



## Open Research Online

### Citation

Roupa, Vicky (2024). [Book review] Katharine R. O'Reilly, Caterina Pellò, Ancient women philosophers: recovered ideas and new perspectives. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Bryn Mawr Classical Review

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/98104/>

### License

None Specified

### Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

### Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

BMCR 2024.06.11

# Ancient women philosophers: recovered ideas and new perspectives

Katharine R. O'Reilly, Caterina Pellò, *Ancient women philosophers: recovered ideas and new perspectives*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xv, 272. ISBN 9781316516188.

## Review by

Vicky Roupa, The Open University. [vicky.roupa@open.ac.uk](mailto:vicky.roupa@open.ac.uk)

## Preview

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review]

*Ancient Women Philosophers: Recovered Ideas and New Perspectives* is an exciting new addition to the scholarship about women philosophers in antiquity and the recovery of voices that for centuries were missing or excised from the philosophical canon. The book concentrates on a critical period in philosophy that was highly productive in terms of new ideas and developments and, to some degree, open to women thinkers (for example, by Epicureans and Stoics). Unfortunately, as the editors, O' Reilly and Pellò, explain in the Introduction, very little by way of direct evidence and writings has survived. It is the aim of this book to track down the evidence that does exist, collate and record the sparse information about women's intellectual activity, and highlight the philosophical contributions made by ancient women from diverse traditions, primarily Greek and Roman, but also Indian and Chinese, in the fields of gender, ethics, metaphysics, medical knowledge, philosophy as a way of life, family life and home economics, and pedagogy and women's education.

As is to be expected with such a project, the chief challenge is methodological. If very few writings have survived, how can we even talk about women's philosophical contributions, let alone evaluate them and restore them to the philosophical canon, as the editors and contributors to this volume hope to do? O'Reilly and Pellò grasp this nettle from the start, with the bulk of their Introduction dedicated to methodological issues around the recovery of women's voices. They clarify that whilst carrying no essentialist commitments regarding what a particularly female way of doing philosophy might be, or whether there is one, they do aim to redress a wrong suffered by ancient women thinkers in being stripped of their rightful place in the history of philosophy and having their work ignored. Their intent therefore, is, as they put it, 'reparatory'. The difficulties they (and the contributors) face are multiple and complex; not only are there very few extant writings, but the information we do have about women thinkers in antiquity has come down to us from male authors whose own intentions and biases have to be scrutinized and critically appraised. Another problem concerns the perceived boundary between philosophical activity as we understand it today and other work or activity that may not be recognisably philosophical *stricto sensu*, but that at the time—a time when the borders between disciplines were in flux – had clear theoretical underpinnings, such as, for example, medical practice. A third problem concerns the fictional or fictionalised status of some of the women thinkers of antiquity, such as Diotima, the teacher of Socrates, on matters of eros in Plato's *Symposium*, or Sulabhā, the female renunciate in the *Mahābhārata*. Is there a place for such figures in the philosophical canon or should they be relegated to the margins of philosophical enquiry?

The editors and contributors approach these questions in a rigorous, yet refreshingly bold manner, pointing out that some of these issues apply to male ancient philosophers too, such as, for example, Plato's fictionalised version of the historical Socrates. Other issues, however, require choices that involve a more thorough confrontation with the canon and the criteria traditionally applied for who counts as a philosopher and what kind of contribution merits the epithet 'philosophical'. This is not simply a scholarly matter to be settled by reference to the available sources; rather more intricate work is required, which involves delving into the sources with an enquiring spirit, probing them for hidden biases and agendas, considering issues of pseudonymity, i.e. men writing under female names, and trying to piece together as complete a picture as possible of the ancient women who dared to do philosophy.<sup>[1]</sup>

Chapters 1 and 2 by Frisbee Sheffield and Brian Black focus on the question of gender from two very different perspectives and traditions: Diotima's in Plato's *Symposium* and Sulabhā's in the *Mahābhārata*. Both chapters raise fundamental questions about gender in relation to intellectual activity; both take the view that binary oppositions, such as that between men and women, are questioned and problematised in the texts they respectively deal with (p. 32). Interestingly, even though the historicity of these women remains contested, there is a lot to learn from their interventions – Diotima's reported wisdom in an all-male symposium on the theme of love, Sulabhā's in a debate with King Janaka on the theme of enlightenment – thus leading Black to question 'whether the demand for historicity is the most useful lens through which to make sense of Diotima's and Sulabhā's filtered words' (p. 43).

