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Abstract

In this paper I discuss in some detail my experience teaching women philosophers in the context of a survey course in ancient Greek philosophy at a small liberal arts college. My aim is to share the peculiar difficulties one may encounter when teaching this topic in a lower-level undergraduate course, difficulties stemming from a multiplicity of methodological hurdles that do not arise when teaching women philosophers in other periods, such as the modern era. In the first section, I briefly review some of what we know about ancient Greek women philosophers, which is not only very little but frustratingly uncertain and highly debated. I devote the second section to some of the scholarly debates surrounding these philosophers' doctrines, the details of their biographies, and their very existence. The third section is about the corresponding pedagogical challenges, and the fourth and final section describes the strategies I implemented to face those challenges.

Keywords: women philosophers, ancient female philosophers, Greek philosophy, Greek women, teaching ancient philosophy, teaching women philosophers, Hypatia, Diotima, neo-Pythagorean women

The idea that we ought to expand the Western philosophical canon is gaining traction and becoming accepted in mainstream philosophy. Scholars and teachers in the anglophone world are actively and successfully incorporating non-Western traditions and figures and, more generally, neglected epistemic perspectives in their research and in their teaching. A major component of these efforts has been to rediscover and bring to the fore the work of women in the history of philosophy.

In this paper I discuss in some detail my experience teaching women philosophers in the context of a survey course in ancient Greek philosophy at a small liberal arts college. My aim is to share the *peculiar* difficulties one may encounter when teaching this topic in a lower-level undergraduate course, difficulties stemming from a multiplicity of methodological hurdles that do not arise when teaching women philosophers in other periods, such as the modern era.

In the first section, I briefly review some of what we know about ancient Greek women philosophers, which is not only very little but frustratingly uncertain and highly debated. I devote the second section to some of the scholarly debates surrounding these philosophers' doctrines, the details of their biographies, and their very existence. The third section is about the corresponding pedagogical challenges, and the fourth and final section describes the strategies I implemented to face those challenges. Note, however, that my intent is not to tell others what readings should be assigned or which figures exactly should be analyzed. The take-home message is that there are many ways of teaching this topic and that the plurality of perspectives and possibilities is precisely what is pedagogically valuable.

Finally, note that I do not defend many assumptions that lie at the heart of this paper—to wit, that the philosophical canon ought to become more inclusive of neglected philosophers and philosophies for both moral and epistemic reasons; that what we teach and how we teach it matters to increasing inclusivity; and that the delegitimization of certain authors and traditions is neither incidental nor innocuous. Those are well-trodden paths that I do not beat again here.¹

1. Women Philosophers in Antiquity?!

When I started teaching at a small liberal arts college, fresh out of graduate school and with no experience as a primary instructor, I wrote my syllabi with the aim of being inclusive of students from underrepresented groups and mindful of neglected philosophical perspectives and traditions. Even just selecting the course readings proved much harder than I expected: in addition to my sheer ignorance of many topics outside the canon, I found it very difficult to cope with my own entrenched, unwittingly internalized dogmas. It took me a few years to realize that “swapping” Audre Lorde and Kimberlé Crenshaw with Aristotle (whom my students consistently found too hard to digest in the abbreviated form that I proposed to them) would make my first-year seminar more compelling and diverse without any loss of philosophical rigor.

¹ For a noncomprehensive selection of recent articles, books, and blog posts (at times in disagreement with each other) on expanding the philosophical canon, see Antony 2012; Drabinski 2016; Rickless 2018; Schliesser 2016; Shapiro 2016; Tyson 2018; Van Norden 2017; Wong 2019. For a collection of posts on *Daily Nous*, see <http://dailynous.com/tag/canon/>. For more pedagogically oriented articles, see Berges 2015; Chung 2018. For a seminal paper on how to change the ideology and culture of philosophy, see Haslanger 2008.

But the hardest challenge was writing my Ancient Philosophy syllabus.² I wanted to have some women in it, but I didn't know of any.³ I had heard of Hypatia, of course, but I thought she was more of a mathematician than a philosopher. Then again, I hadn't really thought much about her at all. Never in my undergraduate or graduate studies had I encountered an ancient woman philosopher—unless one counted Diotima, who was, I had always been told, certainly fictional.

So I started asking around in the feminist philosophy circles, and many colleagues recommended Kathleen Wider's (1986) "Women Philosophers in the Ancient Greek World: Donning the Mantle." The day I read it, I was amazed by the discovery that there are... binders full of ancient women philosophers!⁴ Or, at least, there are long lists of names. One such list from the seventeenth century (Ménage 1984) contains sixty-five from Hellenistic times alone.⁵ Iamblichus (4th c. CE) lists 17 of the most famous Pythagorean women (Huffman 2018). Wider herself discusses, in varying detail, nineteen figures over the course of ten centuries (from 6th c. BCE to 4th or 5th c. CE).

² Classics, like many other academic disciplines, is plagued by a colonialist and racist legacy, which the discipline is now attempting to shake off. At my own institution, for instance, the Classics department has renamed itself Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and is revising their courses so that the new name reflects a deep reassessment of contents and methods rather than just a cosmetic change of labels. Similar enterprises are being pursued in philosophy departments, including mine, through newly introduced courses such as Race and Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy. However, for reasons of space and personal competence, in my course and consequently in this paper I maintain an exclusive focus on women, setting aside potential complications raised by the class and race/ethnicity of these figures, since as far as we know they were all Greek, free, and of higher socioeconomic status (or at least we have no evidence to the contrary). I thank a reviewer for prompting this clarification.

³ In this course I focus almost exclusively on primary sources and do not ask students to read secondary sources, with the exception of one reading by Martha Nussbaum (1986) and one by Julia Annas (2008). A reviewer pointed out to me that canon revisionism does not involve only the inclusion of women authors but also feminist interpreters of male authors (e.g., Freeland 1989; Bar On 1994; Tuana 1994; Witt 2003; see also the bibliography included in Witt and Shapiro 2015). This is certainly correct, and it made me reflect on ways to further improve my teaching. I am thankful to a reviewer for this reminder.

