

# SCHOLARLY APPENDIX: WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY, AND WHY THERE AREN'T MANY

There are only a few women in many reference works to philosophy, scattered around, like so many afterthoughts. In philosophy, it seems as if women must be as Aristotle said, lacking a certain virtue, the vital philosophical faculty of rationality.

And just in case they didn't realize it, over the ages would-be women philosophers have been comprehensively suppressed. Hypatia, hailed as the most brilliant thinker of her time, was dragged from her chariot and killed with sharpened shells. Aspasia, another skilled mathematician and logician, was sent to a nunnery and forbidden to leave. Teano, on becoming head of the Pythagoreans, was taken prisoner and tortured.

The physical oppression has been only part of it, though. Plato's mentor, Diotima, was demoted to the status of a fictional creation. In more recent times, Jenny Marx and Harriet Mill have been ahistorically discounted as influences in the development of Marxism and liberalism. Even in the twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir had her first book, the foundation account of existentialism, sent back by the publisher with a note advising her to stick to 'women's topics'.

So many of the women-who-might-have-been-philosophers wrote poems and letters rather than books. For any and all of these reasons, few of their writings in philosophy have had any direct influence on the subject, and their contribution can only be gauged second-hand by noting the occasional male acknowledgment. One of the most famous of these comes in Plato's dialogue the *Symposium*, or "Drinking Party," where the wise woman, Diotima, is credited by Socrates as having opened his eyes to the values of poetry, love, and, most importantly of all, the nature of knowledge and the 'Forms' themselves. Diotima indeed is perhaps the 'Mother' of Western philosophy. Given this, it was necessary to relegate her to the status of 'imaginary person', a task undertaken by male scholars in the fifteenth century, and comprehensively ignore her ever since.

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So let us start by correcting that imbalance slightly by recalling that celebrated example of ‘women’s philosophy’, perhaps indeed the ONLY example to have survived the millennia (disguised in Plato’s clothing).

It is 360 BCE, and the scene is a drinking party at the home of Agathon, in Athens. Socrates is speaking.

You made a very good speech, Agathon, but there is yet one small question which I would fain ask: Is not the good also the beautiful?

AGATHON: Why, yes.

SOCRATES: Then in seeking the beautiful, love wants also seeks the good?

AGATHON: I cannot refute you, Socrates. Let us assume that what you say is true.

SOCRATES: Say rather, my dear Agathon, that you cannot refute the truth; for Socrates is easily refuted. But now, before taking my leave of you, I want to tell a tale of love which I heard told originally by Diotima of Mantinea, a woman wise both in this matter and in many other kinds of knowledge. In the old times, it is said, she told the Athenians to offer sacrifice before the coming of the plague, and thus delayed the arrival of the disease by ten years. But for me, she was my instructress in the art of love, and I shall now repeat to you what she said to me, beginning with the points made to me by Agathon, which are almost the same as those I made to the wise woman when she questioned me.

First I said to her, in nearly the same words which he used to me, that Love was a mighty god, and likewise beautiful and she proved to me that, by my own account, Love was neither beautiful nor good. “What do you mean, Diotima,” I said, “is love then evil and foul?”

“Hush,” she said; “must that be foul which is not fair?”

“Certainly,” I said.

“And is that which is not wise, ignorant? do you not see that there is a mean between wisdom and ignorance?”

“And what may that be?” I said.

“Right opinion,” she replied; “which, as you know, being incapable of giving a reason, is not knowledge (for how can knowledge be devoid of reason?), nor again, ignorance, for equally, how can ignorance attain the truth?, but is clearly something in-between ignorance and wisdom.”

To which I replied, “Quite true.”

“Do not then insist,” she said, “that what is not fair is of necessity foul, nor that what is not good must be evil. Because love is not beautiful and good does not mean that love is therefore foul and evil; for there is a mean between them.”

