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Hypatia of Alexandria

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Recommended Citation
Minardi, Cara, "Hypatia of Alexandria" (2008). *Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2008*. Paper 10.
http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/english_conf_newvoice_2008/10

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2008 New Voices Conference September 25-27
Graduate English Association
English Department, Georgia State University
Atlanta, Georgia

Hypatia of Alexandria

The forthcoming text entitled *The Present State of Scholarship in Historical Rhetoric* edited by Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Winifred Bryan Horner tells a single and clear story: scholarship in the history of rhetoric is sorely lacking. This is especially true concerning ancient women. There have been important and numerous contributions over the last twenty years to feminist historiographical research of all periods, however, the amount of work left to do in the ancient world is enormous. We have, in fact, barely scratched the surface of the ancient world and have recovered only Aspasia and Diotima from the fifth century BCE. However, as *The Present State of Scholarship in Historical Rhetoric* indicates, there is not another single historical woman of note between these Greek women and Hildegard of Bingen who lived between 1098-1179.

So I asked myself, what does it mean that there is not a single woman of note engaged in philosophy or rhetoric for more than 1500 years? The obvious answer until now has been that women during this era were oppressed and the lack of primary materials by ancient women is an indication of the reality of their oppression. In addition, feminist historiography is especially painstaking work and requires an enormous amount of time, knowledge, and/or motivation. Then, of course, even when historical women are recovered, scholars of historical rhetoric can resist newly recovered figures as meriting canonical status within their own historical period, insisting that women recovered in our age are a product of contemporary rhetoric. These problems serve to constrain the material reality under which all scholars of historical rhetoric

must function and produce their scholarship. But, there are other problems too, problems we don't directly discuss.

One of the most important and impactful problems is in our ideology about historical women itself. The ideology is the one that tells us, assures us, requires us to believe that ancient women did not participate in philosophical or rhetorical tasks, except rare situations. In *Politics*, Aristotle tells us, "silence is a woman's glory." St. Paul wrote, "women should keep silent . . . they have no permission to talk, but should keep their place as the law directs" (1 Corinthians 33-34). In 1 Timothy (2:12) St. Paul stated he did not "permit women to teach or dictate to the men" In *Moralia* Plutarch states the Roman position on women clearly, "the two great duties of a virtuous woman . . . are to keep at home and be silent. For she is only to speak to her husband, as by her husband. Nor is she to take amiss the uttering of her mind . . ." By adopting Platonic/Aristotelian ideologies of women we have, in many ways, reconstructed the universal woman and the universal woman's condition in the ancient world as unvaried and universally oppressed.

This conditioned ideology leads to other conditions and ideologies that prohibit, prevent, or discourage scholars from this work. We also have biases about race, class, and orientation in addition to gender that we have not quite shaken and which we bring to our work. As Gaillet's and Horner's book indicates, there is much more work to do in non-Western rhetorics. Research in the area of non-Western rhetorics could help us address issues of race. We must also reconsider the meaning of literacy in the ancient world concerning men and women and learn how it functioned without the apriori assumption that only those of the upper classes had access to it. Furthermore, if there will be inroads made in historical rhetoric, scholars would be well guided by the newer methodologies of feminist historiographers in order to recover those

individuals or groups on whom primary materials is so sparse. Feminist historiographical methods allow the recreation of a historical context so necessary when primary documents do not exist.

So you might be asking yourselves at this point, if the challenges are so difficult, why bother reconstructing women in the ancient world? The most succinct answer I can provide here is by using a quote. Berubé explains "canons are at once the location, the index, and the record of the struggle for cultural representation; like any other hegemonic formation, they must be continually reproduced anew" (qtd. in McLaughlin 12). Michel Foucault tells us that discourses contain, inscribe, and resinscribe power, hence what I am saying is that to recover women's participation in philosophy and rhetoric, especially in the ancient world, may allow those Othered by patriarchal tradition a firm voice in that tradition and by extension, an increased voice in our own age.