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binders_full_of_women.

⁵ It is to be noted, though, that Ménage's criteria for including women in his list are somewhat flawed. For an insightful critique see Pellò (forthcoming a and b).

The simple act of reading the names contained in that 1986 article—names that with a couple of exceptions had never made their appearance throughout my very extensive philosophical education—was an epiphany that has radically changed the way I approach teaching and learning ancient philosophy. I talk about this revelation from a personal perspective, but my experience is far from atypical: every year I witness the same shock and elation in my students, especially those who identify as women, but not only them. Whether or not the people bearing these names all existed, and whether or not they really did do philosophy—something we might never know or agree on—we know that there were women in ancient philosophical schools, and most of those unnamed and unknown women have been all but forgotten until very recently. Saying their names, saying *some* names, is an *homage* to all of these forgotten figures.

So here is Kathleen Wider's list: Theano, Myia, Damo, Arignote, Perictione, Melissa, Phintys, Aspasia, Diotima, Arete, Hipparchia, Pamphile, Leontion, Menexene, Argeia, Theognis, Artemisia, Pantaclea, and, finally, the most famous of all: Hypatia. Theano was a contemporary of Pythagoras (likely his wife or daughter) and thus lived in the sixth century BCE, while the Neoplatonist Hypatia died in the fifth century of the common era.

Other names have emerged since Wider's article was published. In a volume edited by Mary Ellen Waithe, *A History of Women Philosophers: Ancient Women Philosophers 600 BC–500 AD* (1987), we discover the names, lives, and sometimes doctrines of Asclepigenia, Axiothea, Cleobulina, Lasthenia, and (in the Roman tradition) Julia Domna and the Christian saint Macrina. More recently, Danielle Layne (2018) briefly discusses Sosipatra and, again, Asclepigenia in a blog post for *Blog of the APA*. Caterina Pellò (forthcoming a) mentions Plato's disciples Lasthenia and Axiothea. Gary Gabor told me in correspondence that he is writing a paper on the Pythian oracle as a philosophical figure. Women thus seem to have been involved in Western philosophy since its inception and within a wide range of traditions (Pythagorean, Academic, Cynic, Cyrenaic, Epicurean, Neoplatonic, Christian).

I am sure this is not an exhaustive list of ancient women philosophers who are being discovered, or rediscovered. Even if one were to limit oneself to studying and teaching a subset of these authors, however, a host of issues would emerge right away. Some of these women are believed by most people to be fictional (most notably, Diotima). Others are said to be associated with philosophers but are not considered philosophers themselves (for instance, Theano was Pythagoras's wife or daughter; Perictione was Plato's mother; Aspasia was Pericles's partner; Arete was daughter *and* mother of two philosophers, both called Aristippus; Hipparchia was

wife of Crates).⁶ Others are famous historical figures whose status as philosophers has been disputed (Aspasia and Julia Domna). Some have names that recur in the tradition, thus making their identification even more difficult (again, Theano and Perictione). Some are acknowledged as philosophers, but we know nothing of their doctrines, or their doctrines are attributed to a male relative (Arete) or recounted by a male relative (Macrina). None of them is the author of primary texts whose authenticity is unquestioned. For all of them, ancient and even contemporary sources are biased.

Given these difficulties, which I will further discuss in the next section, it is very hard to introduce students to the *content* of the doctrines. One possibility is to say what little we know about them without caveats or qualifications, and to introduce the texts and fragments and ask students to read them, as we do with texts and views said to be authored by men.

Feminist scholars have done that. Luce Irigaray (1989), for instance, writes about Diotima's speech without any prologue concerning Diotima's existence. She simply discusses (and critiques) the view, without any concern for whether Diotima is fictional or not. But this is not the approach usually adopted in teaching. Any responsible teacher is expected to premise a class on the *Symposium* with a flashing warning about Diotima's ontological status. Similar warnings, as we will see later, are provided for the Pythagorean women. I have seen quite a few raised eyebrows when I have given the talk version of this paper at the mention that I provide alleged primary texts. An attendee at a poster session came to ask, "How can you teach this topic without any texts?!" and was very much not satisfied by my answers.

And yet, I am increasingly convinced that starting from the views is the most pedagogically fruitful and intellectually honest way to go.⁷ A useful starting point—I have found—is to ask students to take an educated guess: what kind of philosophy could women raised in ancient patriarchal societies have written?

One might think that women who managed to write, or at least talk about, philosophy would have had access to the same resources as their male counterparts: that they somehow did get some education, that they were allowed into schools. Furthermore, one might believe that women reason like men,

⁶ A reviewer, whom I thank, reminded me that similar claims were used to exclude women from artistic canons. Notable examples include Artemisia Gentileschi, Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, and Alice Coltrane. And, of course, there are some such cases in the more recent history of philosophy as well (e.g., Harriet Taylor Mill until recently was not considered an original thinker in her own right).

⁷ I am grateful to Christia Mercer for pushing me in this direction, when I was still myself in the grip of the dogma that it is irresponsible to propose without comment texts that are so controversial.

notwithstanding their different social reality. Thus, one might guess that their philosophy is about the same topics that we see in mainstream ancient philosophy, such as the nature of the cosmos and of the soul, and that they wrote the same kinds of texts, such as treatises and collections of aphorisms.

Alternatively, one might argue that women's freedom and ability in ancient Greece were dramatically constrained and limited, that one's thinking is shaped by such cultural and social factors, and that minds are always embodied, both literally and metaphorically. Thus, one might guess that their philosophy was, in fact, different: that they discussed topics that were more salient in their daily lives, such as the management of a household or the behavior of their husbands, and wrote about them in different formats, such as letters.