## Ancient Women

But this is jumping ahead a bit. The Philosophical Tale of the missing women philosophers should include many other ancients, such as Aspasia (to 401 BCE), whose elegant hairdo is memorialized in a fresco over the portal of the University of Athens. Aspasia was active in Athenian intellectual and political life at the time of Plato. She became the mistress, and then later wife, of Pericles, and thus one of the key figures in the Sophist movement. Aspasia was considered an authority on rhetoric, politics, and the State. Philosophers of her time called her the “mistress of eloquence.” Socrates was said to have visited her often to discuss the arts of rhetoric and philosophy.

Like Socrates, Aspasia was tried for impiety but in her case she was acquitted after Pericles came to her defense. She is in Greece.

Another ‘lady friend’ of Socrates was Arete of Cyrene. According to the epitaph inscribed on her tomb she possessed the beauty of Helen, the virtue of Thirma, the pen of Aristippus, the soul of Socrates, and the tongue of Homer. She was the daughter of Aristippus, himself a student and friend of Socrates, and one of the few who were present on the fateful occasion that Socrates drank the hemlock. Aristippus founded the Cyrenaic school in what is nowadays northeast Libya. The school was an advocate for hedonism, or the pursuit of pleasure, and in due course Arete succeeded her father as director, teaching both natural and moral philosophy for the next thirty years. She is said to have written some forty books, and taught some hundred or so other philosophers.

Then there is Cleobuline (or, more precisely, Eumetide of the Cleobuline sect). She was one of the seven sages of ancient Greece and wrote enigmatic texts in hexameters (little poems of six lines), as well as something about the medical properties of a ‘sucking glass’ which is commented on favorably by Aristotle in Book II of the *Rhetoric*. Some texts recall that she was given the job of washing the feet of visitors at her father’s house, a role which must be considered as a relatively good outcome for a women philosopher.

Hipparchia (ca. 300 BCE) defied her wealthy parents to marry Crates, a celebrated Cynic philosopher who had also given up a considerable inheritance, to become a couple of itinerant philosophers spreading the teachings of their sect. In keeping with their philosophical beliefs, the couple lived simply, with Hipparchia making her name as a philosopher by writing a treatise called “Philosophical Hypotheses,” as well as in the

rather second-hand way of explaining the principles of the movement. The most interesting thing about her was that she apparently took the obligation to live ‘according to nature’ very seriously, for example talking with her husband in public as an equal, and in Book III of the *Anthology of Palatine*, it is said that she declined to ornament her clothes or her feet, or wear make-up. We are told she walked with a stout stick, in bare feet, dressed in a simple habit like a monk, and slept on the earth. Her philosophy has been summed up as “nothing natural is shameful.” We should have obtained our word ‘Hippy’ from her. But, alas, it seems not.

Then there are several ‘Pythagorean women’, such as Themistocle, who was the sister of Pythagoras, and is said to have been the true source of the Pythagorean moral code, which, as we have seen, is not necessarily entirely an unblemished achievement. Where some say Pythagoras consulted the priestess at the oracle in Delphi, others say he consulted his sister, and the likelihood is indeed that Pythagoras obtained his ideas from her, but preferred to report them as coming from the Oracle, in order to make the views appear more authoritative.

Another Pythagorean women philosopher was Theano, alternatively either his daughter or wife according to different accounts (or two different people!), and who became the director of the Pythagorean school after Pythagoras departed Earth to undergo another cycle of reincarnation. Whilst he was alive, however, she helped the master identify the density of the ‘ether’ that the Pythagoreans supposed to surround the Earth and fill space, as well as several other complicated bits of geometry. There is a document attributed to Theano in which metaphysics is discussed, and there are reports of many other of her writings in which she expresses her views on the usual women’s philosophy areas of marriage, sex, ethics, and, of course, women. Some accounts say that after Theano became director of the Pythagorean school she was captured and tortured in a bid to extract their secrets, but even after the most unspeakable tortures, resolutely refused to speak.

According to Montaigne, Theano (like Hipparchia) encouraged all women who married to strip off without any shame in front of their men, a policy condemned by Plutarch with the weighty advice that a true woman retains her modesty even without her clothes on. Indeed, Theano herself is supposed to have told a young man who stared at her beautiful elbows “they are beautiful, but they are not for everyone.” Plutarch would have approved, but not been content with that. He thought that women should not speak in front of men in public. And so, despite the fact that she evidently wrote much, and converted Pythagoras to the view

that it was not numbers but the order of numbers that governs the universe, such tittle-tattle is all history has been able to pass on of her philosophy. Perhaps it would have been better if she had divulged a few more of the secrets.

