Ancient Greek Women Philosophers

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All right, welcome everybody to the second season of the podcast series ‘Ancient World: New Voices,’ where we discuss the exciting collaborative research projects that the Department of Greek and Latin at UCL is engaged in at the moment. So, today's special guest is Catalina Pellò, who is Associate Lecturer in Greek and Latin at UCL and the teaching associate in the history of philosophy at University of Nottingham. However, she is specialist in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. And the study of women in the history of philosophy. She works on philosophy women and the Hellenistic treaties is ascribed to female philosophers. She's also cool editing a volume titled ‘ancient women philosophers recovered ideas and new perspectives’ for Cambridge University Press. And I think we might want to start from here. So, it seems to be one of the latest projects that has seen you busy and occupied. So, if you could tell us a little bit more about this project? And yeah, what got you interested in this particular topic? Over to you Caterina, thank you for being with us.

01:26

Thank you for having me. Yes. So, I wrote my PhD thesis on Phytogorean women. So, this group of women philosophers, who are followers of Pythagoras, and I'm now working and interested in the role of women in the history of philosophy more broadly, and this builds up to book projects. On the one hand, I am I developed my PhD thesis for publication in the series, Cambridge elements in the on women in the history of philosophy, which will be published at the end of May. And on the other hand, I am co editing this volume, ancient women philosophers. And the book is about women who engaged in philosophical activity in antiquity. And we are looking at Greek and Roman philosophy as well as the Indian, Chinese, and Islamic tradition. So yes, they're very, two very exciting projects, at least to me. So, to tell you more about my own research, which is about the Byfuglien women by Pythagorean women, we usually, this label is used to indicate two groups of women philosophers. So, on the one hand, we have the early Pythagorean women, who are followers of Pythagoras, or members of Pythagoras family. And on the other hand, we have the Hellenistic and post Hellenistic treatises ascribed to Pythagoras and women. So, it's a very varied group of thinkers, which includes for our researchers, different challenges, and different issues, and I think different benefits. So, on the one hand, we have no direct evidence from the early Pythagoras and women. And this is because Pythagoras and his first disciples left and over to work so we only have later authors, writing about the bicycle and women. And so there the challenge is, we know that they were there, there are several biographers writing about Pythagoras, educating women. So, the challenge is trying to understand what they were taught, and whether they were involved in any kind of philosophical activity or sort of philosophical way of living as most of the early beta Koreans did. So, we have a source issue first, which is sort of a source issue we're facing insofar as that of the pie Targaryen is presented as the first example of female inclusion in ancient Greek philosophy, at least according from given the evidence that we have. So, there may be others that may be women before them, and there were definitely women outside Greece, but from Greece, that's the case for most evidence, we get more evidence. And then we have the Hellenistic or post Hellenistic women, and that group of philosophers when sort of more challenging. So, what happens is that in the post, Hellenistic period, roughly from the third century BCE, to the first century BCE, we get this collection of texts, relatively extensive collection of texts, written under the name of fifth century Pythagoras and philosophers. So, we know that the texts are synonymous, right? They were written in the Hellenistic period under the names of Byfuglien philosophers, but we don't know who wrote them, to which tradition they belonged, and what the purpose of these texts were. What fascinates me about the corpus is that we have 10 letters and five treatises ascribed to women, philosophers. And again, that would be the only surviving example of philosophical pros ascribed to a female author. But the challenge there is pseudonymity. So, the fact that we don't know who wrote them and several scholars raised the possibility that they will interact with them by men and their female pseudonyms, and so you have different challenges for a researcher to work on.