Both guesses are indeed formulated by students. Both are correct, and provide halves of a complex whole, halves with ragged edges that do not match precisely. Women (may) have written treatises on the nature of the universe and the composition of our souls (e.g., Aesara of Lucania) but also letters to women who had just become mothers, full of advice on how to choose a nurse and feed a child (e.g., Theano). They taught in traditional philosophical schools (and even headed them in several cases) presumably on orthodox topics and following established methods (e.g., Arete, Hipparchia, Hypatia), but they also taught outside of those institutional contexts and were revered oracular or mystic figures, who are so often excluded from the Western philosophical canon (e.g., the Pythia, Diotima).⁸ Or, in a hybrid combination of "feminine" and "masculine" expectations, they wrote treatises *On the Moderation of Women* (e.g., Phintys of Sparta).

But these are not just different topics and modalities. The thorny question is whether they are commensurable at all, and whether those who wrote about "womanly" matters in "womanly" ways did philosophy at all (see Waithe 1987, xi–xii). This is a question that may be discussed in feminist philosophy courses and at more advanced levels of instruction in the history of philosophy, but one that rarely arises in standard survey courses in ancient philosophy, due to the scarcity of primary texts and acknowledged women figures.

⁸ On the significance of this exclusion, see Layne (2018). Andrea Nye's (1989) interpretation of Diotima's Speech relies substantively on Diotima's role as a priestess and on the idea that even in classical Greece women retained authority and respect in religious contexts. For parallel arguments in the study of Medieval thought, see Mercer (2017), who argues that Teresa of Avila inspired Descartes's rendering of the evil demon trope, and Van Dyke (2018), who argues that contemporary philosophical understanding of mysticism is affected by an ahistorical and prejudiced exclusion of embodied mysticism, which was mostly practiced by women.

This question, however, also evokes the current metaphilosophical discussions about what qualifies as philosophy (Dotson 2012) and relatedly what qualifies as teaching introduction to philosophy (Liao 2018). One might want to resist the impulse to propose this question to an audience of inexperienced undergraduate students, for fear of replicating and reinforcing oppressive disciplinary boundaries. But I have found that asking the question in the context of an introductory history of philosophy class encourages the students to think about interesting asymmetries. For instance, why has the Pythagorean discussion of how women can be temperate and modest failed to qualify as an inquiry into human nature and human virtue, while the equally gendered Aristotelian analysis of courage in battle has had a different fate? These are questions that are easy to grasp and that enliven metaphilosophical discussions which usually do not grip students at this level.

Furthermore, even the texts that appear to be philosophical in a canonical sense may be influenced by their being authored by women. Consider Aesara of Lucania's conception of the soul, which is superficially very similar to Plato's but differs in linking appetite with kindness (*philophrosynē*) and love. One striking feature of Plato's moral psychology is its seeming obliviousness to the motivational force of maternal love and in general its neglect of forms of love that are not erotic. That a woman philosopher should be more pluralistic in her conception of human motivation and more attuned to norms that she was socially required to be attuned to would not be shocking. Or would it?

If these and other questions are asked in good faith, self-reflectively, and without an agonistic spirit aimed to ascertain victors and hierarchies—as Mary Ellen Waithe (1987), Vicki Lynn Harper (2013), Annette Bourland Huizenga (2013), and Caterina Pellò (forthcoming a and b), among others, have done—the answers may be illuminating and liberating, not obscurantist and oppressive.

This is especially important in a pedagogical context. While the questions above risk sounding anachronistic or trite to an audience of scholars, they are new and exciting to most students, especially in the context of an introductory history of philosophy class, which may attract a different audience than that of a gender studies or feminist philosophy class. But I hope to show in the following section that there are many more interesting questions that are peculiar to ancient philosophy and that do not arise when investigating, for instance, modern philosophers such as Elisabeth of Bohemia or Anne Conway.

2. The Challenges of *Studying* Ancient Women Philosophers

In the previous section, I have alluded to the many methodological issues surrounding the study of these philosophers: primary texts, assuming there really were any, may be lost forever; indirect ancient sources are unreliable; modern and

contemporary scholars are hindered not only by their sexist prejudice but by millennia of an interpretive tradition written in an exclusively male voice, or conversely, they may be influenced by their desire to find undoubtable evidence even where there isn't any. These issues are often unknown to philosophers who do not specialize in ancient philosophy. Thus, in this section I spell out the aforementioned methodological hurdles in greater detail, with the caveat that a single article cannot do justice to the subtleties and complexities of the many controversies that I briefly recount. Also, note that even though I attempt to present them as three distinct issues, they are unavoidably intertwined.

2.1. Absence of Primary Texts

Ancient texts have gotten lost in transmission, if they existed at all. This is a well-known problem that affects even the most eminent philosophers: all of Aristotle's "exoteric" works (the more polished compositions destined for a wider audience) have been lost, probably forever, with the exception of some fragments.

If this fate befell the most venerated philosopher in antiquity, and many important philosophers before him, it is unsurprising that we have no philosophical text that is undoubtedly and reliably acknowledged as written by a woman before the Middle Ages.

The only primary texts we may have from women are letters and fragments (that is, purported quotes) attributed to the Pythagorean women, and texts authored by men who claim to report women's views, as in Plato's *Symposium* and *Menexenus* and Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Soul and Resurrection*.

These works involve distinct but related debates. I discuss the alleged primary texts in section 2.3. The problem with texts containing reported views is evident even to the nonspecialist: how can we be sure that Plato and Gregory represented the views of the purported authors correctly? We cannot, of course. But feminist philosophers have highlighted the hermeneutic double standard that is at play here. Nobody believes that Plato represents Socrates's view in a completely unfiltered way, and nobody trusts blindly any Aristotelian commentator referring to his lost works. However, nobody *wholly* distrusts these sources either; nobody, that is, simply assumes that those who speak on behalf of others cannot be possibly referring to authentic philosophical doctrines or that they cannot be preserving any of the original content. Even more relevantly to the issue at hand, there is an entire tradition, Presocratic philosophy, which we study entirely on the basis of fragments and *commentaria* (that is, commentaries or paraphrases of what another philosopher said). I do not mean to argue that the two situations are exactly analogous: it may be the case that there are more solid grounds for accepting

Presocratic fragments as authentic and the related commentaries as reliable.⁹ I simply want to point out that there is a different approach to these philosophers. Even though there is no extant text attributed to Thales, and many discrepancies between sources, we do not hesitate to honor him with the title of first philosopher in the Western tradition and to attempt to reconstruct his philosophy as best as we can.