Women's medical knowledge in antiquity is the focus of Chapter 3, by Sophia M. Connell. This is an important area, not only because medicine in antiquity had a significant overlap with philosophy, but also because of the related issues of women's health and fertility with which women doctors would have certainly been involved. The chapter makes two claims: first, that it would be a mistake to assume that only male doctors were inclined towards theory, leaving female practitioners to learn their craft through practice alone; and secondly that female doctors were likely to attend to both female and male patients, thus debunking a myth that saw women practitioners solely as midwives. Painstakingly collating the evidence to support these claims, Connell paints a rich and detailed picture of how women doctors would have practiced medicine and how male doctors would have sometimes had to draw upon women's knowledge of the body, childbirth and menstruation in order to prove their credentials and attract female clients.

Chapter 4 by Kelly Arenson highlights another factor in the complex work of recovering ancient women's voices, namely that sometimes misogyny was used as a weapon not only against the women who practiced philosophy, but also against a school's theoretical tenets. This certainly appears to have been the case with the Epicureans, who welcomed women amongst their ranks, yet drew a lot of critical fire from other authors who employed the cheap tactics of sexualising Epicurean women to cast ridicule on hedonism. Arenson attempts to reconstruct a more accurate profile of Epicurean women, such as Leontion and Themista, labelled *hetairai* in the extant literature, but who could well have been in stable relationships with Epicurean men and active in studying, discussing, and promulgating Epicurean philosophical principles.

The next three chapters look at how philosophical activity intersected with traditional female roles, such as those of wife, mother, or household member. Chapter 5 by Katharine O'Reilly examines this issue from the point of view of philosophical lineage, i.e. the reception and handing down of philosophical principles and ideas. Focusing on Arete of Cyrene – the daughter of the founder of the Cyrenaic school, Aristippus, and the mother of an important leader of that school, Aristippus the Younger – the chapter explores the related roles of philosopher, head of school and mother/educator Arete took on. In the following chapter Kate Meng Brassel reflects on the topic of the Stoic wife and highlights a paradox at the heart of Stoic thinking: on the one hand, the Stoics welcomed women in their midst and saw marriage as a community in which spouses were subject to the same standards and were both required to practice philosophy for the attainment of virtue; on the other, the absence of any Stoic women's record makes one wonder how seriously the Stoic theory of equality was meant. The paradox is intensified with later Stoics such as Seneca

and Epictetus, for whom manliness and virility were paramount virtues. In the absence of direct evidence, Brassel turns to drama in an attempt to piece together a more fully fleshed-out picture of the Stoic woman.

Rosemary Twomey in Chapter 7 addresses the question of the household as a locus for philosophical activity. Her focus is Pythagorean women – authors of letters and treatises some of which have survived and therefore shine a light on an area that is otherwise steeped in speculation and conjecture. The problem with these texts, however, is that they do not always fit the criteria for what is considered properly philosophical subject matter. They often deal with issues of everyday morality, such as sexual infidelity and indiscretion, or a woman's role as a good wife, thus leading scholars to doubt their status as valuable philosophical contributions. Twomey questions this position by highlighting the philosophical underpinnings of these texts and challenging the belief that philosophy is only suited for the public arena, implicitly marginalising and excluding women who made use of what limited opportunities they had for philosophy.

