

Women as Philosophers in the Platonic Tradition

Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*

- (1) [201d] <sup>1</sup>“And now I shall let you alone, and proceed with the discourse upon Love which I heard one day from a Mantinean woman named Diotima:<sup>2</sup> in this subject she was skilled, and in many others too; for once, by bidding the Athenians offer sacrifices ten years before the plague, she procured them so much delay in the advent of the sickness. Well, I also had my lesson from her in love-matters; so now I will try and follow up the points on which Agathon and I have just agreed by narrating to you all on my own account, as well as I am able, the speech she delivered to me. So first, Agathon, I must unfold, [201e] in your manner of exposition, who and what sort of being is Love, and then I shall tell of his works. The readiest way, I think, will be to give my description that form of question and answer which the stranger woman used for hers that day. For I spoke to her in much the same terms as Agathon addressed just now to me, saying Love was a great god, and was of beautiful things; and she refuted me with the very arguments I have brought against our young friend, showing that by my account that god was neither beautiful nor good. (Plato, *Symposium* 201d-e)
- (2) “When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils. First of all, it is ever-existent [211a] and neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and in part ugly, nor is it such at such a time and other at another, nor in one respect beautiful and in another ugly, nor so affected by position as to seem beautiful to some and ugly to others. Nor again will our initiate find the beautiful presented to him in the guise of a face or of hands or any other portion of the body, nor as a particular description or piece of knowledge, nor as existing somewhere in another substance, such as an animal or [211b] the earth or sky or any other thing; but existing ever in singularity of form independent by itself, while all the multitude of beautiful things partake of it in such wise that, though all of them are coming to be and perishing, it grows neither greater nor less, and is affected by nothing. So when a man by the right method of loving ascends from these particulars and begins to descry that beauty, he is almost able to lay hold of the final secret. Such is the right approach [211c] or induction to love-matters. Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; from personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observance to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone; so that in the end he comes to know [211d] the very essence of beauty. In that state of life above all others, my dear Socrates,” said the Mantinean woman, “a man finds it truly worthwhile to live, as he contemplates essential beauty. This, when once beheld, will outshine your gold and your vesture, your beautiful boys and striplings, whose aspect now so astounds you and makes you and many another, at the sight and constant society of your darlings, ready to do without either food or drink if that were any way possible, and only gaze upon them and have their company.”  
(Plato, *Symposium* 210e-211d)

### Female Philosophers in Plato's Academy

- (3) ... among them were also two women, Lastheneia of Mantinea and Axiothea of Phlius, the latter of whom wore men's clothes, as Dicaerchus reports.

(Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 3.46).<sup>1</sup>

- (4) When Axiothea read one of the works written by Plato about the state, she left Arcadia and went to Athens. She listened to Plato, causing it to go unnoticed for quite some time that she was a woman, just as Achilles had concealed his sex in the house of Lycomedes. (Themistius, *Or.* 23.295c).<sup>2</sup>

### Women as Philosophers in the Hellenistic period

- (5) Theano to the philosopher Rhodope. Are you disheartened? But I too am disheartened. Are you grieved that I have not sent to you the book of Plato, the one which he has written called "*Ideas* or the *Parmenides*"? (*Theano to Rhodope* 1-2).<sup>3</sup>

- (6) Frequently also such a woman will act beautifully towards cities if she happens to rule over cities and nations, as we see is sometimes the case in a kingdom.

(Perictione, *On the Harmony of a Woman* 689.2-3; Thesleff 1965, 142)<sup>4</sup>

### Women and Philosophy in the Roman Imperial Period: Plutarch's evidence

- (7) You have often been told that happiness depends on right thinking, which results in a stable frame of mind...

(Plutarch, *Consolation to his Wife* 611a4-5)<sup>5</sup>

- (8) You hear others say – many are convinced by them – that there is no evil or pain anywhere for the one who 'suffered dissolution.' But I know that the traditional doctrines and the mystic tokens of the rites of Dionysus, known to us who share them, prevent you from believing this. You should think of the soul as immortal, and as like a captive bird. If it is reared a long time in the body and domesticated in this life by all its affairs and by long habit, then it comes back again into the world and does not cease from its involvement in passions and accidents in its successive births. Do not imagine that old age is abused and reviled for its wrinkles and gray hair and physical weakness; the

<sup>1</sup> ... σὺν οἷς καὶ γυναῖκες δύο Λασθένεια Μαντινικὴ καὶ Ἀξιοθέα Φλειασία, ἣ καὶ ἀνδρεῖα ἠμίσχετο, ὡς φησι Δικαίαρχος.

<sup>2</sup> Themistius, *Or.* 23.295c, trs. Penella 2000, 122: Ἀξιοθέα μὲν γὰρ ἐπιλεξαμένη τι τῶν συγγραμμάτων ἃ Πλάτωνι πεποιήται ὑπὲρ πολιτείας, ὤχετο ἀπιούσα Ἀθηναίᾳ ἐξ Ἀρκαδίας, καὶ Πλάτωνος ἠκροῶτο λανθάνουσα ἄχρι πόρρω ὅτι γυνὴ εἶη, ὥσπερ ὁ Ἀχιλλεὺς τοῦ Λυκομήδους.