Debra Nails highlights such hermeneutical double standards when talking about Diotima's disputed existence:

There is a current and widespread assumption that Diotima is the one named character Plato certainly invented. In classical studies generally, "arguments from silence" (i.e. absence of evidence) are used with caution—not only because evidence has a way of turning up unexpectedly in some newly found papyrus or inscription—but because we can be quite certain that we have only a tiny portion of the evidence of antiquity. Yet the argument from silence is the one most commonly employed to the conclusion that Diotima is not historical. (Nails 2002, 137)

When it comes to women philosophers, then, skepticism verging on outright denial has for a long time been the default attitude. That is, the longstanding approach of (often but not exclusively male) scholars has been to not treat these sources as *possibly* transmitting philosophical doctrines elaborated by women, even when they are explicitly presented as such. Again, skepticism in itself is not unwarranted, but it is hard to disentangle two related but importantly different factors: one is the awareness that women lived in a sexist environment that made it difficult to practice philosophy; the other is the sexist environment in which *all commentators, even contemporary ones, still live*, and which cannot help but affect their judgment. Why is it so hard to believe that (upper-class, free, Greek) women philosophized and wrote philosophy?

Furthermore, a distinct prejudice often at play in these discussions is to assume that the past is necessarily more subject to certain kinds of biases than the present.¹⁰ But we have many testimonies of the respect and even veneration enjoyed by women philosophers in their time and afterward. The incredulity with

⁹ In general, note that I do not commit myself to any specific position on the controversies I discuss, or at the very least I strive to remain as agnostic as possible. The aim of this paper is not to take sides, even though complete impartiality is not achievable and my sympathies clearly transpire.

¹⁰ See Van Dyke (2018) for a case study disproving this prejudice and showing why it is pernicious.

which these testimonies have been received by modern and contemporary commentators, and the consequent eagerness to dismiss these testimonies as satirical, is telling.

Interpretative debate on the *Menexenus* is an example of this attitude. Many scholars have argued in favor of an ironic interpretation of Aspasia's speech, while others have endorsed what Robitzsch explicitly terms the "feminist reading" (2017, 288).

Most recently, Peter Adamson has argued that Aspasia's role in *Menexenus* is to present ideas that are perceived to be "feminine" but which are nonetheless endorsed by Plato (Adamson, n.d.).¹¹ Thus, he rejects an ironic reading. He presents Aspasia as a controversial historical figure who attracted extreme views: she was hated and despised by Pericles's political adversaries, who mocked her as a prostitute,¹² but she was greatly admired by those in Socrates's and Plato's circles: "For Plato as for Xenophanes and Aeschines, she may have been a figure worth taking seriously and even a potential philosopher queen," Adamson writes. However, even his interpretation—in my view—falls prey to the default skepticism toward ancient women philosophers, since he presents Aspasia exclusively as Plato's mouthpiece, albeit a distinctive one. Aspasia's voice is used by Plato—according to Adamson—to present Platonic views that are gendered. But they are nevertheless *Plato's views*; that is, he is the only one credited for them: "If Plato was a man of his time in associating women with relationships of family within and beyond the household, he was perhaps unique among classical thinkers in granting these 'women's issues' a far wider philosophical significance." As with Diotima, whose presence in the *Symposium* is often mentioned to show Plato's affinity for "women's issues," Aspasia is never credited with these ideas. Adamson never considers the possibility that Aspasia, a real person who really did interact with Socrates and Plato, could have been the source of at least some of the views Plato himself attributes to her.¹³ He never stops to ask: why was Aspasia considered a philosopher queen? Furthermore, *Menexenus* is a Socratic dialogue: with other Socratic dialogues the presumption is that Plato is strongly influenced by his master's thought and that the

¹¹ All citations are from the pdf available on Academia.edu. Adamson also discusses other authors who reject a satirical interpretation of Aspasia's speech. Robitzsch (2017) provides what I believe is the most recent literature review on the topic.

¹² Aspasia was indeed a *hetaira*, that is, a (probably educated) courtesan. The differences between *hetairai* and *pornai*, or common prostitutes, are still debated.

¹³ We have many ancient sources other than Plato on Aspasia, including but not limited to Aeschines, Aristophanes, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch (see Nails 2002, 58–62). In addition to those for Aspasia and Diotima, Nails's *Prosopography* also contains an entry on Perictione, *qua* Plato's mother (Nails 2002, 228–229).

views presented there are at least in part to be credited to the historical Socrates. Why a different presumption in Aspasia's case?¹⁴

Adamson also exemplifies another attitude I find problematic. In a post for the APA blog, he writes:

There are interesting historical and philosophical questions to be asked. For instance, even if we suspect that Diotima or Gārgī are largely or entirely fictional, we might wonder why Plato and the authors of the Upanishads chose women and not men as characters for these specific contexts. We might also observe that certain types of philosophy are associated with women at certain periods. This goes not just for mysticism in medieval Europe (and the medieval Islamic world too by the way, as with the important Sufi thinker Rabi'a), but also the branch of practical philosophy called "economics," in other words household management, in the letters ascribed to Pythagorean women. (Adamson 2016)

Adamson concludes that "when it comes to the textual basis for the study of women thinkers, then, learning to settle for less may help us to learn more." Now this stance is likely to be considered balanced and unbiased. I worry, however, that this kind of contribution is seen as more authoritative than a view which expresses caution about the available evidence but goes on to take the content of the philosophical views at face value (such as, for instance, Harper [2013] and Pellò [forthcoming a and b]). That is, even assuming that the few extant texts attributed to women were not in fact written by those women, it is not clear that, by entertaining the possibility that those views were in fact held by women philosophers, and that by studying them as such, we learn *less*. Perhaps, we simply learn *different* things, such as philosophical views that might be worth thinking about, independently of whether their authors are those whose names are on the page.