The following three chapters shift the focus to more standard philosophical fare, including questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and the nature and immortality of the soul. Chapter 8 by Giulia De Cesaris and Caterina Pellò deals with the Pythagorean Perictione, to whom the treatise *On Wisdom* is ascribed, looking in detail at both the philosophical content of the treatise and questions of potential pseudonymity. Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa's sister and interlocutor in Gregory's dialogue *On Soul and Resurrection* is the focus of Chapter 9, by Anna Christensen. A fascinating figure, who pretended to be a widow in order to avoid marriage, Macrina made a clear commitment to a philosophical life at a time when women had little control over their lives. Chapter 10 by Jana Schultz deals with the Neoplatonists Sosipatra of Ephesus and one of the best-known figures of antiquity, the mathematician, philosopher and public teacher Hypatia of Alexandria.

Chapter 11 by Ann Pang-White focuses on the Chinese philosopher and poet Ban Zhao – an extraordinary individual who took on the role of public intellectual and official at a time when rigid gender roles prescribed that women had no place outside the home. Best known for her support of women's education, Ban Zhao penned the influential *Lessons for Women*, which made a passionate plea for education for women. Finally, in Chapter 12, Peter Adamson examines the reception of Plato's ideas on women by Proclus, Ibn Rushd and the early modern feminist Lucrezia Marinella.

All twelve chapters are of extremely high quality, written in a spirit of sympathy for women thinkers of antiquity, but also in full knowledge of the conventions of the field and the difficulties these pose for restoring women to the philosophical canon. Admittedly, the dearth of direct evidence places considerable obstacles in the way of this endeavour, but the contributors tackle these with originality, resourcefulness and sound argument. Overall, this volume is a commendable achievement that will appeal to those with interests in ancient philosophy and its history, feminism, and those seeking to expand the philosophical canon to include marginalised groups and non-Western perspectives.

## **Authors and Titles**

Introduction: The Value of Women Philosophers for the History of Philosophy – Caterina Pellò and Katharine R. O' Reilly

1. Beyond Gender: The Voice of Diotima – Frisbee C.C. Sheffield
2. Sulabhā and Indian Philosophy: Rhetoric, Gender, and Freedom in the *Mahābhārata* – Brian Black
3. Women's Medical Knowledge in Antiquity: Beyond Midwifery – Sophia M. Connell
4. Ancient Women Epicureans and Their Anti-Hedonist Critics – Kelly Arenson
5. Arete of Cyrene and the Role of Women in Philosophical Lineage – Katharine R. O'Reilly

6. Women at the crossroads: Life and Death for the Stoic Wife – Kate Meng Brassel
7. Pythagorean Women and the Domestic as a Philosophical Topic – Rosemary Twomey
8. Perictione, Mother of Metaphysics: A New Philosophical Reading of *On Wisdom* – Giulia De Cesaris and Caterina Pellò
9. Not Veiled in Silence: The case for Macrina – Anna B. Christensen
10. Women Philosophers and Ideals of Being a Woman in Neoplatonic Schools of Late Antiquity: The Examples of Sosipatra of Ephesus and Hypatia of Alexandria – Jana Schultz
11. Reappraising Ban Zhao: The Advent of Chinese Women Philosophers – Ann A. Pang-White
12. The Reception of Plato on Women: Proclus, Averroes, Marinella – Peter Adamson

## Notes

**[1]** It is worth referring to another book with a similar theme, *Women's Perspectives on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, edited by I. Chouinard, Z. McConaughey, A. Medeiros Ramos, and R. Noel (New York: Springer, 2021), to which Katharine R. O'Reilly has contributed a chapter. In discussing the question of who counts as a philosopher O'Reilly argues that the restoration of ancient women thinkers involves changing the way we view the discipline itself. She also suggests that it may be appropriate to apply less restrictive criteria when it comes to women thinkers, partly because there is a history of resistance to labelling women as philosophers (labelling them, instead, as priestesses, courtesans, poets, mystics, saints, etc.) and partly because of a tendency to apply double standards resulting in excluding women who lived a philosophical lifestyle whilst including men with such a lifestyle (e.g. Diogenes of Sinope). As a result, re-integrating women to philosophy, argues O'Reilly, requires both a shift in our methods and a good deal of reflection on the methods currently used (pp. 17-28).