Once we reorient ourselves, research possibilities open. So where do we start? How do we begin? In Patricia Bizzell's article "Opportunities for Feminist Research in the History of Rhetoric," Bizzell explains three ways scholars can find and conduct research. The first is to be a "resisting reader" meaning that we need to question the biased assumptions made by men's documentation of women's lives. The second is to look for works by women that are similar to those done by men during the same period, and the last is to look in places not traditionally associated with rhetorical activity in order to reframe rhetoric and its meaning. All of these methods are important, but it is equally important to just pay attention.

I first "discovered" Hypatia of Alexandria as college freshman when I was taking the UMASS Boston version of our English 1102. In the library one day doing research, I was perusing academic journals and the journal *Hypatia* came up on one of my searches. I had never

heard the word and wanted to know more about what it meant or where it came from. I pulled an edition of the journal and read on the inside cover that Hypatia had been a teacher, philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer in Alexandria between 355-415 CE. According to the note on the journal, Hypatia was murdered in 415 by a mob of Christian monks. There are many theories about who was responsible and what the motive for her murder was but nothing is known for certain. However, I was hooked and I had to know more. Over the years, I read whatever came my way about Hypatia and she is the subject of my dissertation. First, I am going to tell you a little bit about Hypatia of Alexandria then I am going to discuss what I see as a hidden rhetorical tradition emerging in my research. My goal here is not just to share what I know as of now, but also to encourage you to consider feminist historiography for your own research projects.

Evidence of Hypatia's life, works, and murder are documented in several historical sources including *The Ecclesiastical History of Philostorgius: As Epitomized by Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* from the late fourth early fifth century, the fifth century *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 439 CE), written by Socrates Scholasticus, and *The Chronicle of John Malalas* from the late fifth early sixth century. There is also an entry in the *Chronicle* by John, Coptic Bishop of Nikiu from the sixth century, and an entry about Hypatia in the tenth century encyclopedia *Suidae Lexicon*. These documents are important sources to establish who Hypatia was and provide scholars a sense of the importance of her scholarly and rhetorical work.

According to the ancient sources, in addition to being a teacher, a philosopher, and mathematician/astronomer she was also chair of the school of Neoplatonism in Alexandria. She was a well-respected person that had considerable influence among the elite in Alexandria and the Mediterranean world. Her most famous student was Synesius of Cyrene, credited for infusing early Christianity with Neoplatonism that he learned from Hypatia. Several of his

letters to her are extant and in his letters to others—some of whom were classmates—he discusses her with affection and admiration. While none of Hypatia's work exists, according to the *Suidae Lexicon* she wrote "a commentary on Diophantus [Arithmetica . . .] a work called *The Astronomical Canon* [. . .] and a commentary on *The Conics* of Apollonius" (Fideler 57). While a few scholars theorize that some of Hypatia's work might exist in Arabic, others claim her work can be extracted by identifying her idiosyncratic mathematical formulas from these scientific and mathematical pieces that she edited. Pollard and Reid credit Hypatia for preserving mathematical knowledge, "without [Hypatia's] clear, patient explanations of the works of . . . [Diophantus which was] . . . crucial in the development of modern mathematics. . . [his ideas may not] even have survived" (267). In spite of these theories, to date Hypatia's work has yet to be recovered and there are only two contemporary book-length treatments about Hypatia, Maria Dzielska's 1995 *Hypatia of Alexandria* and Michael Deakin's 2007 *Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician and Martyr.*

Hypatia of Alexandria is important for the rhetorical canon because contrary to Aristotle, St. Paul, Plutarch and the patriarchal tradition of history, she indicates that women did participate in intellectual and civic activities in parts of the ancient world—perhaps even more directly than previously thought. According to the *Suidae Lexicon,* Hypatia was an articulate woman who lectured in public about Plato and Aristotle, indicating her education in philosophy and rhetoric. She

> excelled all the philosophers of that time—and not only succeeded in Plato his school, the exercise of which Plotinus continued, but also expounded to as many as came to hear the precepts and doctrines of all sorts of philosophers. Wherefore

> as many gave their study to knowledge of philosophical discipline flocked to her lessons from every country. (Wider 53-54)