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Fascinating, thank you. You said ancient Greece, right. So, this is what we have. And you emphasize that, you know, the may actually you what you're talking about is making ancient Greece, but what about the rest? And the other question is about students. So, what is the evidence for them to be women, or

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so, in terms of the rest in our edited volume, uh, we have three chapters, which unfortunately, not as many as we wanted on non-Greek women philosophers or so we have one chapter on Indian women philosophers. And in that case, we focus on Indian philosophical texts that include female characters coming up with philosophical arguments in our chapter specifically is about the Mahabharata, and a woman philosophers called Sula. Now, in that chapter, a chapter is written by Brian black, and it raises very interesting questions that are a question that I with my research came across when I was working on the symposium and the Ottomans. So, the extent to which a literary figure can be used as an example or can be used to understand how real women whether and to what extent real women were engaging with philosophical activity. So that's one chapter, we also have a chapter on bonds out and Chinese philosophy. So, she is a compassionate provision philosopher. But with that, we jump to the fifth century, the baby, so it's quite late. And the challenge there is a bit different. Because the chapter is written by Ampang, white, and the challenge is different, because in the case we have a lot of texts. So, she wrote extensively. The challenge is that these texts, which have never been valued philosophically, as pieces of philosophical writing. So, they're mainly thought to be texts about pedagogy and sort of educating women female education. So, the challenge there is to see whether we can find any sort of philosophical value in her writings and what that might be. We also have a chapter on, on Islamic philosophy. But that chapter is more about the reception of chapters written by Peter Adamson. And it's more about the reception on women philosophers and the Plato's arguments on women's philosophical ability in the fifth book and the Republic in the Islamic philosophy. But Peter Adamson also raises question has to do what philosophers like isn't that I should, whether the fact that even Russia engages with Plato's arguments in the public five, can tell us anything about women doing philosophy in the Islamic tradition. So, the evidence is always challenging or was limited, but there are interesting questions one can engage with within Greece and beyond. Your other question was about pseudonymity. So, there is the authorship question when you turn to the Python, Korean women or to the Pythagoreans so is very complex. And I find it fascinating. So, as I said, we have at least three different levels in which these texts are pseudonyms. First of all, they were written in the Hellenistic personalistic period. Most of the women's stacks are dated around the first century BCE, under the name of early Byfuglien philosophers. So, the later text under the name of early earlier thinkers. Second, these texts are written under the name of Pythagoras and philosophers. But what's striking is that there are very limited Pythagoras elements. So, there is no theory of method psychoses. There's no number theory or the things that we normally associate with the Pythagoras tradition. What they do is that they take platonic and Aristotelian theories and some stoic theories, but, especially platonic theories, which they combine and then ascribe back to Pythagoras. And this is because presumably, they were written with the aim of portraying Pythagoras as the ultimate founder of the Platonic tradition.

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The first problem is later text written under the name of early philosopher. They are non-Pythagorean texts or non-traditional pedigree and text written under the name of Piper going in philosophers. And then when it comes to the text, ascribe to female authors, we have the extra challenge of the gender of the author. So, they're written up in the name of women, thinkers, and writers. And the question is whether or not they were actually women writing them Now, the scholarship, most of the most distinguished scholars so far have focused on the authorship questions whether or not they were authored by women. And that's sort of where we got stuck, in a sense. So, there are two trends on the one hand, authors like Sarah Pomeroy or Mary Ellen Way, or who think that because these texts, discuss topics that are traditionally associated with the female gender, such as marital relations, how to raise children home economics, and they are addressed to women. So, the letters are written to female interlocutors, the texts, the treatises are about how women should behave. So, the argument is that they're more likely to have been written by a female point of view, and quotes. On the other hand, you have the exact opposite argument. So, because philosophy in antiquity was not, was an almost predominantly male enterprise, it is less likely to have men to have women writing this text, and more likely to have men writing under female pseudonyms, perhaps with the aim of educating female pupils. Now, where I come in, is, so I usually raise three issues here. So first of all, I think it's important to realize that most of the arguments for or against female authorship is based on the claim that the texts are about women, which is true for the most part, but not all of them are, in fact, about women. So, there are at least three treatises and a couple of letters I can think of, that are about psychology or cosmology, or metaphysics, epistemology, and do not mention the female gender at all. On the one hand, it's interesting that these are the texts where the gender of the author has been challenged the most. On the other hand, I think that whether we, when we come up with an argument for or against human authorship, we need to account for those non-gendered sorts of philosophical texts. Point number one. The second point is that I think both arguments for or against, recognize that at least the readership, the audience of this text includes women. So, then, again, it's a very complicated tradition. But the community that was reading this text included a female audience, and these are philosophical texts addressed to women. So, I guess the question is whether we can make the jump from audience to authorship. And that leads me to my third point, which is that it seems to me that so far, no persuasive argument has been suggested, either for or against peds, their female authorship. So perhaps this is not the most useful question we should get back on. So perhaps we should just accept this text as ascribed to female authors and start looking at what they are about or asking ourselves why, why were they ascribed to these women authorities? Who were the voices behind the text? Why were they considered good spokespersons for philosophical content? And, and what in what philosophical tradition? Do these texts insert themselves? What do they have anything to contribute? And I think there's more work to be done there. I'm sort of bracketing the authorship question, and I'm looking at the content.

