

CHAPTER 1

Anne Conway and Her Contemporaries

Though your ladyship has lived in the dark much, yett you have not at all liv'd in obscurity, your virtues and sufferings having made you as famous as any in the Nation.

—Henry More, *The Conway Letters*

During the seventeenth century in Western Europe, the nature and direction of developments in science (or natural philosophy) were matters of intense debate and investigation. This was also an era in which women could not attend university and their roles were restricted to that of wife and mother. It is surprising, therefore, to discover that Anne Conway, a seventeenth-century English philosopher, made important contributions to conversations about the nature and constitution of the physical world. The mechanical philosophies of Rene Descartes and Thomas Hobbes occupied center stage throughout the middle part of the seventeenth century, receiving much attention from philosophers and thinkers of diverse persuasions. In her sole published text, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Conway challenged the basic assumptions of Descartes' dualism and advanced her own system as the true, most adequate philosophy of the time.¹ Conway anticipated many of the dangerous implications of the hierarchic dualisms associated with mind/matter and spirit/flesh distinctions. Assuming an anti-Hobbesian stance, she asserted that all

substances have some element, or at least potential possession, of thought or mentality. Conway's religious philosophy placed emphasis on the life of all things and compelled its adherents to adopt an ethic of care for the inherent worth of everything alive.

Unfortunately, Conway is better known for her lifelong headaches that exhausted the resources of seventeenth-century medicine than for her contributions to natural philosophy.² In a gesture typical of patriarchal constructions of history, Conway's views on nature have been virtually erased from Western intellectual history and overshadowed by a tradition of scientific views on nature inaugurated by such luminaries as Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes. Moreover, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* is not featured in most historical studies that trace the long-standing interconnections between religion and science.³ The result is that Conway's distinct perspectives on the major categories concerning the "nature" of nature (substance, mind, matter, and time) have been ignored by most historians of philosophy and science, and her religious naturalism is practically unknown by contemporary religious scholars.

In this study, I recover Conway's ideas concerning nature, contending that they are too important to remain in obscurity.⁴ I do so for several reasons. First, Conway's views increase our awareness of the diversity of intellectual positions regarding the construction of nature during the seventeenth century. Her published treatise shows that at least one woman provided a provocative articulation of natural philosophy and offered a sustained critique of mechanistic science. This fact helps to dismiss the still popular (and unfounded) notion that women were not significant contributors to essential debates concerning natural processes during the early modern period. Second, Conway constructs an alternative cosmology to the mechanistic worldview popularized by Descartes and others. In so doing, she offers a religious cosmology resonating with ethical force regarding proper relations among all forms of nature. Third, I believe Conway's cosmological views foreshadow a trajectory of religious naturalism that has challenged the "dominion-over-nature" ideology derived from the modern scientific conception of nature that began with Bacon and escalated horrifically throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Conway's reflections on the "sentience" of nature prefigure some key assumptions and implications of twentieth-century process cosmologies regarding the radical relationality found among all forms of nature.

Finally, Conway's general outlook is consistent with my own basic convictions as a philosopher of religion, namely, that religious truths are conditioned by beliefs about (human) nature and destiny—

that is, by what we think about ourselves as natural processes in relation to other natural processes surrounding us. Conway's historical example thus lends support in crucial ways to current projects that reenvision the relationality of nature in our own "post" age. Conway's work thus provides a surprising antecedent for new naturalistic impulses in religious studies as some of us call into question the deficient scientific models of nature that have dominated mainstream thought until quite recently.

THE FAMOUS CASE OF LADY ANNE CONWAY

Anne Conway was born Anne Finch on December 14, 1631, into a politically influential and prominent English family.⁵ She was the younger of two children of Elizabeth Craddock and Sir Heneage Finch, Sergeant-at-Law, Recorder of the City of London, and Speaker of the House of Commons. Both parents had been married before and widowed: her mother to Richard Benet, her father to Frances Bell, by whom he had seven sons and four daughters. According to the various biographical sketches of her life, Conway was not bound by conventional "feminine" duties, and hence spent most of her time studying Latin and Greek, and reading voraciously in philosophical and classical literature.

