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The status of women in ancient Greek philosophy: from Plato to Plotinus

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the status of women according to the ancient philosophers and specifically from Plato to Plotinus. Initially, a general reference is made to the aspect of women through Plato's philosophy and in particular the dialogues *Symposium* and *Republic*. In the second part a reference is made to Xenophon's *Economics*, a philosophical dialogue, which presents how education can awaken a woman's capabilities. Although Xenophon is not a platonic philosopher, he lived at the same time as Plato and shares with him the influence of Socrates' teaching. In the third part we examine the way Platonic philosophers viewed women through the case study of the eclectic Platonic Plutarch, who through historical examples highlights the virtues that women can also demonstrate. The fourth and final part of this paper refers to the way women were seen by the Neoplatonists and, in particular by the founder of the school, Plotinus, who recognizes no difference in the prospects of an embodied soul depending on gender. At the end, a brief reference is made to the Neoplatonic Hypatia, who through her actions offered a living example of women's contribution to philosophy and to philosophical and public life.

Keywords: *Diotima, female mysticism, Hypatia, Neoplatonism, Plato, Plotinus, Plutarchus, Xenophon*

Introduction

Philosophy traditionally has never been a female issue: from antiquity till Christian times, there are very few female figures who are attested to having developed philosophical activity – which is to be expected, given the patriarchal character of the society of those times – while there is rarely any reference to women in general in philosophical texts. This paper studies the status of women in philosophy from Plato and his contemporary Xenophon, to Platonic philosophers, such as Plutarch, and of course to Neoplatonism and especially to its proponent, Plotinus, while this discussion concludes with a sort reference to Hypatia. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the significant contribution of the students of Socrates and especially Plato, but also of the successors of platonic philosophy, to the recognition of women's abilities and potential, a perception that was destined to define modern thought through the Renaissance and Humanism.

I. Woman in Plato's philosophy

Plato's philosophy includes several innovative elements for his time, including his perception of the value and position of women¹. For example, in the dialogue *Meno* (c. 385 BC), Socrates, discussing the issue of virtue with the young aristocrat who gave his name to the work, leads him to the assumption that virtue is common to men and women regardless of the field in which it is practiced, because it equally consists of good administration, administration with prudence and justice². While the Platonic Socrates is aware of the different nature of women and men in terms of their biological characteristics, he believes that this does not imply differences in their virtues,

¹ Annas J., *Plato: Everything you need to know*, Greek trans. Leontsíni E., Athens: Elliniká Grámmata, 2006, 62-63.

² R. S. (ed.), *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Bluck, 1961, 1-8, 11-22. Scott D., *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 79-87. Taylor A. E., *Plato, The man and his work*, Greek trans. I. Arzóglou, Athens: Morphotikó Ídrima Ethnikís Trapézis, 1992, 165-181.

capabilities and abilities and that they could and should serve equally with the ultimate goal of the common good³.

SO. *But tell me only about virtue, Meno, do you think that it is one in man, another in woman and in others, or the same also about health and size and strength? Do you think that health is one in man and another in woman? Or does it have the same "kind" everywhere, as long as it is health, whether in a man or in anyone else it is found?*

MEN. *It seems to me that health is the same in both man and woman.*

SO. *And size and strength? If a woman is strong, she will be strong having the same general character and the same strength. By the same, this is what I mean: strength does not differ in anything as to being strength, whether it is found in a man or in a woman, or do you think that it differs in anything?*

MEN. *Not me.*

SO. *But will virtue as to being virtue differ at all, whether it is in a child or in an old man, in a woman or in a man?*

MEN. *I think, Socrates, that this is no longer quite the same as the others.*

SO. *But what? Didn't you say that it is a virtue for a man to govern a city well, and for a woman a house?*

MEN. *Yes, I said so.*

SO. *Is it possible for anyone to govern a city or a house or anything else, if he does not govern it wisely and justly?*

MEN. *Certainly not.*

SO. *And if they govern justly and wisely, will they not govern with justice and temperance?*

MEN. *It is obvious.*

SO. *So the same things are needed, if indeed both the woman and the man are to be good, justice and temperance.*

MEN. *It is obvious⁴.*

³ Mossé C., *I yinaika stin arkhaia Ellada*, Athens: Papadima, 2008, 141-151.

