

Jana Schultz/James Wilberding (eds.): *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2022 (Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 30). XIV, 312 p., 1 table. € 144.45/\$ 162.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-51046-3.

Trailing behind earlier efforts to uncover women's lives and voices in the ancient world came the search for women's roles in ancient philosophy. This task has come fully into its own in the 2020's with the nearly simultaneous appearance of the volume currently under review with two other edited collections, "Ancient Women Philosophers. Recovered Ideas and New Perspectives", edited by Katharine O'Reilly and Caterina Pellò and "The Routledge Handbook of Women and Ancient Greek Philosophy", edited by Sara Brill and Catherine McKeen.¹ To these should be added three volumes on ancient topics in the Cambridge Elements series "Women in the History of Philosophy",² as well as some of the volumes from the Oxford "Women in Antiquity" series, especially those dealing with later Platonists: Heidi Marx's "Sosipatra of Pergamum. Philosopher and Oracle" and Edward J. Watts' "Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher".³ The newly established Brill "Journal of the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists" shows how the growing interest in female philosophers transcends temporal and geographical boundaries. Now is surely a boom time for the study of ancient female philosophers.

Within this broader growth industry, Late Antiquity plays a privileged role. Most of our best attested Greco-Roman female philosophers come from Late Antiquity (e.g. Gemina [Plotinus' patron], Sosipatra and Hypatia), and early Christianity itself represented a turning point in the rhetorical inclusion of women in the life of philosophy as well as new social structures such as

- 1 K. O'Reilly / C. Pellò (eds.): *Ancient Women Philosophers. Recovered Ideas and New Perspectives*. Cambridge 2023; S. Brill / C. McKeen (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Ancient Greek Philosophy*. New York/Abingdon 2024 (Routledge Handbooks in Philosophy).
- 2 C. Pellò: *Pythagorean Women*. Cambridge 2022 (Elements on Women in the History of Philosophy); D. LaValle Norman: *Early Christian Women*. Cambridge 2022 (Elements on Women in the History of Philosophy); C. Addey: *Platonic Women*. Cambridge, forthcoming.
- 3 H. Marx: *Sosipatra of Pergamum. Philosopher and Oracle*. New York 2021 (Women in Antiquity); E. J. Watts: *Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*. New York 2017 (Women in Antiquity).

endorsed childlessness that made the life of the mind more possible for women.

The goal of Jana Schultz and James Wilberding's edited collection is two-fold, clearly expressed in the title: it is simultaneously about women in the Neoplatonic philosophical schools *and* about the role of female principles and the abstract 'female' in the philosophical systems of the Neoplatonists. Linking these two topics is the heart of the volume's innovation.⁴ While it is concerned with the recovery of a history of the role of women in Neoplatonism, and Crystal Addey's clear and persuasive opening chapter ("Diotima, Sosipatra and Hypatia: Methodological Reflections on the Study of Female Philosophers in the Platonic Tradition", pp. 9–40) contributes to this ongoing debate on the side of persistent presence of women in Platonic philosophical schools, it also broadens the scope to look at the 'female' in Neoplatonic metaphysics.

Does the presence of real live women participating in the Neoplatonic life extend to a different valuation of the female itself? That theoretical question so central to the volume is not tackled by the editors in their spare introduction (pp. 1–6). Some of the essays attempt to connect the relationship between metaphysical principles and human life. These are the synthesizing and ambitious works that give this volume coherence, and as such, will be the focus of my review.

On what we may call the 'non-revisionist' side, many of the essays argue that within Neoplatonic systems, the female is subordinated to the male at all levels of reality – at the level of divinity, at the level of abstraction, and at the human level.

The primary examples of this view are the essays by Dirk Baltzly and Jana Schultz (for Proclus and Damascius respectively), which agree on a clear mapping of gender and its valuation from the intelligible to the material world. Baltzly's essay ("The Myth of Er and Female Guardians in Proclus' *Republic Commentary*", pp. 104–121) explores the "analogical reasoning" (p. 121) that links the roles that Proclus assigns to goddesses in the Myth of Er to the real political role that he believes would be open to women in the ideal city (p. 105). Baltzly also helpfully contributes to the question of gender

4 For a detailed table of contents, readers are referred to the end of this review (pp. 348–349).

essentialism, showing how Proclus believes in the soul's innate gender, which is connected to their leading gods/goddesses (p. 109). Schultz's essay ("Damascius on the Virtue of Women and Their Relation to Men", pp. 122–143) agrees that there is a direct link between metaphorical femininity and real women, arguing that, in line with the metaphysical valuations of gender, female excellence for Damascius lies in either becoming male or supporting males in their masculine work.

Other essays in the volume push against this overarching synthetic paradigm, which assumes universal subordination and devaluation of the female.