Conway's passion for learning was so intense that the mysterious headaches that plagued her from age twelve were initially attributed to her excessive studying habits.⁶ Her brother, John Finch, also encouraged Conway's learning through gifts of books and involvement in philosophical discussions. Conway married at age nineteen, and her husband, Viscount Edward Conway (1623–83) who was away often on business trips, also supported his wife's intellectual endeavors. When their only child, a son, died in infancy, Conway had even more time for reading and study. As well, her father-in-law, Lord Conway, known as a collector of books and a gentleman of diverse intellectual interests, enjoyed lively conversations with Conway. Their correspondence reveals animated debates on diverse perspectives and topics ranging from Copernican astronomy and Pythagorean maxims, through Henry Wotton's architectural theory, to the literary writings of John Donne and scriptural and apocryphal texts.⁷ Through the influence of her brother John, who had been a student at Christ's College, Cambridge, Conway became the (long-distance) pupil of the leading Cambridge Platonist, Henry More (1614–87), with whom she maintained a close and respectful intellectual friendship for over thirty-five years.

More often praised Conway's intellectual gifts and her brilliance, even dedicating one of his important writings, *Antidote to Atheism* (1652), to her.

As Conway gained respect for her erudition, her bouts with pain were so severe and mysterious that she also became a famous medical case. Through the years, her family sought relief for Conway from among the leading medical minds of the day—the family's personal physician was William Harvey, discoverer of the circulation of blood—but to no avail. Thomas Willis of Oxford eventually diagnosed and predicted chronic, unceasing pain for Conway for the duration of her life. In 1665, as England was struck by the plague, Conway's headaches became so severe and debilitating that she and her husband sought the help of Valentine Greatrakes, a healer in Ireland rumored to cure people simply by laying his hands on them. After much discussion and pleading from the Conways, Greatrakes journeyed to England to visit and cure Conway, arriving at Ragley Hall (Conway's estate in Warwickshire) on January 27, 1665. Among those gathered to witness the great event were Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, and Benjamin Whichcote, all of whom were keenly interested in such unexplainable healings. Before attempting to treat Lady Conway, Greatrakes healed some of the tenants present, making his prospects for aiding Conway even more likely and remarkable. When, however, Greatrakes tried to heal Conway, he failed.

Five years later, another prominent figure, and perhaps one of the most colorful characters of the seventeenth century, entered Conway's life: Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–98), the gypsy scholar.⁸ Van Helmont was the son of the famous chemist Jean Baptiste van Helmont, and first encountered Conway through the intervention of More. In October 1670, while entertaining van Helmont at Christ's Church in Cambridge, More described Conway's debilitating headaches to the wandering physician. Impressed with van Helmont's reputation as an alchemist and miraculous healer, More then invited the physician to visit Conway in Warwickshire to see if he could offer any relief from the persistent headaches affecting his beloved student.⁹ Upon his arrival at Ragley that winter, however, van Helmont was unsuccessful in treating or curing Conway's headaches, as was the experience of Greatrakes five years earlier.

Van Helmont soon became Conway's closest friend as well as her personal physician, living continuously at Ragley beginning in 1671. A unique intellectual bond between the two began during this time as Conway and van Helmont explored intriguing doctrines developed from alchemy, the Kabbalah, and other esoteric literature and

philosophies. Their creative exchanges eventually compelled Conway to move away from the dualism of her early Cartesian studies and to revise the traditional philosophic knowledge provided by More. Conway and van Helmont also eventually became Quakers, a monumental decision that was deplored by both More and members of Conway's family.

Van Helmont's devotion to Conway and the extraordinary intimacy between the two are clearly evident in the fascinating events surrounding her death in 1679. While Conway's husband was away in Ireland attending to his large estates, van Helmont preserved Conway's corpse in spirits of wine in the library at Ragley until her husband's return. Although scholars acknowledge that it is difficult to access precisely how, and to what extent, van Helmont was also instrumental in transforming Conway's philosophical notes into *The Principles* several years after her death. Whether prepared by van Helmont or More individually or jointly (or by a third party, under their supervision), van Helmont had a Latin text of Conway's work ready for publication by 1690.

