

Jana Schultz and **James Wilberding**, eds. *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*. Brill 2022. 312 pp. \$162.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9789004510463).

The volume collects the proceedings of the conference ‘Philosophers, Goddesses and Principles – Women and the Female in Neoplatonism’ held at the Ruhr-University of Bochum in September 2018, where the authors addressed the perceptions and conceptions of women and femininity in Neoplatonism. Each contribution is assigned to a specific thematic section and offers precious insights for scholars specializing in ancient philosophy, thanks also to a useful index of names and subjects, a precise *index locorum*, and a comprehensive and updated bibliography at the end of each paper. The volume represents a valuable milestone in gender studies, especially those devoted to the ancient world: it is a perfect example of how to reconstruct properly the (usually hostile or depreciating) attitude towards women in the history of Western culture. There is only a small error in the recapitulation of the volume in the general *Introduction*: Adamson’s essay is assigned to the third thematic section, while it belongs to the fourth one, dedicated to those Christian philosophers imbued with Neoplatonic culture.

The first section, *The Historical Presence of Women in Neoplatonic Schools*, offers an introduction to the other contributions, since it analyzes the historical status of women in late antiquity. In this regard, the paper by Crystal Addey, ‘Diotima, Sosipatra and Hypatia: Methodological Reflections on the Study of Female Philosophers in the Platonic Tradition’ (9-40), highlights some preliminary remarks on the study of female figures in the Neoplatonic tradition. Addey observes how information on Neoplatonic women philosophers has been handed down by men, and how little is preserved of these women’s work: hence the tendency of several scholars to believe that women philosophers were an exception or, worse, simple ‘appendages’ to their male counterparts. This is incorrect: many women were mentors for male philosophers, such as Asclepigeneia (Proclus) and Hypatia (Synesius of Cyrene), whose model dates back to the character of Diotima of Plato’s *Symposium*. Various literary, epigraphical, and archeological evidence shows that numerous women were active in philosophy: as such, they were not an exception.

After this premise, the volume moves on to the second thematic section, *The Status of Women in Neoplatonic Socio-political Theory*, dedicated to Neoplatonists’ opinions and attitudes towards women in their works. James Wilberding’s paper, ‘Women in Plotinus’ (43-63), considers the way in which Plotinus reacted to the authority of Plato’s *Timaeus* regarding femininity. As is well known, in his *Timaeus* Plato devalues the nature of women: he considers female existence a punishment for those male souls who, in a previous incarnation, behaved in a licentious way; moreover, he employs the metaphor of ‘the father’ to connote the positive character and activity of the Demiurge, who infuses order and harmony in a disordered – and thus negative – matter, labeled ‘mother,’ characterized as feminine and imperfect. Plotinus does not endorse Plato’s misogyny: for Plotinus, matter is genderless and existence as a woman is not a form of punishment. However, Plotinus does not reappraise Plato’s more progressive attitude concerning the philosopher-queen of the *Republic*.

Luc Brisson’s contribution, ‘Marcella and Porphyry’ (64-78), analyzes Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella*, an exhortation to philosophy addressed to a woman who was part of Porphyry’s



philosophical circle. In this work, Porphyry considers himself a disciple of Pythagoras through Plato's mediation, whose dialogues represent an unquestionable authority. In this way, Porphyry inherits both the Pythagorean openness to women as individuals capable of developing wisdom, and Plato's opinions concerning the equality of masculine and feminine natures as expressed in his *Republic*. Women can thus acquire virtue and become philosophers if properly educated, just like men. Porphyry's attitude depends on his cultural background, both Pythagorean and Platonic.

Dominic O'Meara, 'On the Equality in Virtue of Women and Men in Late Antique Platonism: Proclus, Julian and Philip the Philosopher' (79-93), studies the ways in which Plato's *Republic* and his attitude towards women were assimilated by some Neoplatonists. In his *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, Proclus states that women can acquire the same virtues as men during the soul's ascent to the divine world. There is only a minimal difference: women are less intellectually gifted than men, but thanks to education this difference is leveled and eliminated. For the Roman emperor Julian, women are able to acquire virtue. In the case of his *Pro Eusebia*, Eusebia developed virtue better than some emperors and princes, thus becoming a perfect philosopher-queen. Finally, in Heliiodorus' *Aethiopica*, more precisely in its exegesis preserved under the name of Philip the Philosopher, there are passages in which Plato's *Republic* is echoed, especially when the absence of differences between sexes and genders is defended: the genderless human soul can acquire virtue and knowledge.