James Wilberding's essay on Plotinus ("Women in Plotinus", pp. 43–63) argues that in three specific areas of notorious anti-feminine elements in Plato's thought, Plotinus makes significant revisions that point to a more positive view of the female (although he tempers this in his conclusion with exploring Plotinus' "less progressive side", p. 59). One of these, Plotinus' rejection of Plato's view that the mother provides only the matter and not the form for generation, builds on Wilberding's previous ground-breaking work on Neoplatonic embryology and the increased role it grants to the mother.⁵

Danielle A. Layne's essay ("Otherwise Than the Father: Night and the Maternal Causes in Proclus' Theological Metaphysics", pp. 221–252) is the strongest argument for the 'optimistic' or revisionist reading of Neoplatonic treatment of gender. In her chapter she expands on her 2021 article⁶ in the journal "Hypatia" to argue that Proclus can himself provide anti-patriarchal and queer tools against female metaphysical subordination. She uses the female character of Night as her prime example, with a particularly helpful section on the bigendered/queer Phanes as well (pp. 230–234). She argues that, in Proclus, Night's creative feminine power is superior and prior to that of the male Demiurge, which counteracts the more typical role of the female as the material receptacle. Layne recognizes that she is reading against the grain. Her thesis that "Proclus' system [...] fails to suppress [the female] completely" (p. 226), might sound to some like damning with faint praise. Night

5 J. Wilberding: *Forms, Souls, and Embryos: Neoplatonists on Human Reproduction*. London/New York 2017; J. Wilberding, 'The Revolutionary Embryology of the Neoplatonists'. In: *OSAPh* 49, 2015, pp. 321–361.

6 D. A. Layne: 'Feminine Power in Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*'. In: *Hypatia* 36, 2021, pp. 120–144.

was also a central character in Damascius' metaphysics, and her subordinated role is used by Schultz to come to the opposite conclusion to Layne. While the female is necessary for procession to occur, according to Schultz the female *qua* female always plays a complementary role, and when Night rules, it is from a masculine element in herself (p. 137).

Like Layne, Miira Tuominen also falls on the side of greater optimism when she turns to gender in Porphyry's *De Abstinencia* ("Femininity in Porphyry's *On Abstinence*", pp. 147–168). While Tuominen admits that Porphyry's system includes a devaluation of the female in relationship to the male, she finds it significant that Porphyry does not use all the tools available to him to make an explicit argument concerning the inferiority of women. We might wish for more from Porphyry. Her essay exemplifies the difficulties in making the 'optimistic' argument and shows how carefully such arguments must be hedged to reflect the text accurately.

Of special interest to this reader was Peter Adamson's insightful reading of Gregory of Nyssa's sister Macrina's character in the dialogue *On Soul and Resurrection* ("Macrina's Method: Reason and Reasoning in Gregory of Nyssa's *On Soul and Resurrection*", pp. 255–275). After an analysis of the logic behind Macrina's argument, Adamson dips his toes into the debated question of gender essentialism (or rather, its reputed absence) in Gregory of Nyssa's theology. He argues that Gregory's point is that gender does not matter, and that the ideal teacher (whether Socrates or Diotima) combines both masculine rationality with feminine care of particular students. Unfortunately, Adamson does not have the space to develop at length the repercussions of including 'feminine' aspects in the ideal human (or at least the ideal teacher).

Overall, there is less discussion among the chapters than one would have hoped. For instance, the dialogue between Schultz and Layne on the role of Night in different Neoplatonic authors is not brought out in cross-notes. Strikingly, John Dillon's essay on Theodore of Asine ("Theodorus of Asine on the Equality of the Sexes: Traces of a Rhetorical Trope in the Fourth Century CE", pp. 94–103) is missing any reference to the important previous contribution on the same text by another contributor to the volume (e.g. Baltzly's 2013 article on Theodore of Asine's views of female philoso-

pher-rulers,⁷ which *is* cited in other chapters). Further oversight by the editors might have made this a more tightly linked volume.

In addition, a more fulsome introduction might have addressed some of the many remaining questions that are brought up by this collection, especially on the broader questions about the relationship between the essays. In the Neoplatonic system, is gender essential to human identity? If gender exists on the divine level, how does that impinge on the human level? Is the Neoplatonic view of gender one thing, or does it change depending on which theorist we are reading? Is the variation due to the types of evidence, temporal change or geographical variation? Can we gather the Neoplatonists into sub-schools on this topic?

But perhaps the Neoplatonic answers to the value of women and the female are simply too varied to admit to a unified thesis. The contributions on individual writers and texts are an excellent start to see if such a synthetic work might, in the future, be possible.

7 D. Baltzly: Proclus and Theodore of Asine on Female Philosopher-Rulers? Patriarchy, Metempsychosis, and Women in the Neoplatonic Commentary Tradition. In: *AncPhil* 33, 2013, pp. 403–424.

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