Various documents confirm her vocation as a teacher of philosophy and rhetoric in addition to mathematics. Like many famous male teachers, her reputation drew students from around the Mediterranean. In "Hypatia and Her Mathematics," Deakin concurs, stating that "at the time of her death, [Hypatia] was in fact the greatest mathematician then living in the Greco-Roman world, very likely the world as a whole . . . Hypatia . . . clearly outshine[s her father] Theon . . . in her reputation as a teacher" (241-242). Providing additional support for Hypatia's teaching excellence is a poem by Palladas who edified and memorialized Hypatia's skill as a teacher in the *Greek Anthology*:

> Revered Hypatia, ornament of learning, stainless star of wise teaching, when I see thee and thy discourse I worship thee, looking on the starry house of Virgo; for thy business is in heaven. Palladas, *Greek Anthology* 11 (qtd. in Pollard and Reid 266)

While we do not have a complete list of her students, Synesius' letters provide the names of some of them as well as confirmation of her reputation and activities. Among her students were Synesius, his younger brother, Euoptius and their uncle, Alexander. Synesius' closest friend Herculian, and his younger brother Olympius studied with Hypatia. Hessychius, Athanasius, and Theodosius, are the names of other students. While it is difficult to identify all of Hypatia's students with certainty, there is evidence that they were generally wealthy, influential, or both. Synesius of Cyrene became Bishop of Constantinople and his brother, Euoptius, was Synesisus' successor. Olympius was "a wealthy landowner from Selucia in Syrian and "was well connected in Alexandria," and Dzielska assumes the same is true of his

brother, Herculian, although there are no details about him (Dzielska 32-3). However, according to Pollard and Reid, Herculian became prefect in Constantinople (268). Hesychius was probably "governor of Upper Libya . . . Athanasius . . . is probably the well-known Alexandrian sophist, the author of commentaries and rhetorical works; Theodosius is the Alexandrian "'grammarian of the first order' and the author of discourses on verbs and nouns" (Dzielska 35-37).

In addition to teaching, which probably took the form of private lessons for students of the elite class, Hypatia lectured in public and attained influence among Alexandrian officials. Socrates Scholasticus explains,

> for her grave courage of mind, that which she gathered out of the fountains and bowels of philosophical literature, for her modest and matronlike behavior, she sticked not to present herself before princes and magistrates. Neither was she abashed to come into the open face of the assembly. All men did both reverence and had in her admiration for the singular modesty of her mind. (Wider 53-54)

Because she was both well regarded for her intellect and loved by inhabitants of Alexandria, "high officials . . . [arriving] paid early calls on Hypatia as one of the foremost people in the city" (Dzielska 38). One of the officials Hypatia knew well was the Roman prefect, Orestes. They "met frequently . . . and he consulted with her on municipal and political issues" (Dzielska 38). Rist concurs, "Hypatia had considerable influence" in Alexandria (223). According to Dzielska, Hypatia's influence was felt in places as far away from Alexandria as Constantinople, Syria, and Cyrene (89).

In addition to documenting Hypatia's importance in Alexandria, she suggests the usefulness of intersecting the feminist concern of race/ethnicity as well as gender in order to find ancient women and their active participation. Unlike Dzielska who asserts Hypatia was culturally

and ethnically Greek, I believe that Hypatia was ethnically Egyptian and Greek. I base this on the fact that her father, Theon, identified as Egyptian and Greek[1] and on Bagnall's demographics of late Roman Alexandria, which conclude that the population consisted of a large number of Egyptian Greeks by the Roman period. This seemingly minor point is significant in the context of Roman Alexandria. We must remember that ancient Egypt was atypical in its treatment of women and that Alexandria in particular was anomalous because of its geographical isolation from the rest of Egypt. Alexandria's isolation functioned to relieve Alexandria from misogynistic traditions instituted elsewhere like in Rome.