⁴ Plato, *Meno* 72d-73b, *Platonis opera*. V. Burnet J. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967-68.

The issue of women's value is being discussed again in the *Symposium* (385 BC-), a philosophical discourse which refers to love⁵. Regarding specifically the status of women, this dialogue contributes in two ways to the issue: by referring to the figure of Diotima and by treating love as a tendency of the soul towards the Good.

Socrates begins his speech by stating that everything he knows about love, was taught to him by Diotima of Mantinea in Arcadia. The significance of the reference to her is that she is the only woman who is presented through the Platonic dialogues as teaching Socrates himself and represents the feminine element of wisdom, something extremely rare in ancient Greek philosophy⁶. Diotima is one of the most enigmatic figures in ancient literature, as there are no other known references to her by ancient writers - at least not in a way that is directly connected to her personality and philosophy. Thus, it remains unknown whether she was indeed a historical figure or a literary invention. It is possible that she was a priestess of the time associated with women's mystical traditions (e.g., the Eleusinian Mysteries), who was involved in purification rituals and mysteries. This possibility is reinforced by Socrates' statement that: "And to the Athenians, who had once offered sacrifices before the plague, she granted them a postponement of the disease for ten years"⁷. It is possible that, even if her existence was attested by other writers, she was eliminated by Christian copyists and scholars, since female participation in philosophy, religion, and the mysteries was considered from a threat to heretical, especially if it was related to pagan elements of faith and ritual. As a historical person, she must have been part of the circle of the Pythagoreans, with whom other women were associated, about which little is known⁸. However, the fact

⁵ Taylor, 1992, 250-279.

⁶ Yeorgopoulou N., *The Platonic myth of Diotima*, Athens: Gkélmpesis, 2005, 42-45.

⁷ Plato, *Symposium* 201d. Cf. Futter, D., "Lear on Irony and Socratic Method", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1), 2023, pp. 111-126.

⁸ The most famous of these was the Pythagorean Theano (6th century BC). She wrote on ethics, marriage and the education of women. Other well-known were Phindis/Philtys, Myia, Damo and Arete, who wrote philosophical and ethical works, see Spandagou E. R. & Travlou D., *The*

that she was a priestess and possibly a Pythagorean philosopher allows the Platonic Socrates to make the transition to metaphysical search. Regardless of whether she was a historical or a fictional person, she functions as the persona of the philosopher in order for him to present ideas that are not and could not be proven through logical means.

Through Diotima, Plato conveys the metaphysical theory of love, which is essentially a theory of the elevation of the soul to the Good⁹. Eros, who is presented as the child of Poros and Penia, is always in quest and never in a state of completeness. The journey of conquering the other begins with a physical attraction, as desire for physical union with the other and the procreation of offspring. For some people, however, whose soul has not sunk into matter to such an extent that they are excluded from the possibility of remembering the origin of their soul, love is characterized by elevations, which make it evident that in its true form it is a desire for immortality through the ascension of the soul to the higher spiritual level, the vision of the Good. Thus, through love, the soul is led to the knowledge of the good and the true. What is important to point out in the context of the present study is that there is no suggestion that the love for the Good and the ascension to it concerns only the souls of men – rather than all souls without exception, regardless of the body to which it was united during its incarnation.

Diotima: “*Now,*” she said, “*those who are pregnant physically turn to women in preference and in this way manifest their love, seeking, as they imagine, to secure future immortality and posthumous fame and eternal happiness by the acquisition of children; on the contrary, the others, who are*

Mathematicians of Ancient Greece: Biographical Details and Works of the Mathematicians of Ancient Greece from 900 BC to 550 AD, Athens: Aethra, 1994.

⁹ Halperin D. M., "Why Is Diotima a Woman? Platonic Eros and the Figuration of Gender", *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1990, 257–308. Nye A., "The Hidden Host: Irigaray and Diotima at Plato's Symposium", *Hypatia*, v.3, n.3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 45–61.