2.2. Unreliability of Ancient Sources

To sum up, scholars disagree not only or even primarily on the amount of evidence concerning the authenticity of primary texts but also and most importantly

¹⁴ Note that I do not mean to assess personal intentions, motivations, or character. It is also not the case that I find Adamson's entire work problematic in this respect. He has another work in progress in which he considers Macrina's philosophical method and in which he takes her philosophy at face value. Furthermore, his podcast *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* advances both inclusivity in the profession and scholarly inquiry.

on the implications of this scarce evidence. Similar considerations apply to a connected but distinct issue, that of the unreliability of ancient sources.¹⁵

Women philosophers are constantly mentioned in relation to a man, whether it is their husband, son, father, brother, or pupil (in the case of Diotima and Socrates) with few exceptions, like Axiothea.¹⁶ For all of them, information about their life and philosophy is provided by men (unless we believe that at least some of the Pythagorean letters and fragments are eponymous). Until relatively recently, all scholars who read those commentaries and did research on them were also men. Several problems stem from the fact that women's voices are transmitted by men.

First, as Wider states: "It has been suggested by both ancient and modern writers that women were in the philosophical schools to provide sexual satisfaction for the men" (Wider 1986, 26). While some of these figures (seven, by Wider's account) could be classed as *hetairai*, there is no evidence that that was the case for most of them. Compared to when Wider wrote her article, most scholars now seem to acknowledge that women were present in most philosophical movements in Western antiquity, from Pythagoreanism to the Hellenistic schools and beyond. However, it is difficult to shake off the effects of a sexist scholarly heritage completely: we still have to contend with pervasive cultural beliefs affecting all ancient sources, and we have to take them into account when interpreting what they say. In this regard, I agree with Adamson's reiterated warning that we never have unmediated access to the views of women philosophers.

Second, and relatedly, well-known issues concerning the reliability of ancient testimonials, which occur for most badly preserved ancient views, are exacerbated by this sexist bias. That is, assuming that there is no authentic primary text, secondary sources become crucial, and we cannot trust even amicable ones. Remember the battle between friends and foes of Aspasia. Even sources that were sympathetic to her, and who did not hold her *hetaira* status against her, might have still misinterpreted her views, seen them through a deforming lens, and reported them incorrectly. How often, even today, does one hear the compliment "smart for a woman"? Such benevolent sexism would have been endemic in classical Athens, and it had not dissipated by 1690, when Ménage wrote his *Historia Mulierum Philosopharum* and considered a woman a philosopher simply in virtue of her relation to a philosopher.

Finally, even those who were not maligned as *hetairai* are still often portrayed in highly sexualized terms, as the "lurid, pornographic descriptions"

¹⁵ See Pellò (forthcoming a and b) for discussions of the peculiar difficulties concerning the study and teaching of Pythagorean women.

¹⁶ Being related to a man philosopher is by itself one of the criteria Gilles Ménage (1984) uses in his list of women philosophers!

(Wider 1986, 26) of Hypatia’s lynching and her iconography attest.¹⁷ While we might think that this is a concern for the historian or the visual arts scholar, I think that philosophers, too, ought to be sensitive to the subterranean influence literary and artistic depictions may have on our perception of these figures.

2.3 Disagreement and Bias in Contemporary Scholarship

The lack of canonical primary texts, combined with the unreliability of ancient sources and with the fact that sexist bias persists in our societies, results in the peculiar level of disagreement among contemporary scholars, particularly on the topic of Pythagorean women but not limited to them.

Now, I am going to assume here that no science is value-free and that no perspective is free from bias, *including the feminist one*. Feminists are susceptible to many cognitive biases, including confirmation bias and wishful thinking, just like any other person. Feminist arguments are only made stronger by this acknowledgment and by subsequent strategies aimed at reducing those biases. But even with those strategies in place, it is not possible to extract oneself from one’s context and approach the text in a totally neutral, unprejudiced way, and I do not intend to defend the idea that feminist scholars have a higher chance of being *less* prejudiced with regard to this topic than their nonfeminist counterparts (for one such defense, see Antony [1993]). What I do aim to do in this last subsection is to focus on a specific case that illustrates well the many difficulties discussed above and the consequent disputes between contemporary commentators: the controversy concerning Pythagorean *pseudepigrapha*, to which I have already alluded. But I recount this debate through a novel pedagogical lens. That is, I describe in some detail the contrast between discordant sources as it can be seen from a student perspective: some of these sources are likely to be perceived as authoritative and definitive; others as alternative, unreliable, and hard to access, either literally (because they are not easily available on the internet or at their library) or metaphorically (because they are complex from a scholarly perspective).

As we know, students tend to stop at the first few sources they find in a library catalogue or directly on the internet. Students searching for the keyword “Pythagorean women” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* would find three entries. One is “Feminist History of Philosophy” (Witt and Shapiro 2015), which contains a brief direct quote from Waithe (1987). This entry would be useful to students only insofar as it would direct them to Waithe’s volume, but it is the third result of the search and would not be the most natural starting point, given that it

¹⁷ See, for instance, the painting by Charles William Mitchell, exhibited in 1885, where she is naked and only barely covered by her long hair. A recent movie (*Agora*, 2009) shows Hypatia dismissing many romantic advances.

focuses on general theoretical issues and on early modern philosophers. Furthermore, the volume edited by Waithe is expensive and may not be owned by a library or available electronically.

