

“Anne Conway and the Feminine: Between Receptacle and Embodied Thought”

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I offer a novel reading of Anne Finch Conway’s conception of the female body in the general context of her metaphysical theory of spiritual monism. I rephrase Conway’s position regarding the female body as “receptacle” by distinguishing two senses in which she understands the female element in the process of generation. At first, I argue, she appears to describe the female element as a “more passive principle” which provides the foundation for the development of the new “seed” but does not contribute to the morphological shaping of new life. I recast this position as a metaphor for creation, in which God embodies the male principle while matter constitutes the female undifferentiated component. However, in my paper, I emphasize how Conway actually describes the female element as possessing its own spirit. In this latter sense, Conway characterizes the female spirit as equal and dialectically involved in the constitution of new life, thanks to the introduction of the median figure of the “female seed” as a contrast to the “male seed”. The “female seed”, for Conway, consists in “the purest extract of the whole body”, with infinite power of retention and embodiment. Moreover, I argue, this centrifugal strategy enables Conway to offer a novel characterization of the notion of thought. The latter she describes as divided “into masculine and feminine” thanks to its necessary embodiment, refusing any idealist position and instead adopting a mechanical explanation of memory and reflection.