*pregnant in the [209a] soul — for there are not lacking those who are pregnant much more in the soul than in their body, offspring that the soul is fit to conceive and bring into the world. What then is the offspring that is fit for it? Prudence and virtue in general—yes, these are the things that poets in general and those craftsmen who are renowned for being inventors bring to the world; and the greatest, he said, and most beautiful creation of prudence is the orderly government of cities and households, what we call prudence and justice’.*¹⁰

The most revolutionary concept for his era regarding the status of women is presented in the *Republic* (c. 380 – 374 BC). According to his concept of the proper structure and constitution of a state, sharing spouses is required and permitted, in order to produce children with the best genetic prospects for the sake of the state. Furthermore, contrary to the dominant view of the time and especially that concerning women of the upper class (which included the philosopher himself), it is argued that despite the physical – biological difference between men and women, specifically with regard to the process of reproduction, there is no other differentiation regarding the abilities or the receptivity of the soul to virtue. The social roles of women are not affected completely by nature and thus women do not fall sort of men at least to the activities not having to do with the bodily strength, as to be educated and to govern, just like men, and therefore can and have to participate in every activity of the state, practice every profession, and, since they have the same predispositions and inclinations as men, as well as similar abilities and virtues, they can serve in every position of the state and become guardians or even philosophers - rulers¹¹.

– *Do you know anything now about what people do in which men do not possess all these qualities in a much*

¹⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 208e - 209e, *Platonis opera. III*. Burnet J. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–68.

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, E, 455d-456c, *Platonis opera. IV*. Burnet J. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–68, · Taylor, 1992, 310-348.

higher degree than women? Or should we sit and talk at length about weaving and the art of making sweets and cooking, in which women seem to be something, and in which it would be their greatest shame [455d] to fall below men?

– *You are really right in saying that in all things, in one respect, one sex is much inferior to another; indeed, there are many women who are superior to men in many things; but on the whole it is as you say.*

– *There is, then, my friend, no work of the kind mentioned in the administration of the state which belongs to a woman because she is a woman, nor to a man because she is a man, but the natural dispositions are equally divided in both sexes, and the woman is equally formed by nature to take part in all professions, [455e] and the man also, only in all things the woman is a weaker creature than the man.*

– *This is certain.*

– *So, shall we assign everything to the man and leave nothing to the woman?*

– *How is this possible?*

– *But there are indeed, we will say, women who are made for medicine and others not, and some who are apt to music and others the opposite.*

– *How not?*

– *[456a] There are also some who are fit for gymnastics and for the works of war, and others who are not at all fit for them, and do not even love them.*

– *I believe it.*

– *And what? Women love philosophy and others hate it? Or are some men of the same temperament and others of the opposite?*

– *That is also true.*

– *So, are there women who are fit to guard the city and others who are not; or did we not take men with such natural abilities when we chose them to guard our city?*

– *With them, indeed.*

– *So, both men and women are equally fit to guard the city, with the only difference being that one is stronger or weaker than the other.*

- *It seems so.*
- [456b] *Such women, then, should be chosen to live with such men and to guard the city with them, since they are fit for it and have the same natural disposition.*
- *No more.*
- *And should we not assign the same tasks to the same natural dispositions?*
- *The same.*
- *So here we are again, after the round we have made, and we agree that it is not at all unnatural to give the wives of the guards' gymnastics and musical education.*
- *Certainly not at all.*
- *So, we were not imposing impossible things, even similar to a simple wish, [456c] since this law is in accordance with nature; but on the contrary, the way things are done today is much more, as it seems, something against nature.*
- *So, it seems.*
- *But the point was not to prove that what we maintain is not only possible, but also the best?*
- *Indeed.*
- *And that they can be done, have we already admitted?*
- *We have.*
- *That they are the best, is not what now remains for us to agree on?*
- *And certainly.*
- *So, in order for a woman to be able to guard the city, will we need to give her a different education from that of men, since [456d] she has also been endowed with the same natural predisposition?*
- *Not different.*
- *And what is your idea about what I am going to ask you.*
- *Which?*
- *Do you have the idea that one man is better and another worse; or do you think they are all alike?*
- *Quite the opposite.*
- *So, in the state that we were founding, do you have the idea that our guards, by the education we have described,*

made better men than the scythe-cutters with the education they also received from their art?