The other two entries are “Pythagoras” and “Pythagoreanism,” both written by Carl Huffman (Huffman 2018, 2019). The first entry only refers to the existence of women very briefly and without mentioning any names. However, Huffman devotes a whopping page and a half of the second 58-page entry to Pythagorean women, where he acknowledges the unusually large role given to women in the school and the fact that women “were *probably* more active in Pythagoreanism than any other ancient philosophical movement” (Huffman 2019, sec. 3.3; my emphasis). The subsection mentions none of their alleged doctrines. It gives biographical details of Theano and Timycha, but not of Myia, Pythagoras’s daughter, whose existence is well attested. The subsection also contains the claim that there is “no reliable evidence for any writings by these women” (ibid.), and refers to other works on the topic (not a comprehensive list, see below).

The only other place in the entry where the author mentions women is in the discussion of their *pseudepigrapha*. To Perictione and Phintys are attributed fragments from two treatises (*On the Harmony of a Woman* and *On the Temperance of a Woman*, respectively) and there are five letters attributed to Theano, Melissa, and Miya. It is only here that Huffman mentions very briefly the content of these views, but also adds this: “There is little that is specifically Pythagorean” (2019, sec. 4.2). He also cautions the reader to take these texts seriously: “Due to the dearth of preserved writings by women from the ancient world *some* have been tempted to suppose that the writings are genuine works by the named authors” (ibid.; my emphasis). However, the reader is left to wonder who those “some” may ever be: there is no reference, either in the text or in the bibliography.

It is hard not to find this lacuna insulting: the absence of any engagement with the feminist philosophy literature on the topic seemingly suggests that the author didn’t even deem them worthy of expressing his disagreement with them.

The only feminist author that Huffman engages with is Sarah Pomeroy, a prominent classicist who published a monograph devoted to Pythagorean women (Pomeroy 2013). However, he cites her only briefly, saying that the book “provides some useful commentary but has some serious drawbacks” (Huffman 2019, sec. 4.2) and then refers to two negative reviews of the book, one condescendingly lukewarm (Brodersen 2014) and the other scathing and at times offensive (Centrone 2014). The reviews are featured in the bibliography *twice*: once on their own, and once after the reference to Pomeroy’s book.

It is worthwhile to note that the entry does not deny that there were women who belonged to the Pythagorean school. It thus maintains a semblance of openness and neutrality. But, at the same time, it dismisses the possibility that their

doctrines have survived somehow (even if transmitted by someone else, and even if they might have evolved from their original Pythagorean origins) and fails to take them seriously on their own merits.

Huffman is not alone in deeming the work of Pomeroy, Waithe, and Wider to be flawed. Annette Huizenga, whose *Moral Education for Women in the Pastoral and Pythagorean Letters: Philosophers of the Household* (2013) Huffman cites approvingly at various points, agrees with the mainstream view that these ancient texts are pseudonymous. But first she engages extensively, even if critically, with the feminist scholarship, citing it directly. Second, as the subtitle of her book suggests, she takes the philosophical content of such work extremely seriously and presents evidence concerning the existence of these women philosophers at length. Her view is that some of these women philosophers existed and were held in high esteem in antiquity, and that is why the texts were attributed to them.

Huizenga's book may be the most rigorous and extended analysis of the Pythagorean women's philosophy to date. It is, however, a thick volume full of footnotes, hard to navigate for nonspecialists, and—I fear—fairly inaccessible to students. I would imagine most if not all students would rest content with the SEP entries, especially given how fond they are of online sources. Another favorite student resource, the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, does not contain any mention of the Pythagorean women.¹⁸

The topic of Pythagorean women is particularly fraught, but I hope I have provided a taste of the peculiar difficulties surrounding ancient women philosophers. I have presented in some detail a couple of debates (on Diotima and Aspasia in the Platonic *corpus*, and on the Pythagorean women), in order to show the uneven presentation and accessibility of scholarship from a student perspective. But that is not, alas, the only pedagogical challenge one may encounter, as I explain in the next section.

3. The Challenges of *Teaching Ancient Women Philosophers*

In the first iteration of my Ancient Greek Philosophy course, as I said, I knew very little about ancient women. At the beginning of the term, I held a class session discussing similarities and differences between Sappho, Hesiod, and the Presocratics, so as to introduce the question, what is philosophy? My aim was to expand on the traditional distinction between *mythos* and *logos* and the comparison drawn by Jonathan Barnes (2001) between Hesiod's *Theogony* and the doctrines of the school of Miletus. I wanted, on the one hand, to highlight the undeniable differences in methodology and form of these texts, but on the other, to suggest

¹⁸ This is not in any way an indictment of the IEP, which does have, for instance, an entry devoted to Cynic philosopher Hipparchia.

that what gets included in a canon is not only dependent on that. However, I myself considered that connection a bit of a stretch, and the metaphilosophical question went well above the head of my students.

I had higher expectations for a class devoted to Kathleen Wider's article. But I could not think of anything better than having groups summarize findings related to each historical period analyzed by Wider, and then present them to the class. The board was full of facts for each woman philosopher, but the students did not realize how peculiar that board was, nor did they grasp the import of the methodological and scholarly issues I had them regurgitate. I also worried the class felt more like indoctrination than genuine teaching.

Therefore, the following year I partnered with our humanities librarian Katy Curtis. In the first session, she introduced students to library resources; she explained the distinction between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources; she had them analyze some primary sources from Waithe's volume; and finally she led them in a concept-mapping activity, using a digital tool named Coggle.¹⁹

Students were divided into small groups, each devoted to a different woman philosopher.²⁰ Each group received one primary text reading for their assigned philosopher. Each group also skimmed entries for "Pythagoras" and "Pythagoreanism" from the SEP to identify overlapping or related ideas. (All materials had been assigned as class reading as well). The task for each group was to contribute one "branch" related to their female philosopher to the class Coggle map. Branches could include biographical information, and summary or analysis of the primary text, as well as connections to the Pythagorean tradition or the challenges of studying female philosophers in antiquity.²¹

This class was very successful in engaging students in discussion and in fostering active research and exploration of the topic. In my library colleague's own words:

This session went really well! I think it has been one of my most successful library sessions this semester. Students were enthusiastic and engaged, contributing thoughtfully to all discussions. The topic of women in ancient philosophy was very effective for fostering an exploration of the library resources and I believe all students were impressed by (or at the very least recognized the value of) the specificity of the subject encyclopedias and their usefulness for getting started. The students also seemed to enjoy using Coggle to outline their ideas when working with their primary texts.

