

## NEOPLATONISM AND GENDER

SCHULTZ (J.), WILBERDING (J.) (edd.) *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*. (Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 30.) Pp. xiv + 312. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022. Cased, €135. ISBN: 978-90-04-51046-3.

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The thirteen essays in this volume range from documentation of the historical presence of women in Neoplatonic schools and texts (the first section of the book) to the status of women in Neoplatonic socio-political theory and to female principles in Neoplatonic metaphysics and science (in the second and third sections of the book). Lastly, its scope extends to the views of several Christian Neoplatonists. The collection of studies originates from the conference ‘Philosophers, Goddesses and Principles – Women and the Female in Neoplatonism’, held in Bochum in 2018.

C. Addey’s article, in the first category, documents the scale of female involvement in ancient philosophy. She notes the facts that few works written by women survive and that most of the extant evidence comes from a male educated elite. Female philosophers that were cited for their roles and contributions within the Platonic tradition, such as Diotima, Clea, Sosipatra and Asclepigenia (daughter of Plutarch of Athens), are often minimised, or their historical existence is questioned. Diotima, for example, only appears in Plato’s *Symposium*, and some scholars have mentioned the possibility that Diotima is not historical. Epigraphic evidence, however, reveals that women philosophers in antiquity are not anomalies, though clearly marginalised. The volume, by presenting readers with Neoplatonic texts, goes a long way towards remedying this situation. In Schultz’s essay on Damascius, for example, *Vita Isidori* is cited as an important source, providing material proof that women played important roles in Neoplatonic circles in Alexandria and Athens. Throughout the volume readers will find that every possible textual context has been mined in the service of documenting the historical presence, the ideas and positions, and the female as principle, all present in Neoplatonist writings.

What is most notable in these explorations and deemed worthy of extensive comment by the contributors are the modifications and additions that Neoplatonic philosophers made, in treating doctrines that stemmed from Plato and prior to Platonism. The first and most famous example is Plato’s conviction in *Republic* (*Rep.* 540c, 455d–7e) that women have virtues equal to that of men and can be political rulers of the ideal state. Expanding on Plato’s remarkably forward-looking stance, L. Brisson examines Porphyry’s protreptic letter to his wife Marcella, calling upon her to lead a philosophical life, considering women equal to the task of reaching virtue and leading the philosophical life. Considering women as philosophers equal in virtue to male philosophers was an emergent focus in late antiquity. Iamblichus’ *On the Pythagorean Life* includes a list of famous Pythagorean women, and Porphyry in *Life of Pythagoras* mentions women disciples. Further, influenced by Neopythagoreans, Numenius, Plotinus and Porphyry made changes to the famous passages on women and the female in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Republic*. A litmus test for ascertaining a given Neoplatonist’s view on women and the female, then, consists in adjudicating how that philosopher handled Plato’s famous equalitarian and not so equalitarian stipulations. D. O’Meara, in ‘On the Equality in Virtue of Women and Men in Late Antique Platonism’, examines the equal opportunities for virtue among men and women. He includes a discussion of Proclus’ *Essays on Plato’s Republic* and Julian the Emperor’s *Praise of the Empress Eusebia* as a philosopher queen

equal in virtue to her husband. According to Proclus, women's education in virtue, qualifying them for a political role, had to do with their possession of political virtues, considered by Plotinus and Iamblichus to be of less value than the highest virtues, but still a positive characteristic. On the negative side, Proclus regarded women as weaker in a natural receptive capacity for virtue. O'Meara examines Theodore of Asine's support for a philosopher queen (in Essay IX of Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Republic*), as does J. Dillon. Theodore of Asine argued for the view that men and women have equal virtues.

Plato's description of the 'receptacle' in *Timaeus* is a second example of a doctrine that precipitated a critical response or was minimised by the Neoplatonists. In Plato's *Timaeus*, the feminine receptacle and nurse of becoming (e.g. 50a3) is deprived of an active role in creation, as opposed to the Demiurge, master and father of the universe (28c3). D. Layne, in 'Otherwise than the Father: Night and the Maternal Causes in Proclus' *Theological Metaphysics*', acknowledges Luce Irigaray's comments and other feminist complaints regarding the historical eclipse of the feminine role in acts of creation and within classical theogonies. In Proclus' six-fold schema of 'Platonic' causality, the creative and paradigmatic 'paternal' cause is primary while the receptacle and supplemental causes, associated with the female, are a source of harmony and communion. Layne suggests that the feminine is one of the most important and influential causes, crucial to binding and connecting the cosmos to divine causes, the intelligible to the intellective. Proclus states in *Platonic Theology* (IV 90.20–91), giving this role some importance, that it is the cause of all mediation and an influence over the paternal Demiurge. Summarising the order of the gods in the intelligible realm, Layne focuses on Night, the only female deity on the list, who acts alongside Phanes, and is a leading primary cause as well. Phanes is gender-neutral, an intelligible living being that includes both the male and the female simultaneously. Night is both receptive and generative, receiving and generating secondary natures, together with the father who represents intelligible, intellective being. Wilberding, in 'Women in Plotinus', recalls the account of the receptacle in Plato's *Timaeus*, noting that 'in the maternal material hypothesis' Form is from the father (*Tim.* 28c3) while the mother is the receptacle of becoming. Plotinus distances himself from this hypothesis. In the *Enneads* he advocates for an account of generation in favour of mixtures of form-principles (*logoi*) contributed by both the mother and the father (*Enn.* 5.7.2.1–12). What Wilberding labels the 'regrettable reincarnation thesis' (p. 43) (*Tim.* 42b, 90e–91a) is a third area in which Plato's doctrine is not followed or incorporated by the late Neoplatonists. Plato states that those who live unjustly will be reincarnated as women. Wilberding argues that Plotinus, generally more positive towards women than Plato, excludes this hypothesis in favour of a more act-based theory of karma. He details Plotinus' support of Plato's position on the equal nature of men and women and presents the specifics of Plotinus' own more complex and nuanced reincarnation theories (pp. 44–6).