<sup>3</sup> *Theano to Rhodope*, in Thesleff 1965, 200 (translation: Crystal Addey): Θεανὼ Ῥοδόπῃ φιλοσόφῳ. Ἀθυμεῖς σύ; ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὴ ἄθυμῶ. δυσφορεῖς ὅτι μήπω σοι <ἔπεμψα> τὸ Πλάτωνος βιβλίον, ὃ οὕτως ἐπιγέγραπται Ἰδέαι ἢ Παρμενίδης. Cf. also Thesleff 1961, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Perictione, *On the Harmony of a Woman* 689.2-3 in Thesleff 1965, 142; trs. Guthrie: πολλάκις δὲ καὶ πόλει, εἴ γε πόλιος ἢ ἔθνεα ἢ τοίη γε κρατῶνι ὡς ἐπὶ βασιληῆς ὀρέομεν.

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Consolation to His Wife* 611a4-5 in Pomeroy 1999, trs. D. Russell. All quotations and translations of this work are taken from this edition.

worst of it is that it makes the soul stale in its recollection of the world beyond and anxious to hold on to this world... (Plutarch, *Consolation to his Wife* 10.611d-e).

(9) In philosophy too there are many fine subjects of discourse, but none more important than this discourse of marriage, whereby philosophy charms those who come together to share their lives, and makes them gentle and amenable to each other.

(Plutarch, *Advice to the Bride and Groom* 138b6-c1).<sup>6</sup>

(10) Familiarise yourself, Eurydice, in particular with the sayings of good and wise men. Always have on your lips the remarks you learned with me as a girl.

(Plutarch, *Advice to the Bride and Groom* 48.145e4-6)

### Women in Later Platonism (in Late Antiquity)

#### Female Philosophers in Plotinus' School

(11) There were women, too, who were greatly devoted to him [i.e. the philosopher Plotinus]: Gemina, in whose house he lived, and her daughter Gemina, who had the same name as her mother, and Amphiclea, who became the wife of Ariston, the son of Iamblichus, all of whom had a great devotion to philosophy.

(Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 10)

#### Women in Iamblichus' Circle and among his philosophic successors

(12) In her own home, Sosipatra held a chair of philosophy that rivalled his [Aedesius, Iamblichus' philosophic successor], and after attending the lectures of Aedesius, the students would go to hear hers; and though there was none that did not greatly appreciate and admire the accurate learning of Aedesius, they positively adored and revered the woman's inspired teaching.

(Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 469)

(13) "What is this? Behold my kinsman Philometor riding in a carriage! The carriage (*ochēma*) has overturned in a rough place in the road and both his legs are in danger! However, his servants have dragged him out unharmed, except that he has received wounds on his hands and elbows, though even these are not dangerous. He is being carried home on a stretcher, groaning loudly." These were her words, and they were the truth, for so it actually was. By this all were convinced that Sosipatra was omnipresent, and that, even as the philosophers assert concerning the gods, nothing happened without her being there to see.

(Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 470)

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<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to the Bride and Groom* 138b6-c1 in Pomeroy 1999, trs. D. Russell. All quotations and translations of this work are taken from this edition.

- (14) “But you will go hence before me, and be allotted a fair and fitting place of abode, though I perhaps shall attain to one even higher. For your station will be in the orbit of the moon, and only five years longer will you devote your services to philosophy – for so your phantom tells me – but you shall traverse the region below the moon with a blessed and easily guided motion. Fain would I tell you my own fate also.” Then, after keeping silence for a short time, she cried aloud: “No, my god prevents me!”

(Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 469)

#### Women in the Athenian School: Asclepigeneia

- (15) These he acquired for himself, and from Asclepigeneia, the daughter of Plutarch, he learned the invocations and the rest of the apparatus. For she alone preserved the rituals, and the whole process of theurgy, handed on to her from the great Nestorius by her father.

(Marinus, *Proclus, or on Happiness*, 28).

#### Women in the Alexandrian School: Hypatia

- (16) Hypatia: She was born, brought up and educated in Alexandria and, being endowed with a nobler nature than her father [i.e. the philosopher Theon], she was not content with the mathematical education that her father gave her, but occupied herself with some distinction in the other branches of philosophy. And wrapping herself in a philosopher’s cloak, she progressed through the town, publicly interpreting the works of Plato, Aristotle or any other philosopher to those who wished to listen. As well as being a gifted teacher, she had reached the peak of moral virtue; she was just and prudent.

(Damascius, *Philosophical History* F43A)

- (17) Hypatia being of such a nature: skilled and dialectical in speech, wise and politic in behaviour – the entire city naturally loved her and held her in exceptional esteem, while the powers-that-be paid their respects to her, as indeed was the custom in Athens .... It happened one day that Cyril, the man in charge of the opposing sect, was passing Hypatia’s house and seeing a great crowd at the door, “a mix of men and horses”, some going, some coming and some standing round, he asked what the crowd was and why there was this commotion in front of the house. His attendants told him that honour was being paid to the philosopher Hypatia and that this was her house. When he heard this, envy so gnawed at his soul that he soon began to plot her murder – the most ungodly murder of all. When she left her house as usual, a crowd of bestial men – truly abominable – those who take account neither of divine vengeance nor human retribution – fell upon and killed the philosopher. And while she still gasped for air, they cut out her eyes, thus inflicting the greatest pollution and disgrace upon the city.

(Damascius, *Philosophical History* F43E)