INTELLECTUAL WOMEN AND WRITING IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Conway's intellectual development and the philosophical and religious innovations at Ragley appear anomalous in the context of seventeenth-century English society. The ideals of Renaissance humanism, which extended to women the right to learn, had been lost, and the Tudor emphasis on erudition was now in disfavor. In nearly every country of seventeenth-century Europe, an educated woman was frowned upon and viewed as a social misfit, and a "woman" philosopher fully ostracized. A pejorative term—bluestocking—was even coined to designate the female intellectual, or the woman who pursued the "manly" goals of studying philosophy. The only females mentioned in Abraham Cowley's prospectus for a new college where philosophy would specifically be studied were "four old women to tend the chambers and such like services."¹⁰ His projected budget allocated ten pounds for such women's work, the least amount for all servants—with the ten pounds evenly divided among them. Cowley's example is paradigmatic of the structural and systematic forces at work in the seventeenth century that kept women financially dependent on men, making them feel intellectually inferior to their male counterparts.

Women who dared to publish their theoretical writings were often mocked, attacked, or jeered by critics, as in the case with Lady Margaret Cavendish of Newcastle, a contemporary of Conway's. Cavendish was ridiculed, and often referred to as Mad Madge, for publishing works dealing with science and philosophy.¹¹ Along with other women, Cavendish protested against the gender biases surrounding women's education, and the lack of access to formal knowledge:

. . . for the most part women are not educated as they should be, I mean those of quality, for their education is only to dance, sing, and fiddle, to write complimentary letters, to read romances, to speak some language that is not their native, which education, is an education of the body, and not of the mind, and shows that their parents take more care of their feet than their head, more of their words than their reason, more of their music than their virtue, more of their beauty than their honesty, which methinks is strange, as that their friends and parents would take more care, and be at greater charge to adorn their bodies, than to endue their minds.¹²

Bathsua Makin, a seventeenth-century reformer, also deplored the sad neglect of women's formal education in her own century. Reminiscing on the halcyon days of Tudor England, when a woman's erudition was a favorable asset, Makin objected to the double standard in educational practices in *An Essay to Revive the Anteint Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts and Tongues*:

Custom, when it is inveterate, has a mighty influence: it has the force of Nature itself. The barbarous custom to breed women low, is grown general amongst us, and hath prevailed so far, that it is verily believed (especially amongst a sort of debauched sots) that women are not endued with such reason as men; nor capable of improvement by education, as they are. . . . A learned woman is thought to be a comet, that bodes mischief whenever it appears.¹³

Makin reiterated a theme that would become a dominant one among those women who published literary or other sorts of polemical texts during this period. Emphasizing the inadequate academic instruction granted to seventeenth-century women, and forecasting the cultural and social benefits for both sexes if this gender disparity were to change, she wrote, "I verily think, women were formerly educated in the knowledge of arts and tongues, and by their education, many did rise to a great height in learning. Were women thus educated now, I am confi-

dent the advantage would be very great, the women would have honor and pleasure, their relations profit, and the whole nation advantage."¹⁴

Although misogynist biases and practices prevented all women from entering the traditionally masculine domain of the university (the thought of a woman entering Cambridge or Oxford was inconceivable), Conway and some other women overcame such restrictions and contributed greatly to the intellectual developments of the period. With diverse styles and approaches, and with varying degrees of radicalism and public acceptance, these scholarly women conceived and published works on key issues that often challenged, and sometimes supplemented, the academic knowledge advanced by the elite male establishment.¹⁵

Conway did not have a prototypical public voice, as found in such women as Cavendish and Makin, yet she was greatly influential in her own quiet way. Here, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which van Helmont, More, and countless others, took note of Conway's words and ideas during the intellectual salons held at Ragley. For example, van Helmont's genuine admiration of Conway's philosophical depth and her unique religious cosmology was often reflected in his sharing of her insights and ideas with others.¹⁶ Having been introduced to her work by van Helmont, Gottfried Willhelm Leibniz wrote: *Les miens en philosophie approchent un peu d'avantage de ceux de feu Madame la Comtesse de Conway, et tiennent le milieu entre Platon et Democrite, puisque je crois que tout se fait mechaniquement, comme veulent Democrite et Descartes, contre l'opinion de Mr. Morus et ses semblables; et que neanmoins tout se fait encore vitalement et suivant les causes finales, tout etant plein de vie et perception, contre l'opinion des Democritiens.*¹⁷ Beyond such acknowledgments, the provocative, brilliant charisma of Conway as a "woman" philosopher and religious innovator was especially evident in her complex system of thought, which provides crucial and diverse forms of knowledge regarding nature in the seventeenth century.