Another notable Pythagorean, probably a bit later (no one seems sure of the dates exactly), was Aesara of Lucania, who wrote a book, "On Human Nature," which presented a theory of natural law based on a new principle of 'harmonia'. Harmonia, as we might guess, is the principle that everything is in harmony: geometry, arithmetic, music, the cosmos – everything. Like Plato (in the *Republic*) she links the 'harmony of the soul' with the well-being of the State. However, where Plato looks at the 'larger model' of society to investigate justice, she puts it the other way round, saying we should look at the individual soul in order to find the nature of justice. In this way, she produced a theory of natural law, justice, and human psychology.

Hypatia we have noted more properly already amongst our ancient men. A younger contemporary of Hypatia was Asclepigenia. She also taught in a Neo-Platonic school, but one in Athens, headed by her father. Like Hypatia, she was an atheist or 'pagan' philosopher, and she applied mystical, magical, and theurgic principles to the workings of the universe. She compared the teachings of Plato and Aristotle to the metaphysical claims of Christianity. Upon the death of her father, she took charge of the Academy together with her brother and another philosopher. Her most famous student was the philosopher Proclus, who is held in conventional male philosophy as a key link in the chain of Western philosophy.

But that chain, whether male or female, takes a bit of a jump now, and so the next famous women philosopher we can find is probably Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). Hildegard was prone to having visions, and thought she had been sent by God to warn the people against the folly of forgetting the Scriptures. Her tactic was first to write letters to various religious and secular authorities, coupled with preaching tours throughout her native Germany. Her writings are basically descriptions and interpretations of her 'visions', introducing in the process what scholars say is 'vivid' new imagery. She barely counts as a philosopher, more a mystic, but given the paucity of women philosophers she is often included in lists of such.

Then there's the rather tame Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), nowadays honored as France's 'First Woman of Letters', a poet and exponent of women's rights, especially the right to a full education. She followed

the interests of Aquinas and many others, holding wisdom to be the highest virtue, as well as sharing Aquinas's desire to identify suitable causes for 'holy war'.

Christine de Pizan was one of France's first professional writers and is sometimes said to be the first person ever to be self-supporting through writing alone, although this seems a rather meaningless claim. Her writings were rich in philosophical argument and thought, reflecting upon the social and political debates of the time, the end of the feudal period. The French remember her as having written a poem, "Song in Honor of Joan of Arc," which was indeed the first tribute paid to the French icon. Christine composed the poem as she saw Joan's victory as epitomizing the honor of France and the worth of women.

### **Renaissance Women**

Another French woman of letters and another mystic was Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte, also known as Madame Guyon. After being left a wealthy widow at the age of 28, she began spreading her mystical philosophy in southeastern France. She introduced the French to the doctrine of Quietism, a form of mysticism that stresses withdrawal from worldly concerns, suppression of will, and passive meditation on the divine. In so doing, she incurred the wrath of the Archbishop of Paris and was imprisoned in 1688, although she was released the next year thanks to the intervention of the king's wife. Alack, she was put back behind bars for her writings again in 1695 and remained there until 1703, when she was released under the condition that she leave Paris.

One of the most romantic tales of the women philosophers is the tragic twelfth-century love story of 'Peter the Venerable' and Heloise. Even by the age of 16, Heloise had become renowned throughout France for her learning and was considered France's greatest living philosopher. She knew Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, and she was well educated in ancient philosophy and rhetoric. It was at this point that the venerable Peter Abelard asked to become her private tutor. When Peter met her, he "forced himself upon her," and soon she was pregnant by him.

