

WOMEN AND PHILOSOPHY

O'REILLY (K.R.), PELLÒ (C.) (edd.) *Ancient Women Philosophers. Recovered Ideas and New Perspectives*. Pp. xvi + 272. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £85, US\$110. ISBN: 978-1-316-51618-8.

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When I started teaching ancient philosophy in autumn 2015, I wrote to a feminist philosophy mailing list asking for suggestions about how to integrate female perspectives in a male-dominated field. Among other suggestions, I was advised to read a paper titled 'Women Philosophers in the Ancient Greek World: Donning the Mantle' (K. Wider, *Hypatia* [1986], 21–62). Upon reading it, I was flabbergasted. The article not only discussed the life and works of about sixteen female philosophers in the ancient Greek world from the sixth century BCE to fifth century CE, but also persuasively argued for what Wider called a 'fairly minimal' thesis, which, however, sounded radical and revolutionary to my ears: women had been involved with philosophy throughout ancient Greek history. They were present in most ancient schools, and some of them had even headed those schools.

I have had a rigorous classical education, studying Greek and Latin philosophy and literature since I was fourteen. I went to top-rated universities in Italy and the United States. I was taught by prominent historians of ancient philosophy. Yet, up until that moment, I had never heard of ancient women philosophers. I knew of Hypatia of Alexandria, but had been told that she was a mathematician and astronomer. And, of course, I knew Diotima, but had not even considered the possibility that the received doctrine (namely, that she was a fictional character presenting Plato's views) might be worth questioning.

That revelation started a process of sifting through the few sources available at the time and coming across controversies such as the one about the Pythagorean *pseudepigrapha* (see C. Pellò, *Pythagorean Women* [2022] and this volume's introduction for a review). I found myself learning alongside my students, marvelling at the same discoveries, asking the same questions: how could we not know? How is it possible that we lost all of the writings of so many authors? How can we study them without their writings? How does their situation differ from that of Socrates and some of the Presocratics?

As I detail in an article focused on this pedagogical process (S. Protasi, 'Teaching Ancient Women Philosophers', *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6 [2020]), I asked my students to create 'digital archives' (or rather a simplified version consisting of webpages, with each group curating a profile devoted to a different woman philosopher), and they constantly complained about how hard it was to find sources that would not just repeat the same little and often wildly disputed information over and over.

Less than a decade after my first introduction to the topic, the scholarly panorama has changed dramatically. As the editors of this volume, O'Reilly and Pellò, note in their tightly and clearly written introduction, there are five new books that have been published or are forthcoming since 2020, in the anglophone world only, and I suspect many more will come out soon, in English and other languages, concerning the Graeco-Roman world and other traditions. It is an exciting time to be studying these figures, and the collection of essays at hand showcases the promise and intellectual rewards awaiting those who wish to do so, while being clear-sighted and honest about the associated risks and challenges.

The book's introduction details its rationale, scope and objectives, establishing from the start that this is a book about *women* philosophers, that is, that the *gender* of these

philosophers *matters*: it is not coincidental that their work has not been transmitted to us, and one aim of the volume is to ‘redress a historical wrong and reclaim a place in the history of philosophy and the philosophical canon for those thinkers who have not received enough academic attention’ (p. 2). However, the main goal is to analyse these thinkers’ ideas and consider their original contributions *qua* philosophers, in whatever ways they can be glimpsed at and inferred from the available sources.

The collection’s scope is vast both geographically and chronologically, covering philosophers who (may) have lived in China, India and the Graeco-Roman world between the fourth century BCE and the fifth century CE. While I enjoyed all of the essays, which are clearly written and illuminate different aspects and challenges of studying these philosophers, because of space constraints I will focus on only a handful. I should note that this selection is based on personal competence and idiosyncratic preferences, and does not reflect any value judgment. (Readers can find an overview of the chapters on pp. 18–20 of the book’s introduction.)

My favourite essay may be the one authored by K.M. Brassel on Stoic women, which is premised on a puzzle: the Stoics had views about women that can be defined as ‘protofeminist’: they thought of women as equally capable of virtue as men and deserving of respectful treatment in marriage and of education; yet ‘the Stoic woman’s voice remains missing’ (p. 114). Not only are there no extant undisputed texts, but there is not even robust testimony of their philosophical activity, unlike for many other philosophical schools. ‘Did the Stoics simply not practise what they preached?’ asks the author (p. 115). In order to answer this question, Brassel adopts a two-pronged strategy, first looking at Stoic writings *about* women and then suggesting an interpretation of Megara – as depicted by Seneca in the tragedy *Hercules Furens* – as a Stoic exemplar. The chapter contends that Megara’s death is an example of Stoic *voluntaria mors*, and this thesis is both compellingly argued for and beautifully expressed, in a style that is reminiscent of M. Nussbaum’s (*The Fragility of Goodness* [1986]).