¹⁹ See <https://coggle.it/>.

²⁰ On the benefits of cooperative learning, see Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2014).

²¹ I owe the description of the class activity to Katy Curtis, whom I thank.

The second class was, alas, less successful. I tried to expose the students to two subsequent “twists.” The first one was the realization that the primary texts they had analyzed might not be authentic, as argued in the *Stanford* entry. The second twist was that those authors denying the authenticity might be biased in their assessment, as argued by Waithe. I tried to bring home the point that scholarship is never neutral and always embedded in a tradition that neglects some viewpoints in favor of others, and that navigating these debates is difficult but rewarding.

But once again I found myself telling, rather than showing. I wanted them to realize *on their own* the lacunas, biases, and difficult methodological choices that scholars writing about this topic face. Again, I worried about the students feeling indoctrinated, instead of discovering firsthand at least some of the issues I described to them.

4. Meeting the Challenges: Pedagogical Strategies and Suggestions

To sum up: the main challenges I faced were the multitude and diversity of methodological hurdles concerning the scholarship on this topic, and the risk of being perceived either as a left-leaning professor indoctrinating students or, vice versa, as a moderate liberal one paying only lip-service to a “PC”²² ideal.

The breakthrough occurred after attending a teaching session on *digital archives*. The creation of digital archives is part of the ever-expanding toolkit of digital pedagogy in the humanities (Battershill and Ross 2017; Hirsch 2012). Digital archives have the same purpose as physical archives but contain digitized documents and are available online. The assignment asks students to create a collection of dispersed information concerning each philosopher, with the explicit aim of making it accessible to the larger public.

Each group was to create a web page for a woman philosopher that contained at least one image or portrait of her (assuming they could find any); any available biographical information; primary texts (again, if extant); and discussion questions. (See appendix for the prompt and related rubric). A similar assignment would be to ask students to create a Wikipedia page, but for many of these figures there are preexisting entries, and I did not want to introduce the further complication of learning Wikipedia etiquette and format.

In fall 2017, I divided the class into seven groups, taking into account various demographic factors, personality, and skill level. Since I did this toward the end of

²² I find it sad that “politically correct,” which at face value is a noble concept, is such a charged and derogatory term from *both* sides of the political spectrum, even though perhaps it deserves such a fate due to its not exactly pluralistic origins (see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness>).

the term, I knew the students pretty well.²³ I selected the seven “hidden figures”²⁴ so that they involved very different methodological questions: Aspasia, Perictione, Aesara, Phintys, Theano, Diotima, and Hypatia. Students would create websites about these philosophers and would have to retrieve hard-to-find sources, delve into complex scholarly controversies, and grapple with difficult choices concerning what material to include and how to frame it.

I encouraged them to think about questions such as, did Diotima really exist, and if so, is the theory of love she defends in the *Symposium* attributable to her? Was Aspasia only Pericles’s companion and a *hetaira*, or was she also a public intellectual, and is that enough to consider her a philosopher? Was there only one Theano, was she the daughter of Pythagoras, and can we think of her as an independent thinker? Was Perictione only Plato’s mother, or was she a Pythagorean philosopher, and how do we know that? Is Aesara of Lucania’s work really written by her, how does the tripartition of the soul attributed to her compare to Plato’s, and are the differences “gendered”? How does Phintys’s discussion of feminine virtues differ from or relate to the Aristotelian account? How can one responsibly use the problematic iconography associated with Hypatia, and what does that iconography teach us about the pervasiveness of the male gaze? These were only some of the questions I hoped my students would ask themselves and their peers. I hoped that proposing specific and concrete questions such as these, concerning one particular philosopher at a time, would lead them to ponder about the more abstract, metaphilosophical issues concerning ancient women philosophers and the history of philosophy more generally.

In the first class, students were introduced to the library website and the class research guide; then our librarian explained differences between kinds of sources and how to trace citations; and at the end, students were introduced to WordPress and how the site works. The second class, for which they prepared by collecting and reading material devoted to each philosopher (some of which I provided for them), was mostly devoted to designing the archives. They presented the final outcome to their classmates on the last day of classes.

While the level of competence and sophistication of the archives varied, the pedagogical results I expected were accomplished for all. These neglected figures

²³ That year, I had exactly 21 students. Our lower-level lecture courses are capped at 28 students, which, I acknowledge, is a privilege not many instructors have when teaching a survey course. Such small classes allow me to do a lot of small-group work and to get to know the students individually quite well.

²⁴ That is what I called the resulting web page—couldn’t resist the slightly banal name, since the eponymous movie on the Black female mathematicians working for NASA has just come out the year before.

emerged from the past, coming alive in front of all of us.²⁵ Students really seemed to grasp, firsthand, most of the methodological and scholarly controversies I had been trying to convey since that first, flat litany of trivia on the board.

The final assignment for the course was a reflection on the experience of designing the archives. It was rewarding to see that female-identified students felt empowered by the discovery that there were, or might have been, women philosophers even in antiquity; even more exciting was to see their male-identified counterparts not just pay lip service to the idea that women can do philosophy too, but discuss these women's philosophical doctrines, understand the methodological pitfalls, and just enjoy the topic.

A student wrote,

In creating our digital archive entry, it felt satisfying to apply the knowledge I have gained from this course and others in a collaborative way, in turn creating an informative entry that other people can access and share. Pursuing this project in a collaborative way channeled meaningful conversations about the texts we were researching and in that process we were philosophizing in a way that encouraged the study of women. . . . This project and similar ones reflect what a liberal arts education is really about.