Even so, Heloise did not want to marry Peter because (it is said) she feared the marriage would ruin his clerical career. So, bizarrely, despite marrying Peter, both of them publicly denied the marriage. Heloise's uncle accused Peter of being something of a cad, and as if to disapprove

this, Peter sent Heloise to a monastery and forced her to take the vows and enter religious life. Stranger and stranger, Heloise's uncle hired thugs to "pull Peter from his bed and castrate him." Whether this actually happened I do not know, but it seems that, either way, Peter went on to a successful philosophical and religious career, while Heloise remained for the rest of her life a sad and solitary figure in the abbey. The only trace that is left of her philosophical wisdom is in a series of letters over the long years, between Heloise and Peter.

With the Renaissance women came back into playing a role in public discourse, or at least the rich ones did. Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–80), the Princess of Palatine, corresponded with Descartes, who as we have seen had something of a taste for ladies, especially royal ones. Her questioning of his description of the interaction of mind and body and of the operations of 'free will', in the face, as she puts it, of the brute physical reality of being human, is counted as of sufficient merit to give her at least the reflected glory of the great male philosopher.

For some reason England has spawned a lot of women philosophers, such as Catherine Cockburn (1679–1749), or Catherine Trotter as she was rather unpromisingly originally called. Trotter was really a successful playwright. However, she became involved, albeit anonymously, in a debate about 'ethical rationalism' that Samuel Clarke had launched in the 1704–5 Boyle Lectures, a debate that had brought in the likes of Francis Hutcheson and Lord Shaftesbury. Her contribution to philosophy is said to have been her defense of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which is rather a meagre claim, as of course the *Essay* was widely admired and Locke himself needed little defense.

Another Englishwoman, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), is one of the best-known names in 'women's philosophy', although that does not, as we have seen, mean very well known. Certainly she will not feature on many courses. She lived in England and worked as a journalist and translator, as well as writing books such as *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), in which she identified inadequate education as one of the ways in which men kept women in their power. She traveled to France, where she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790, a reply to the male philosopher Burke's condemnation of the values of the Revolution.

Her most influential book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Strictures on Moral and Political Subjects*, although claimed as an early feminist philosophy, is in a sense merely a 'reaction' to Thomas Paine, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau's publishing efforts on behalf of 'men's rights', the title coming from Paine's *Vindication of the Rights of Man*. Her

contribution to philosophy was to say that women have the same rights as men, which may not seem very radical, but still as a political doctrine has a long way to go before finding universal acceptance. Her reasoning, then, is more important: she argued that virtue is a mix of reason and feeling, and not merely reason alone. “Mind has no sex,” she said, a view that could also be attributed to Plato. She adds, however, that relations between men and women are corrupted by artificial distinctions based on gender, comparing them to unnecessary political distinctions, based on class, or wealth, or power, and that true virtue requires political justice. For this her contemporaries condemned her as a “philosophizing serpent,” a “hyena in petticoats,” and even as an “impious amazon.” Like many of our women philosophers, she died young – in her case at age 38, in childbirth.

Another England-resident radical, Mrs. Marx, who, it might be noted in passing, is supposed to have contributed at all stages of the writing process (based in London) to Marx and Engel’s philosophy, has been comprehensively discounted by subsequent historians, and also died young.

Anne-Louise Germaine Necker, Baronne de Staël-Holstein (1766–1817), to leave England briefly, is probably the woman philosopher with the best claim to a long name, even if she is normally referred to merely as Madame de Staël. She was not herself German but wrote a book about the country and the ‘German character’, in which she introduced the works of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schlegel, and others to the French intellectuals, who were otherwise only interested in ‘romantic’ thinkers. Another book, *Literature Considered in its Connexions to Social Institutions*, in its way predated Marxist Critical Thinking by linking religion, law, morality, and literature. Madame de Staël was actively involved in the French Revolution and continued to defend its values in her writing long after it had gone sour.

Harriet Taylor (1807–58) qualifies as a philosopher by being the lover of one, in this case of the English liberal John Stuart Mill. Mill is noted for his views on ‘political economy’ but also on equality, liberty, and individualism. Although she already had married poor John Taylor in 1826, Harriet Taylor fell in love with Mill in 1830 and the two conducted a really rather scandalous liaison ever after. Mill himself acknowledges that the ethical elements of his philosophy were the result of their discussion on the nature of equality, liberty, and individualism. But Harriet is remembered more for ‘the scandal’ than for that.