F. Sheffield’s chapter on Diotima sidesteps the probably unanswerable question of whether she was a historical figure and offers a refreshing take, according to which Diotima’s central insight is that *eros* is a non-binary facilitator, a mediator between binary oppositions. Diotima herself is argued to be presented in a genderqueer way. Sheffield thus argues that Plato decentres the importance of gender, reminding us of its contingency. This is the type of work that connects ancient philosophy to contemporary discussions of gender and that therefore can be particularly useful to draw undergraduate students closer to authors that they sometimes find alien. At the same time, the essay’s emphasis on the textual evidence can show them the importance of close reading.

The chapter on Arete of Cyrene by O’Reilly is an admirable example of writing meaningfully about a philosopher of which we know next to nothing. (Every student group of mine which was assigned Arete has struggled with the lack of information – I am glad I can now refer them to this essay.) It is striking that biographers tell us that Arete ‘had a thirty-five-year public teaching career, wrote forty books, headed the school after the death of her father, and passed her teachings on to her son, playing a crucial role in the philosophical lineage of the Cyrenaics’ (p. 96). Yet, no works of hers have been preserved, and we do not have any details about her doctrines. This dearth of evidence does not stop O’Reilly from gleaning as much information as possible from the available sources, enabling her to paint a portrayal of Arete not as a simple conduit between male philosophers (and relatives), but as a thinker in her own right.

As someone who is not very informed about non-Western philosophical traditions, I learned a lot from the chapters on Sulabhā (by B. Black), a character in the *Mahābhārata*, and on Ban Zhao (班昭) (by A.A. Pang-White), the first female historian

and philosopher in ancient China whose works have been passed down to the contemporary world. The latter chapter includes several excerpts of Ban Zhao's memoranda and poetry that makes it a particularly suitable text for teaching, and it persuasively argues in favour of a more nuanced and charitable assessment of this author, challenging a prior anachronistic understanding of her as an 'archtraitor to women' (p. 225) (this, too, is a useful lesson for undergraduates prone to decontextualising the writings of ancient authors).

Two chapters are dedicated to the notorious Pythagorean women, but they set aside the vexed question of authenticity of the treatises and letters attributed to them, and instead discuss the content of the views presented in them. R. Twomey presents the female-coded topics of family life and home economics, showing that they are worthy of philosophical investigation (a thesis that tends to be easily accepted when it is Plato or Aristotle who write about them). Pellò and G. De Cesaris propose a line-by-line analysis of Perictione's *On Wisdom*, situating its arguments within the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition and positioning Perictione as 'the founding mother of ancient metaphysics and epistemology' (p. 169). I will not reiterate the arguments that have been made in favour of taking these works at face value, arguments that are well explained in multiple essays in this collection, but only note how resilient our inability to entertain the possibility of ancient women doing philosophy is and how important, therefore, the contributions presented here are.

Reading this book has persuaded me it is time to revamp my course. There is now enough rigorous work on ancient women philosophers that I feel comfortable moving past the narrative that I have adopted for the last eight years, namely a male philosophical history that I reveal at the end to have omitted and silenced female voices. Contemporary philosophers such as the authors of this volume have lent their own voices, unearthing the forgotten views. This autumn I am planning to teach Pythagoras, so I can talk about the many Pythagorean women; I will contrast Plato's views on the soul in *Phaedo* and *Republic* with Macrina's arguments in *On Soul and Resurrection* and with Aesara's understanding of the tripartite soul; I will introduce Perictione's *On Wisdom* when analysing the Function Argument, and I will talk about queering the *Symposium*; I will make sure to discuss even briefly the role that Arete, Sosipatra and Hypatia played as heads of school.

And, as I hear the familiar questions in my head: 'How can you responsibly do this? We don't know these women even existed! Or if they did, men are speaking for them.', I can confidently respond that it is *precisely* because these philosophers provoke these questions that it is important to teach them: so that students can grapple with historiographical questions surrounding canon-formation, with hermeneutical questions concerning the validity of second-hand accounts (which pervade ancient philosophy) and with sociological questions on past and present gender-based power relations. As for the philosophical content, we can let the views finally speak for themselves.

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