Remember too that whenever the Romans colonized a new region, they would lay their own rules and customs (*nomos*) over already established local customs, interfering as little as possible. What this means is that, most notably in Alexandria, the culture was a syncretic mix of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman *nomos* in ways that created public spaces not typically open to women in the ancient world. As a woman of mixed ethnicity, Hypatia had the choice of whether to follow Greek or Egyptian *nomos* without Roman intervention. Hence, she could own property and transact her own business without the Roman tradition of a male guardian. Legal opportunities, along with her literacy explain how Hypatia lived an independent life that included speaking publicly, teaching and advising men, moving about the city without an escort, and owning her own house. Furthermore, Haas reports, "the Alexandrians apparently did not consider [Hypatia's] status to be an anomaly, since she was frequently bestowed with civic honors" (311). Haas' observation suggests that the sight of a woman participating in Alexandrian public life may have so been common in Roman Alexandria not to have merited documentation.

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[1] Theon used the "epithets 'Egyptos' and 'Alexandreus,' which suggest he traced his lineage back through both Greek and Egyptian Roots," (Pollard and Reid 260).

Another discovery I accidentally made is that Hypatia may not have been an exceptional woman even within the ancient Greek tradition. While beginning background research on Greek women's lives in order to contextualize Hypatia's cultural life, I discovered that there were plenty of women who did work in philosophy and rhetoric in ancient Greece and in the ancient Mediterranean at large. Hence, while she may have been following the Greek male tradition in her studies in Alexandria, it is also likely that Hypatia knew about women philosophers and rhetors that we do not. According to Kathleen Wider in her article "Women Philosophers in the Ancient Greek World: Donning the Mantle," "there were women in most, if not all, the ancient schools of Greek philosophy" (22). Belle Vivante concurs in her book entitled *Daughters of Gaia.*

I am going to name a few of them here to document their names and as suggestions for future research. In sixth century Rhodes there was the philosopher Cleobulus (Pomeroy 56). In Greece the wife of Pythagoras, Theano I wrote a book entitled *On Piety*. Their daughters, Arignote, Damo, and Myia were also philosophers and writers. Arignote wrote works entitled *The Sacred Discourse* and *Rites of Dionysos* as well as other philosophical works, and her sister Damo wrote a commentary on Homer (Wider 29). Theano II was a Pythagorean and philosopher who lived from 540-510 BCE. There is some disagreement over fifth century Arete of Cyrene. While it is clear she was a philosopher, in *Daughters of Gaia*, Belle Vivante asserts she headed the school of Hedonism and that "Arete wrote 40 books and educated 110 philosophers" while Wider claims she was head of the Cyrenaic school (22). The Spartan woman named Phyntis was a philosopher who wrote *On the Moderation of Women*. Athenian Periktione I, who many scholars think may have been Plato's mother, reportedly wrote two texts, *On the Harmony of Women* and *On Wisdom*. In the fourth century, Leontion wrote a rebuttal to the Aristotelian

claim that women were inferior to men, but we have neither fragments nor the title of her work (Vivante *Daughters of Gaia*). There are many more. Knowledge of these women's works is important for two reasons. First, this information allows us to question the universal oppression of women in a place and time that supposedly epitomized it, and secondly, it allows us to realize that women like Hypatia of Alexandria were most likely educated in a Greek tradition very different from what we understand it to have been.

It is important that feminist scholars not be lulled by patriarchal ideology that insists women did not participate widely. It is true that many women were probably prohibited from leading lives similar to Hypatia, however, there have been times and places like Alexandria that were less restricted and may have served to empower women. Nor do misogynistic ideologies alleviate the responsibility of contemporary feminist scholars to contest the historical canon of ancient rhetoric. Since traditional history has avoided or suppressed women in history, the trick for feminist scholars is to search for women everywhere, and to recreate historical periods and women's lifetimes as fully as possible. With attention to race, class, orientation in addition to gender, we may be able to uncover likely pockets of women's empowerment and subsequent activity. I assure you, women like Hypatia of Alexandria were active in a variety of ways in the ancient world, of that there is little doubt. It seems likely that then, as now, they performed work to serve their families, to earn wages, or to serve other interests and, in some places and times like ancient Greece and Alexandria, they participated in scholarly and public life.

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