John Dillon, in 'Theodorus of Asine on the Equality of the Sexes: Traces of a Rhetorical Trope in the Fourth Century CE' (94-103), analyzes Theodorus of Asine and his treatise *That the Virtue of Man and Woman is the Same*, based on Plato's *Republic* and on the claim that all human beings are equal by nature: any difference is simply due to *nomos*, to particular laws that have imparted a different education. Dillon shows how this Platonic conception was inherited not so much by Aristotle and the Peripatetic School but by the Cynics and the Stoics, who transmitted it to Theodorus of Asine, who in turn reaffirms the ability of men and women alike to acquire virtue and wisdom. The same attitude is reappraised by Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Republic* and by Quintus of Smyrna's *The Fall of Troy*, namely the last exponents of pagan culture and tradition.

Dirk Baltzly's paper, 'The Myth of Er and Female Guardians in Proclus' *Republic*' (104-21), considers the theme of women's political involvement according to Proclus, particularly in light of his commentary on the famous myth of Er that closes Book X of Plato's *Republic*. For Proclus, the myth of Er illustrates a cosmic paradigm: there are various female rulers, guardians, and protectors of the order of the macrocosm – Necessity, the Sirens, the Fates – who relate to the cosmos and humans in terms of care and nurture. For Proclus, this is women's role in human societies, in the microcosm: they must replicate the ethics of care of the cosmic female figures, and thus offer providential aid to their fellow citizens.

Jana Schultz, in 'Damascius on the Virtue of Women and Their Relation to Men' (122-43), analyzes Damascius' *Vita Isidori*. The philosopher describes women as entangled in the realm of becoming and as beings who naturally adapt to the will of their men. Damascius exalts women because they are capable of acquiring virtues, but not just any kind of virtue: primarily, chastity and moderation. (The highest and purifying virtues cannot be developed because of women's close connection with the corporeal and emotional dimension.) Probably, the attitude shown by Damascius

in his *Vita Isidori* depends on his metaphysical system, exposed in his *De Principiis*, where female principles possess a multiplying role and are related to matter so that the female is subordinated to male principles, which possess a unifying role and are thus qualitatively superior in the eyes of a Neoplatonist like Damascius.

The third part of the volume, *Female Principles in Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Science*, focuses on the attitude towards female nature from the point of view of metaphysical principles and doctrines. Miira Tuomin's paper, 'Femininity in Porphyry's *On Abstinence*' (147-68), studies Porphyry's *De abstinentia*. In this writing, Porphyry illustrates the importance of not harming other living beings as a fundamental step for assimilation to god. In the path of ascent to the divine world, femininity is not inferior to maleness: there is no hierarchy between genders in gods and goddesses, humans, and even animals. Moreover, femininity offers models for pursuing virtues. Even female animals show care towards their offspring and mates.

Marije Martijn, 'A Match Made in Heaven: The Metaphysics of Aphrodite in Neoplatonic Thinkers' (169-95), considers the figure of Aphrodite in some Neoplatonists. She is not merely a personal divinity connected to love: on the contrary, she is conceived allegorically as a cosmological, ontological, and metaphysical principle. For Plotinus, the goddess represents simply the soul that must return back to the Intellect and thus recover its original condition of bliss and perfect knowledge: the goddess incarnates this value from a human perspective. Hermias' *Commentary on the Phaedrus* describes Aphrodite as a principle that inspires reversion to the Intellect and Beauty, towards the Intelligible realm. Proclus assimilates Aphrodite into his metaphysical system as a principle that sets in motion a chain that binds opposites together. For Hermias and Proclus, Aphrodite has a fundamental metaphysical and cosmological role: connection and link between opposite dimensions.

