

BOOK REVIEW

Pythagorean Women: Their History and Writings. By SARAH B. POMEROY. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. xxii +172. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-0956-6.

Only a fraction of what ancient women wrote has survived antiquity, and relatively little of that is prose. The authenticity of what little we do have has been doubted, but since recent research has shown that it was not uncommon for elite girls and women to be literate and even well-educated, the idea that women could have written prose treatises and epistles no longer seems implausible.

Mary Ellen Waithe began her 1991 *Ancient Women Philosophers (A History of Women Philosophers, v.1)* with a discussion of the writings attributed to Pythagorean women, along with some translations and commentary by Vicki Lynn Harper. In *Pythagorean Women* Sarah Pomeroy has made the hypothesis of authenticity seem even more plausible, by providing a characteristically lucid and comprehensive re-construction of the ambiances in which the Pythagorean women were likely to have lived. She shows why Pythagoreanism would have offered important advantages to females in propertied families in the prosperous Greek settlements in Southwestern Italy: a healthy nutritional regimen, education for girls, and marital fidelity for men as well as for women. The cult of Hera, the goddess of marriage, appears to have particular importance in Croton. The high proportion of female graves in Metapontum may also suggest that there was less female infanticide there than in the rest of the Greek world.

The second half of Pomeroy's book consists of a selection of letters and sayings attributed to Pythagorean women (some translated by Pomeroy herself), along with helpful introductions and commentaries. There is a final chapter by Vicki Lynn Harper about the Pythagorean women as philosophers, showing how they integrate Pythagorean theories of harmony into their advice about household management and the challenges posed by marriage and the bearing and raising of children. The letters by women comprise less than ten percent of all extant Pythagorean letters (compare *The Garland of Meleager*, where women wrote only three percent of the epigrams). Of the eight Pythagorean women authors, two

names (Theano and Perictione) appear to belong to at least two different women. Pomeroy suggests that the first Perictione might have been Plato's mother; but if so, wouldn't a comic poet have said something about it? They liked to make fun of Pythagoreans and their eating habits (e.g., Alexis' *Pythagorean Woman*, fr. 201-3 and *Men from Tarentum*, fr. 223 and Aristophon's *Pythagorean*, fr. 10, 12; see S. D. Olsen, *Broken Laughter*, Oxford 2007: 242-8).

The possibility that Pythagorean women could have written their own letters has greater appeal than what they appear to have written. Even as stern a critic of women's behavior as Semonides of Amorgos would have approved of the sanctimonious advice the women give about the importance of chastity, modest and unostentatious clothing, and piety, or how to select a wet nurse, raise children, and treat one's parent. Practically everything they say about women's lives has analogues in texts by men. Pomeroy suggests that only a woman would offer the kind of the advice given by Theano II in two letters advising women not to overreact when their husbands take on a mistress. But Euripides has Andromache say that she not only accepted Hector's infidelity but nursed his bastard babies (*And.* 213-27, cf. *Tro.* 643-58).

Like many of the ancient literary epistles attributed to male philosophers and politicians, but composed by rhetoricians, the style of the letters is formal, their content general, and their tone didactic, without any of the little anecdotes and personal details that would make them sound like personal letters from real women. Most do not make much use of the kind of abstract reasoning characteristic of Platonic or Aristotelian philosophy. The exception is the treatise on numbers by Aesara (the name of one of Pythagoras' daughters) but the attribution depends upon an emendation (Stobaeus 1.49.27 Wachsmuth). In the manuscript tradition of Stobaeus the author of this letter is a male, Aisaros or Aresas.

A glimmer of personality comes through only in the apothegms of Pythagoras' wife Theano, a few of which Pomeroy includes in her chapter about the letters. Unlike the Theano of the letters, Theano of the apothegms comes across as a woman who was capable of expressing herself forcefully and who understood Pythagoras' theory of numbers and its connection to piety (*eusebeia*), and the consequences of his theory of transmigration. By the early centuries ad this Theano had become a legendary figure, endowed with wisdom and courage. (She is said to have bitten off her tongue so she could not answer questions posed to her by a tyrant, an act that Iamblichus in his *Life of Pythagoras* [194] attributes to Timycha, defying Dionysius II of Syracuse). A manuscript in Syriac preserves some sixty-five additional sayings of Theano that have no direct counterparts in the surviving

Greek, advice about friendship, righteous behavior, warnings against materialism (see U. Possekel, *Museon* 118 (1998) 7–36). Historical or not, Theano had become an icon of the wise, loyal, and courageous woman.

Whatever the historical Pythagorean women actually did or did not do, and what their lives were actually like in the rich farmland of the colonies they inhabited, in the end it is not they, but rather the fictive versions of themselves and their writings that for centuries captured the imaginations of ancient peoples.

MARY R. LEFKOWITZ

Wellesley College, mlefkowi@wellesley.edu