- *How ridiculous is your question.*
- *I understand; are they not [456e] better than their other fellow citizens?*
- *And much better.*
- *But what? and will not the women be the best among other women?*
- *Of course, they too.*
- *And is there anything better for the city than to have the best women and men in it?*
- *There is none.*
- *And will music and gymnastics achieve this, when they are presented in the way [457a] that we have said?*
- *How not?*
- *So not only can it be implemented, but the best for the city is the law that we have prescribed.*
- *Indeed.*
- *Therefore, the women of the guards must be stripped, since instead of any other dress they will be dressed in virtue, and will take part in the war and in the other guarding of our city, and they will have no other work to do; only we will put the women in the lighter of these, than the men, on account of the weakness of their sex; [457b] and he who laughs at the stripping of the women, who will be exercising for the best purpose, "will immediately reap the fruit of the knowledge of the ridiculous," and he does not know, it seems, either why he laughs or what he is doing; for the saying is and will always be perfectly stated that what is beneficial is beautiful and what is harmful is ugly.*
- *Thus, it is absolutely.*

II. The status of women in Xenophon

Xenophon (c. 430-355 BC) as a philosopher also started, like Plato, writing under the strong influence of the personality of Socrates. This impact determined the content of his philosophical works *Memorabilia*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Symposium*,

and *Economics*. The latter is a dialogue between Ischomachus, a literary persona of the author himself, and Socrates, where the two of them are discussing the daily life of a landowner and the optimal way of managing of his estate and property. In this treatise, it is interesting to focus on the way in which the woman is presented and her contribution to *oikos*¹².

When one initially reads the *Economics*, gets the impression that the personality of the woman is outlined negatively, as a person without knowledge and will. More specifically, Ischomachus states that “she was not quite fifteen years old and came to my house, while in the previous period she had lived under strict supervision, so that she could see as few things as possible, hear as few things as possible, and ask as few questions as possible”¹³. This reference is open to many interpretations: while it has been argued that Xenophon expresses an idealized view of the position of women in the past¹⁴, it could also be argued that, conversely, he is criticizing Athenian society, which kept young girls isolated from the world and uneducated, since this choice constituted an impediment to their intellectual development. Such a conjecture could be valid, given the critical spirit that we see in Xenophon’s entire work, not only in the philosophical but also in the historical, as well as his philolaconism. Whereas, in Athens, girls received a very limited education, which mainly included domestic arts and very basic knowledge of reading and writing, without any prospect of participation in public life, in Sparta the education provided to women was almost the same as that received by men and mainly included physical education, sports, dance,

¹² Pomeroy S. B., *Xenophon, Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 31–36, 41–45; Vavouras E., “The political and economic philosophy in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*”, *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 6, 2019, pp. 85-95.

¹³ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7.5, Introduction, summary, translation, comments Dimitriádoú - Touphexí E., Thessaloniki: Zítros, 2007; Vavouras Elias, “The political philosophy as a precondition and completion of political economy in the Ways and Means of Xenophon”, *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 9, 2020, pp. 183-198.

¹⁴ Pomeroy, 1994, 247.

music and other skills, that allowed active participation in public events and gave freedom and a say in the affairs¹⁵.

On the other hand, the young girl in the dialogue does not differ much as a person from the slave with whom Socrates converses in the Platonic *Meno*¹⁶: just as there the philosopher invites a slave to solve together a mathematical problem, following a step-by-step approach, so here Ischomachus invites his wife to find out together a solution for the optimal way of managing their household. And as in the *Meno*, so in the *Economics* the conclusion is drawn that the process of leading to the solution proves that knowledge pre-exists, even if unconsciously, in the human soul and therefore knowledge essentially constitutes a recall of all the knowledge that the soul possessed in the pre-incarnated phase of its existence. Thus, through introduction to the dialogue process the individual develops the skills of thinking and deliberating, becomes aware of its abilities and activates its skills. This is achieved through education, which begins with an apprenticeship relationship, until the apprentice reaches the level of self-activity. The ultimate goal of education must be to consolidate the concept of justice, which, as in Plato, is identified with self-interest, and the safeguarding of the common good¹⁷.