Christoph Helmig's 'Neoplatonic Motifs in Emperors Julian's *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*' (196-220) analyzes the allegorical readings of the goddess Cybele and his lover Attis according to Emperor Julian. Attis is an aspect of divine causality that is in contact with matter and carries the forms into it; Cybele, the mother of gods, plays a prominent role as a self-constituting entity that limits Attis' procession towards matter and turns him back to her, to the superior sphere of the cosmos. This allegorical exegesis of traditional myths serves Julian to oppose Christians' criticisms, who considered devotion to Cybele a form of bloodthirsty worship: on the contrary, this religious myth – with a female figure as the leading character – is an expression of the purest philosophical tradition of pagan asceticism.

Danielle A. Layne's essay, 'Otherwise Than the Father: Night and Maternal Causes in Proclus' Theological Metaphysics' (221-52), offers a feminist reading of the goddess Night in Proclus. Layne notes that many ancient traditional theogonies sometimes avoid representing female figures as the first and true progenitors of divinities and humans; on the contrary, there are often male figures who are able to generate without female intervention. This obviously serves to preserve patriarchy, to legitimize kings' and princes' earthly government in light of masculine divine rule. However, Proclus seems to partly detach from this tradition by describing the goddess Night as a principle that instructs

the Demiurge – of male gender – in the moment in which he orders and unifies the cosmos: a female figure is thus decisive in imposing directives on a male entity in the government of the world.

The last section, *A Concluding Look at Two Christian Neoplatonists*, is dedicated to some Christian thinkers imbued with Neoplatonic philosophy. Peter Adamson's 'Macrina's Method: Reason and Reasoning in Gregory of Nissa's *On Soul and Resurrection*' (255-75), considers the case posed by the Cappadocian Church Father Gregory of Nissa. Gregory tells that his sister Macrina instructed him on the nature of the soul while she was on her deathbed. She showed no sign of commitment to emotions and bodily dimension; instead, she offered a methodology to study incorporeal entities such as the soul. By considering first empirical data, we can grasp the nature of the soul through its influence on the body; then, according both to reasoning and the Holy Scripture we are in the proper condition to ascertain the soul's affinity to God and its genderless nature.

Finally, Denis Walter's 'What Did Michael Psellos Say about Women in the 11th Century AD?' (276-95) analyzes the Byzantine medieval philosopher Michael Psellos, who seems to be skeptical about women's ability to partake in intellectual, scientific, and theoretical activities and to establish a direct connection to God. Women can reunite with God, albeit imperfectly, since they can do so simply by pursuing philanthropy, which is an activity usually carried out by women; their intellectual inferiority is thus clearly admitted and defended by Psellos.

The volume as a whole reconstructs Neoplatonists' multifaceted attitudes towards women and femininity and clearly shows that it was an ambiguous relationship: overall, it was certainly not as misogynist as many may superficially think (in particular according to post-structuralist approaches, directly criticized by some authors), but it was not totally progressive either. On the contrary, there was often an element of 'resistance' that viewed the male as in some respects superior or more decisive on a human or on a cosmological-metaphysical level. Neoplatonists sometimes considered women's nature stereotypically. They conceived of women as beings born specifically to nurture and aid their relatives: this certainly represents those tenets that typically belong to the patriarchal culture of early Indo-European civilizations.

The volume has the merit of offering not only valid studies of Neoplatonic authors, useful for scholars specialized in ancient and late antique philosophy: each contribution is a perfect example of how to deal with gender issues concerning past – and unequivocal – traditionalist attitudes towards the female condition. The authors historically reconstruct both praise of women and disparagement of femininity in an objective way, against many contemporary approaches (not solely in academic research production) that try to erase, as a sort of *damnatio memoriae*, misogynist tendencies or, more generally, hostility towards diversity that has been part of the history of Western civilization since its dawn (one cannot but think of the ban on Homer's poems someone has recently proposed). The volume reminds us that we must not forget the past or deform its reconstruction in the light of the present, but study it in all its actual (and sometimes despicable) expressions to avoid replicating what is morally condemnable. Therefore, the volume is both a solid, updated and valuable miscellaneous work of history of philosophy and a useful contribution to gender and feminist studies and the goal they ultimately pursue: the fight against misogynist attitudes radically embedded in Western civilization.

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