It is notable that even within the commendable scholarship showing a largely positive view of women among Neoplatonists, in many instances, gender essentialism prevails. As was made evident in my book (*Goddesses of Myth and Cultural Memory* [2021]), gender essentialist content to the detriment of the female appears in Near Eastern myth, in Hesiod, in Homer, in the Pythagorean table of opposites and throughout the Platonic tradition. The volume under review presents much evidence that Neoplatonist texts advanced the position of women, certainly in efforts to establish equal virtues in male and female philosophers and to make their presence as philosophers evident. Binary oppositions of gender, originally attached to characteristics of goddesses (Gaia as mother of all, Artemis as nature etc.), seems to persist. The male gender is treated as an exemplar of logic, ideas and transcendent spirituality, while the female gender is associated with the maternal, the indeterminate, nature and receptivity.

D. Baltzly, for example, in 'The Myth of Er and Female Guardians in Proclus' *Republic Commentary*', offers a thorough intertextual reading of Plato's dialogues to provide background for Proclus' interpretation of Plato's Myth of Er. As Schultz and Wilberding point out in their introduction, Baltzly finds that male deities are responsible for announcing universal rules of justice while female deities are more engaged in taking providential care of particular human souls. The activities of goddesses are generally subordinate to the activities of male gods. Baltzly focuses on the feminine and maternal character of Necessity (also known as the goddess Themis) as the mother of the gods (or Rhea). She orders souls and has jurisdiction over other divinities. Doing so, Themis administers the cosmic political order of the Demiurge. Baltzly details Proclus' general views regarding the gendered nature of male and female souls and their respective vehicles. In the *Commentary on Timaeus* (*In Tim.* III.293) souls are gendered via their resemblance to their leader gods, exhibiting characteristics that stem from the binaries in Pythagorean tables of opposites (Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1.5, 986a220); Limited and Unlimited, One and Plurality, Rest and Motion etc. Limited dominates over Unlimited in value and is male while Unlimited is associated with the female. Schultz, citing *Vita Isidori*, in her essay 'Damascius on the Virtue of Women in Relation to Men', finds that Damascius praises the ability of women to become virtuous, but still evaluates them according to their ability to tend to the needs and wishes of their husbands. The highest level of virtues, the purifying virtues, are contaminated by menstruation/generation. In Damascius' metaphysics male principles are causes of unity and determination while female principles cause generation and progression (along with the danger of ensuing chaos). In *De Principiis*, the One-All associated with Limit and Monad is connected to male while the All-One is associated with the Unlimited, the Dyad, chaos, the material and multiplicity. M. Martijn's essay on the metaphysics of Aphrodite in Neoplatonism finds that Plotinus, along these lines, identifies Aphrodite with the soul hypothesis and with the world soul subordinate to higher hypostases involving intellect. For Proclus, Aphrodite exists on both the hypercosmic and encosmic level and is a force associated with the physical world, responsible for inciting love of divine beauty and intellect. M. Tuominen, examining male and female gods, humans and animals in Porphyry's *On Abstinence*, finds that reason is associated with maleness and the female with passion and the body.

It would be difficult to do full justice to the richness and extensive scholarly contribution present in *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism* within the limits of this review. The book is a significant source book for material on the Neoplatonic reworking of classical views on women and the female. It goes a long way towards remedying an obvious deficiency in the extant literature. Despite the secondary status of the female, in principle, found in Neoplatonist ontologies, there is ample reason to condone the fact that Neoplatonist philosophers gave the 'female' a complex presence and role in the creation and maintenance of the cosmos. In society during these times the representation of the female was hardly as 'cosmic' or exalted, and the documentation of female presence as philosophers and students in Neoplatonist settings is a surprisingly welcome finding. Addey has made it clear that the overall picture emerging from the extant epigraphic, biographical and philosophical works is a fragment of a much wider picture of consistent female activity within the Platonic tradition. This is the 'good news' that emerges from these accounts. The issue that is still uncomfortable for contemporary readers is the unmistakable gender essentialism that persists despite other more positive advancements.

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