Certainly, a differentiation is recognized regarding the level and subject of learning, which depends on the nature of each person. The learning process and content must be in accordance with the nature of the learner, because then it will be more effective. In particular, the purpose of education must be to utilize and improve one's own nature to the greatest extent possible. The nature of each person, of course, primarily includes gender. For example, the fact that the wife is considered uneducated, is attributed to her excessive confinement within the home. However, education also depends on the particular

¹⁵ Blundell S., *Women in Ancient Greece*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995, 113-159.

¹⁶ Plato, *Meno*, 82a – 85c. Bedu-Addo J. T., "Recollection and the Argument 'from a Hypothesis' in Plato's *Meno*", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, v. 104, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 1-14.

¹⁷ Lee Too Y., "The Economics of Pedagogy: Xenophon's Wifely Didactics", *The Cambridge Classical Journal*, v. 47, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 65-80.

personality of each individual. What is most important to emphasize is that, in any case, according to Xenophon, education includes everyone, men and women, free and slaves, an idea which of course must have been quite pioneering for the time and society of his time¹⁸.

[7.14] *To this, Socrates, the woman replied: "What help," she said, "can I offer you? What is my power? Everything depends on you, while my mother told me, it is my work to be wise."*

[7.15] *"Yes, woman," I said, "by Zeus; my own father advised me the same. But it is characteristic of wise people, both men and women, to try to preserve their possessions as best they can, and to add as many other goods as possible to them, in an honest and just manner."*

[7.16] *"Do you really see anything," said the woman, "that, if I do it, I can help to increase the goods of our house?"*

"Yes, by Zeus," I said, "try to do as well as possible these tasks for which the gods made your nature capable and our habits approve"¹⁹.

III. The status of women in Platonic philosophers: the case of Plutarch

The Platonic tradition continued mainly through the Academy, but also beyond and outside of it. Philosophers, who were initiated into Plato's teaching, attempted in the following years to rescue and interpret his works – while perforce, of course, due to the era, incorporating extraneous influences and thus introducing an eclecticism. This chorus of intellectuals includes Plutarch from Chaeronea in Boeotia (45 - 120 AD), who is considered an eclectic Platonist, as his philosophy combines Platonic elements with Pythagorean and Stoic doctrines. The collection "Moralia" includes more than seventy works with

¹⁸ Pomeroy, 1994, 57-59.

¹⁹ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7.14-7.16.

essays, dialogues and speeches covering topics of theoretical and practical philosophy²⁰.

Plutarch follows Plato and the Platonic tradition when declaring that the nature of woman is not at all different from that of man, so that there are women who have by nature capabilities and abilities equal to those of men. For example, they can successfully participate in all levels of education and experience philosophical love, which leads to the knowledge of the Good. Even sexual attraction does not exclude the ascension to which philosophical love leads, because it can evolve into philosophical love, since the two lovers, the man and the woman²¹, can equally help each other in reacquainting themselves with the higher and best part of their existence²².

Plutarch often refers to the relationship between woman and man, between husband and family, and above all in his works “On Married Life” (“Coniugalia Praecepta”) and “Virtues of Women” (“Mulierum Virtutes”). In the former, he addresses advice to a young couple, Polaine and his wife, on achieving marital harmony. The spirit that runs through the work is that the two spouses should function as complements, demonstrate mutual appreciation and respect and share their social

²⁰ Walbank F. W., “Plutarch, Biography, Works, & Facts,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Specifically on the concept of moral education in Plutarch, the role of education in character formation, the role of mothers, educators and politicians as moral teachers and the way in which Plutarch arrives at his positions having been influenced beyond Plato’s teaching by those of Aristotle and the Stoics, see S. Xenophontos, *Ethical Education in Plutarch Moralising Agents and Contexts*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016.

²¹ Here it becomes apparent that the philosopher is referring to the erotic attraction felt by a man and a woman, which is very different from the erotic attraction felt by a student towards his teacher as we see it in Platonic philosophy. Apart from the fact that the erotic attraction to which Plutarch refers is between two equal individuals, these are individuals of different sexes - a differentiation that is possibly due to the fact that in this era the position of women in society is improved compared to that of classical times, women have somewhat greater freedom of participation in philosophical schools and erotic attraction to individuals of the same sex (meaning men) is no longer considered as the norm.