However, there were a few drawbacks. We did not have enough time to talk in detail about the issues. The final presentations were short and the ending was somewhat anticlimactic. Perhaps more importantly, a woman student commented that she felt that this exciting topic had been relegated to the end of the course, almost as an afterthought, instead of integrated throughout the semester. This point struck me deeply, since many of us attempting to reshape the philosophical canon have been dealing with the question of ordering: the chronological order in which topics are discussed may convey an implicit, and unwanted, order of importance. I myself am guilty, for instance, of discussing philosophy of gender, race, disability, and so forth at the end of a class on human nature that starts, you guessed it, with Plato and Aristotle.

Thus, in the latest iteration of this project (fall 2019), I implemented a few changes. The first concerned chronological order. While I did keep the timing of the archives creation (because group work thrives on a sense of community that I build over time and because it is a great note to end the semester on), I previewed elements of the final project and acknowledged the erasure of women's voices

²⁵ Unfortunately I cannot share the archives themselves via permanent link without thereby affecting the success of the assignment for future cohorts of students. I may be able to provide access for a limited time if you email me.

throughout the term. Also, when reading the *Symposium*, I did a little “Ask Diotima anything” session, in which I impersonated Diotima (wearing a peplos and all!) and incorporated in my answers themes from the contemporary philosophy of love, thus creating an explicit continuity from the past to the present, and centering a woman’s voice both physically (as I stood in the center of the room, surrounded by students) and metaphorically (as it was in the middle of the semester).

The second change was to increase the class time devoted to the project, and the number of digital tools at our disposal. Time-wise, we spent four class periods (a total of five-and-a-half hours) on the project: one class to introduce the issue (through the aforementioned article by Kathleen Wider [1986] and a blogpost by Peter Adamson [2016]); one class to read the sources, including primary texts, concerning the figure assigned to each group; one class for the groups to work on the archives; and finally one class to present their work to the whole class and have a collective discussion. They still had to submit an individual reflection on the experience, which is an essential part of any group learning (see appendix for archives and reflection prompts).

For the class focused on analyzing the sources, I brought back the Coggle assignment, since I was presented again with evidence that mapping is a fun and efficacious pedagogical activity (among others, see Harris and Zha [2017], Kandiko, Hay, and Weller [2013], and Novak and Cañas [2006]). Another minor technological change was to use Google Sites instead of WordPress. The choice of platform depends on institutional licenses and practices, and instructor’s preference and knowledge. We found using Google Sites very accessible.

This iteration was very successful. The discussion was engaging, and students reported high levels of intellectual and personal enrichment from the experience. The students went well beyond a quick or unreflective reading of the texts I initially provided, and were, in particular, more critical of authoritative sources such as the *Stanford Encyclopedia*, while at the same time maintaining an overall cautious outlook toward all their sources.

I was particularly pleased with how effective the assignment was with students who were less strong in writing essays. These students seemed to have benefited a lot more from working in a collaborative way and without the pressure of a grade attached directly to the project. Their written reflections showed a high level of engagement, and they used their talents in different ways. A student who struggled with writing, for instance, by his own initiative drew an outstanding digital portrait of Arete of Cyrene, which received much praise from his peers.

However, a student’s complaint about the use of a website as opposed to a PowerPoint presentation made me realize that I had not sufficiently explained the role of digital archives as a service to the public, which is something I will have to remedy next time. There is always space for improvement!

Teaching this topic in a way that is scholarly rigorous, morally conscientious, and pedagogically efficacious is difficult, as I am constantly discovering. There are no fast and easy solutions: any satisfactory implementation of this project requires careful reflection and rethinking of my pedagogical aims, assiduous research into the limited and dispersed literature, and painful reallocation of precious class time. But this has also been a very rewarding project for both me and the students. Expanding the Western canon is not only intrinsically valuable, and instrumental to achieving social justice and to improving our knowledge of the past, but can also spur fruitful innovations in one's teaching.²⁶

²⁶ Thank you to academic librarian Katherine Curtis, for being an invaluable partner in this project since its inception: Katy, I could have not done any of this without your continuous support and valuable insights. I am very grateful to Charlotte Witt for encouragement and detailed feedback on this paper since it was a talk at MOOO, and to Alida Liberman for written comments and advice on the revised version. I am also thankful to Andrew Arlig, Antonio Donato, Gary Gabor, Dhananjay Jagannathan, Kevin Kirner, Julie Klein, Danielle Layne, Shen-yi Liao, Christia Mercer, Gary Ostertag, Nickolas Pappas, Caterina Pellò, Kaity Peake, Rosemary Twomey, audience members of the Central American Philosophical Association meeting in February 2020, *Minds of Our Own: An Anniversary Celebration* conference, and American Association of Philosophy Teachers Annual Conference, and two anonymous reviewers for *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*. Apologies to anyone I might have forgotten: so many people over the last few years offered suggestions and bibliographic help: thank you!

Appendix: Fall 2019 Digital-archives and reflection prompts.

1. DIGITAL ARCHIVE: this is a collaborative group project finalized to produce a web page dedicated to a woman philosopher of antiquity. The archive itself is not graded (although I will note on the reflection's rubric if it is incomplete). It will be presented to your classmates, though, and possibly made available to the public, so make it pretty!

Please follow the following instructions for content and structure.

Content: each page has to be titled, contain at least one image/photo, some biographical information; at least 2 discussion questions; bibliography (including primary texts if available); if relevant, links to other sources (such as videos, blogposts, popular articles).

Structure: I leave that up to each group to decide. Make it visually appealing, but above all clear and well-organized, so that anybody can find the information that they need to know about the philosopher.

2. REFLECTION: this is an individual graded assignment in which you will detail your specific contributions to the group project (what did you do?), explain the difficulties encountered (for instance, you couldn't find a photo; the sources all reported the very same story, or, vice versa, the sources are in conflict), and the methodological lessons learned. No need to review any of the content presented on the archive, unless you need to do so to explain some issue.

Due in class in hard copy on presentation day (Dec. 5th). Use the same cover page instructions as the one I give for papers. Recommended length: 500–1000 words.

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