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PYTHAGORAS'S WOMEN

POMEROY (S.B.) *Pythagorean Women. Their History and Writings*. Pp. xxiv + 172, ills, maps. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Cased, £32, US\$49.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-0956-6. doi:10.1017/S0009840X14002649

It is quite a challenge to write a book about Pythagorean women. Women, it is true, seem to have played in Pythagoreanism a role unparalleled in other philosophical movements – an ancient catalogue remarkably offers a selection of seventeen female followers of Pythagoras considered to be ‘the most renowned Pythagorean women’ (Iambl. *Vit. pyth.* 267). But the evidence about these women is extremely lacunose, dubious and confusing. Apart from their names and scanty hints at their origin and family relations, all we have is (a) late, but potentially reliable, information about Pythagoras’ imparting female ethical values to the women of Croton after his arrival from Samos, and (b) a rather limited number of texts attributed to Pythagorean women, the date and origin of which are hotly disputed, but which clearly do not predate the Hellenistic period and are classed, on the whole, as pseudepigraphical.

These Neopythagorean letters and treatises stand at the heart of P.’s slim and elegantly written book. Following the chronological and geographical order proposed by Thesleff (an order termed ‘highly conjectural’ by the author himself: *An Introduction to the Pythagorean Writings of the Hellenistic Period* [1961], p. 113), she distinguishes between texts supposedly coming from the East (in particular Alexandria) and mostly written in the Ionic dialect and those originating from the West written in the Doric dialect (cf. Chapter 3 ‘Who Were the Neopythagorean Women Authors?’).¹ P. presents them in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively in translations, which partly she herself has produced for the occasion and in part taken over mostly from V.L. Harper (published in M.E. Waither, *A History of Women Philosophers Volume 1: Ancient Women Philosophers 600 B.C. – 500 A.D.* [1987], pp. 20ff.) who, moreover, has contributed the last chapter to the volume under review (‘The Neopythagorean Women as Philosophers’). The translations are accompanied by introductions and commentaries of varying length and density. Chapter 4 serves as a general ‘Introduction to the Prose Writings of Neopythagorean Women’, focusing in particular on the ‘female gaze’ of the letters which, P. is convinced, were written by women for women and not, as other scholars would believe, by male authors using female masks (cf. already Chapter 3, pp. 49ff.).

In this chapter and even more in Chapters 1–3 P. adopts a double strategy to compensate for the serious lack of reliable information. On the one hand, rather than to question critically the sparse data that have come down to us she seems inclined to accept them at face value, reducing where possible the gap between the early Pythagoreans and those of the later Hellenistic period (cf. pp. xix, 48, 59, 65ff.). On the other hand, she amply contextualises the scanty material, adding general considerations about the situation of women, courtesans, slaves and husbands (with special regard to the Spartan context), and skilfully adducing further evidence not only from other literary sources such as Xenophon, Plutarch,

¹C. Montepaone, in her valuable edition *Pitagoriche. Scritti femminili di età ellenistica* (Traduzione e note di Ida Brancaccio) published only shortly before P.’s book (2011), has organised the material somewhat differently, ranking the protagonists in their presumable chronological order and following, where possible, the model of Diels/Kranz’s *Vorsokratiker* (‘A. Vita e Dottrina; B. Frammenti; C. Apoftegmi; D. Lettere’).

Lucian and women's letters from Egypt, but also profiting from recent archaeological finds in Metaponto and elsewhere.

To give an example, in the subchapter 'Dedications to Goddesses' (pp. 33–9) of Chapter 2, 'Wives, Mothers, Sisters, Daughters', P. starts from the effect Pythagoras' moral teaching supposedly had on the Crotoniate women – 'no one dared any longer to get dressed with their costly clothing, but all of them deposited many ten thousands of clothes into Hera's temple' (Iambl. *Vit. pyth.* 56) – and adds a few elements from Pythagoras' preaching to the women (women should prepare their offerings with their own hands and bring them to the altars without the help of slaves, forgoing bloody sacrifices: *ibid.* 54). These meagre, yet stimulating pieces of evidence are the axis around which the whole subchapter revolves. P. succeeds in shaping them into an attractive narrative, suggesting first of all that slaves still 'would have been helpful', but that Pythagoras 'may not have wished to share his precious esoteric insights with slaves', reasoning then that the vegetarian offerings 'must have been light enough for the women to carry at least from the wagon' and that they 'did not require the services of a butcher or any other assistant'. She next adduces examples of luxury dedications to Hera Lacinia, which today can be admired in the Archaeological Museum of Croton, amongst them a beautiful gold crown from the middle of the sixth century B.C. She boldly connects these with Pythagoras ('so they may well be connected with dedications made by the wealthy citizens of Croton at the urging of Pythagoras'), whose arrival at Croton does tend to be dated a little bit later (it is, however, virtually impossible to establish precise dates for Pythagoras' life and career). In the rest of the subchapter P. aptly interweaves further material of Pythagorean provenance, such as the ban on wearing wool or certain information about male Pythagoreans originating from Locri, with her own general reflections. She refers, for example, to the enormous value of garments and the role they must have played in dowries and inheritance in the Greek world or the different fabrics women might have dressed in, but also sketches 'a typical scenario' for the production of wool and identifies textile manufacture as 'the sole productive activity by women that the Greeks recognized as making an economic contribution', not to mention also those ancient cult centres she characterises as 'storehouses of treasures donated by the pious, functioning almost like museums'. In the second part of the subchapter, P. seeks to fill in further the lacunous picture with hints at the special importance of the cults of Hera, Demeter and Persephone 'in the areas inhabited by the Pythagoreans', including Locri where many statues dedicated to Demeter and tablets 'depicting aspects of the life of Persephone' have been found. According to an elegant epigram, cited in conclusion, it was there that the famous Hellenistic poet Nossis would have accompanied her mother in offering a linen garment to Hera.

As such an example illustrates, the reader of this *lepidus libellus* is not merely offered the meagre fare one might have expected, in view of the extreme paucity of evidence in the ancient tradition on Pythagorean women, but rather a lavish feast regaled by one of the outstanding scholars of women's history in Classical Antiquity. Some of the broad evidence she adduces from her areas of competence might seem less relevant than others, and a certain number of redundancies and inaccuracies may sometimes mar the pleasure. But Pythagoras' female followers deserve finally to be taken into the spotlight and brought to the attention of a wider public.

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