²² Plutarchus, *Moralia*, trans. Babbitt F. C., Cherniss H., Sandbach F. H., Einarson B., Lacy P. H. De, Helmbold W. C., Clement P. A., Hoffleit H. B., Pearson L., Minar E. L. Jr., & Fowler H. N., the Loeb Classical Library, 1927, IX, 751E.

surrounding- a view that contradicts the social isolation that Xenophon presented as characterizing Athenian society. The quintessence of marriage, according to Plutarch, lies in the spiritual union of the spouses ("For not only bodies are a union, but also manners and knowledge and life as a whole have some common use and harmony")²³.

According to Plutarch, a woman should be characterized by prudence and sobriety, but not by blind submission and lack of will. A clearer picture of the virtues that are considered to be characteristic of women is presented in the work of the same name, "Virtues of Women" ("Mulierum Virtutes"), providing specific examples of women from Greek and Roman history, which demonstrate the equal moral superiority of the female sex to that of men. The poet Telesilla of Argos stood out for her boldness and sobriety when, after her fellow citizens were defeated in battle with the Spartans, she gathered the women and organized the defense, forcing the latter to retreat (*When there were no men, woman proved to be brave*)²⁴. Brutus' wife, Porcia, proved to be faithful and brave, since she did not betray her husband during his involvement in the conspiracy, while after its failure, she committed suicide (*not only did she act bravely, but also, she spoke philosophically about virtue*). Moreover, he also cites similar examples in the *Parallel Lives*, such as Cleopatra, Olympias, Alexander the Great's mother, and the mother of the Gracchi, Cornelia. Through these examples, Plutarch wants to make it clear that women can demonstrate moral virtues, just like men, and be role models for all people²⁵. This respect and appreciation for the female personality is not so much a sign of the ethics of the era, but rather a legacy of the platonic philosophy, which focuses on the human soul, while gender is a subordinate factor to the nature of the human.

²³ Plutarchus, *Moralia*, IX.

²⁴ Plutarchus, *Moralia*: "Lacaenarum apophthegmata".

²⁵ Warren L., Reading Plutarch's Women: Moral Judgement in the *Moralia* and Some Lives", *Ploutarchos*, v. 15, Coimbra, Portugal: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 97-108.

IV. The status of women in Neoplatonism

A. In Plotinus

Plotinus of Lycopolis in Upper Egypt (c. 203 – 270 AD) is considered the founder of Neoplatonism. His philosophy is summarized in his synthetic treatise, known as *Enneads*. Although he is essentially based on platonic philosophy, in his attempt to continue and interpret it by purifying it of external philosophical elements that had been added over the years, he ends up with a new ontological system, where the Good or One is recognized as the first principle, followed in descending ontological order by Mind, Soul and finally Matter.

Due to the platonic basis of his philosophy, he follows the Academics and Platonists when focusing on the issue of the soul and its union – or, to be precise, reunification – with the One, ignoring the subordinate factors related to the incarnation, such as gender. According to him, every soul has the possibility of reacquainting itself with the Divine through education, practicing the virtues and inner purification. Differences arising from gender are linked to the body and therefore matter, which means that they constitute an obstacle and must be ignored and overcome- as we will see in specific passages below. After all, all incarnated souls remain, according to Plotinus, connected to the Cosmic Soul, which implies the ultimate unity of all things and any differences are only superficial²⁶. Additionally, all souls possess the same powers, such as reason, intellect, and wisdom, face the same passions, and are governed by the innate tendency to approach the One. Plotinus, therefore, recognizes an essential equality between men and women on a spiritual level and a belief that every soul, regardless of gender, has the potential to achieve union with the One.

In fact, every time there is a reference in Plotinus' work to woman, it functions as an example to something- because he

²⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 7, 11, *Plotini opera*, Henry P. / Schwyzer H.-R. (eds). Bibliotheca Augustana, Leiden 1951. O'Meara D., "The hierarchical ordering of reality in Plotinus", *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, L. P. Gerson (ed.), N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 75 – 76.

finds no reason to refer separately to the genera²⁷. For instance, at some point he argues that the union of a soul with a body is not always incidental, because each incarnation offers some lessons to the soul to be learned: sometimes the union of a soul with a female body occurs, if this soul in a previous incarnation committed violence against a woman, so that the current incarnation functions for the soul as a lesson learned. This might sound problematic nowadays, but we must not fall into the trap of anachronisms and interpretations outside a certain temporal and ideological framework · so in this case too, we must always keep in mind that Plotinus's purpose is to reinforce the Platonic position that everything must contribute to the enhancement of the goodness of the soul in order to achieve its reunion with the Good.

*“Do not think, then, that a man becomes a slave or a prisoner, or that he suffers bodily injuries by chance or without reason; but he himself once did what he now suffers. A man who kills his mother will be killed by his child when he is reincarnated as a woman; and he who rapes a woman will be born to experience rape himself”*²⁸.

For Plotinus, the relationships between people are a serious issue and are even linked to the cosmic order. The way of behaving and the events that arise either from this or from circumstances determine the fate of each person.

“Moreover, the fortunes of parents and the birth fortunes of their children, the dispositions of children and their relations with the fortunes of their fathers, even events that have not yet happened, as well as the deaths of brothers, the relations of women with men, and everything connected with them, all these go hand in hand with the articulation of fate. How, then, could the relationship of each person to the stars

²⁷ Wilberding J., "Women in Plotinus", *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 43–63.

²⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 2, 13.

be such that, what is said to happen by the fathers, is true?”²⁹.

In another case where a woman is used as an example, the topic of discussion is love. According to Plotinus it is common and natural for men to experience love towards women. This, however, does not mean that it will act as a brake on the philosophical life, because even physical attraction can act as an impetus for the elevation of the soul through love. Beauty is a creation of the One and the erotic attraction towards it, is essentially an attraction of the soul towards the One.

“Whence, then, does the beauty of Helen, the most beautiful, or of women who are similar to Aphrodite in beauty, come? And whence does the beauty of Aphrodite herself come, or if some beautiful man or God appears to men, or even if he does not appear, but has something beautiful that is seen by them? Is not this form omnipresent, reaching to what is made by its creator, just as it is said in the arts that artificial creations come from craftsmen?”³⁰.

Elsewhere, women are mentioned along with children and friends as factors that create emotional bonds and therefore cause passions in the soul, affecting the memory and mental clarity of the individual. Obviously, of course, Plotinus is referring mainly to men, which we must keep in mind that it is reasonable and expected given the patriarchal nature of society and the majority of the audience that constituted his students³¹.

“And what about friends, children, and wife? And the homeland, and the things that belong to a man, and even the city? Can a man remember them without passion, or does passion determine his memory of them? Perhaps this passion is inherent in man himself, and the passions of men are

²⁹ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 1, 5

³⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 8, 2.

³¹ It should be noted that Plotinus’ treatises are written records of his teachings and discussions with his students at the school.

connected with the seriousness and importance of things, according to the external relation that each one has to them"³².

Therefore, Plotinus recognizes the important presence of women in both society and philosophy, and this perception was also reflected in his school. In fact, there were common people as well as members of the Roman aristocracy, both men and women, such as the emperor Gallienus, as well as his wife Salonina. The empress was not the only case of a female student, as Porphyry testifies – despite the fact that women's participation in philosophy up to that time was limited³³. Women in Plotinus' circle included Geminina (Gemina), a Roman aristocrat and patroness of Plotinus, who provided him with shelter and hospitality for many years in Rome, and her daughter (whose name is not preserved). The two women seem to have attended his teachings and actively participated in philosophical gatherings. The fact that there are no direct references to other women in his school may be due to the lack of historical sources or to the social reality of the time, as the presence of women was not considered a widespread trend in the philosophical schools of the time. On the contrary, their presence in Plotinus' school validates the connection of theoretical principles with everyday practice, projecting a belief in the spiritual equality of people, men and women.

B. In the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria: the case of Hypatia

As we reach the end of this paper, there should be at least a brief mention of the most important representative of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic School, Hypatia (c. 360–415 AD), best known for her tragic end at the hands of the fanatical religious mob of Christians, who condemned women's

³² Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV, 3, 32.

³³ Michalewski A., "Women and Philosophy in Porphyry's Life of Plotinus", *Women's Perspectives on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, Chouinard Is., McConaughy Z., Medeiros Ramos Al. & Noël R. (eds), Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021, 211–217.

involvement in philosophy and the sciences as well as their presence in public life.

Due to the fact that no works of hers have been handed down, any knowledge about her person comes from secondary sources. Thus, we know that her philosophical approach was influenced by Plotinus and Proclus and had as its main points of reference Plato and Aristotle (whose philosophy the Neoplatonists considered preparatory to that of the former), especially with regard to issues surrounding the soul, immortality, and the relationship of man with the Divine. She also taught mathematics and astronomy, mainly focusing on the works of Diophantus, Euclid, Ptolemy and Apollonius, while she also dealt with the applied issues of these sciences, as it seems that she proceeded with calculations and dealt with astronomical instruments, such as the astrolabe and the hydraulic clock³⁴.

The most reliable and contemporary source is the Constantinopolitan Christian historian Socrates Scholasticus (*Ecclesiastical History*, c. 440 AD). He acknowledges that “*she managed to achieve such progress in philosophy and the sciences that she far surpassed all the philosophers of the time*” and that “*those who wanted to study philosophy frequented her*”³⁵.

The Neoplatonic philosopher and last head of the Academy of Athens, Damascius (6th century) refers to Hypatia’s spirituality and testifies that she “*possessed all philosophical knowledge and taught lessons on Plato and Aristotle*”. despite her profound knowledge of platonic and aristotelian philosophy, she did not limit her interest and references to a single philosophical school³⁶.

Her student and bishop of Ptolemais, Synesius of Cyrene, in his *Epistles*, describes her as “*my wise mother, teacher and benefactor*”, showing that their relationship was an applied case of platonic love, where respect and admiration enhance

³⁴ Dendrinós M., *Ipatía: Astronomía, Mathimatiká kai Philosophía sto likóphos tou arkhaíou kósmou*, Athens: Armós, 2021.

³⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7,15, trans. Zenos A.C., Schaff P. & Wace H. (eds), Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890.

³⁶ Damaskios, *Vitae Isidori reliquiae*, Zintzen C. (ed.), Göttingen: Hildesheim Gg Olms, 1967.

the spiritual elevation of the student³⁷. The emotional closeness that Synesius confesses that he felt to her, shows that her teaching included not only academic lectures, but more practical issues, such as solving scientific questions as well as life guidance.

Therefore, the case of Hypatia illustrates the position that runs through the entire Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition regarding the position of women. The Alexandrian philosopher was a living example that the value and contribution of women are the same as that of men³⁸, as their souls possess the same abilities and potential, and above all the ability to acquire knowledge and truth.

Conclusions

The development of philosophical thought from Plato to Plotinus shows that, despite the patriarchal social structures of the time, there was a gradual and significant recognition of the spiritual equality of the sexes. Plato paved the way for the philosophical acceptance of women, promoting the equality of souls regardless of sex and supporting the participation of women in education, politics and philosophy. Xenophon, although less radical, implies through the didactic function of dialogue the possibility of educating women, even within the narrow social frameworks of his time. Plutarch goes a step further, presenting historical figures of women who embodied virtues equal to or superior to those of men, while Plotinus adopts the Platonic view of the soul and completely frees it from physical and social distinctions, emphasizing the inner path towards the One. The case of Hypatia, finally, constitutes the strongest argument in favor of the spiritual equality of the sexes, as it proves in practice that women can not only participate in philosophy, but also excel in it.

³⁷ Synesius of Cyrene, *The Epistles*: Epistle 16.

³⁸ Deakin M. A. B., "Hypatia and Her Mathematics", *The American Mathematical Monthly*, v. 101, n.3, Abingdon-on-Thames, U.K.: Taylor & Francis, March 1994, 234–243. Dzielska M., *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Translated by F. Lyra, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, 132–133.

The philosophical approach to female nature from antiquity to late Neoplatonism constitutes a gradual shift from social marginalization to spiritual equality. Through the philosophy of Plato, Plotinus, and other Platonic thinkers, it becomes clear that the abilities of the soul, though affected by the gender, are equally distributed to both sexes and therefore the ability to access truth, knowledge, and virtue is common to all. This study demonstrates that, although women are rarely mentioned or highlighted in ancient philosophy, where they are, their position is equal – and often exemplary. This philosophical tradition is not simply a theoretical legacy, but a foundation of thought that has profoundly influenced the Western humanist ideal and continues to inspire the search for equality to this day.

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