13:27

Thank you. So, let's get to your main question, then do you make point which is what are these texts about? Can you tell us a little bit more about what they what they what they what the letters are about? And what are the treaties about? Etc.?

13:42

Yes, so we, as I mentioned, we have 10 letters and about five treaties. So, eight of these letters are ascribed to piano, which arguably is supposed to be was Pythagoras wife. So again, we have the authorship issue, and we started understanding why piano could be a good author for the certificate. Right? So, she was Pythagoras’ wife, so she was close to the founder of the school. And anyway, most of the letters I would say, are about addressed to women Arab in about, I would say, traditionally, the topics that are traditionally associated with the female gender, how to raise your children, how to react to your husband's infidelity, how to manage your household. Now, I worked more on the treaties. So, I think in terms of the next project, more work should be done as to assessing the letters and seeing whether there are any philosophical arguments in there. I think it's more challenging, and I haven't done that enough. The treatises instead, I divide them into two groups. So, we have ethical treatises and theoretical treatises. So ethical treatises, there are two one is called on moderation and is ascribed to fineness of Sparta and the other one is titled, on harmony on the harmony of women and is ascribed to, particularly on Reddit. And it was arguably the name of Plato's mother. So again, an interesting pseudonym, because you have you portray Plato's mother as a backpacker. Yeah. And you, you create a bio biological connection between the two traditions. Now, these two texts are also primarily focused on the female gender, though in a more, I think, straightforwardly philosophical way. So, they raise the question of what virtue is. And then they start with an introduction, a more sort of general theoretical introduction about what virtue is. And then they apply this theory to the female gender and ask, how can we make what is what virtues are female? And how can women be virtuous. And so for example, what she does is that in the introduction, she comes up with a definition of virtue with a functionalist definition of virtue, virtue as doing your job well, performing, being excellent at performing your function, and then apply and this is a definition we find in Plato's Republic we find in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, and the arguments, the language the example that font is uses reminds us of those sections in Plato and Aristotle. And then she applies this argument to the female gender in a way that perhaps we I mean; she asks herself what virtues are specifically female. And she writes that given that a woman's job is to stay indoors, that she would be excellent if she if she had moderation. Now, again, this is important here is important to bear in mind that women philosophers in antiquity might not come up with the arguments we would want them to promote. But it's interesting that they make the female gender an issue of worth of philosophical investigation. And in the second part of the text, she targets those who argue that it is not suitable for a woman to philosophize and comes up with two partitions of three different kinds of virtues, those that are proper to either men or women, those that are common to men and women, and those that are preferable. And the way at least I read the text is that her conclusion is that a virtue such as wisdom, it is common to men and women, even though we find it more often, she says in men, because they, they are in charge of doing public speaking. So again, not might not be the arguments we would like her to write, but at the same time, she has an interesting way to respond to the claim that it would not be suitable for a woman to philosophize, she is allegedly a woman philosopher coming up with a philosophical argument about a female the female nature of human virtues and criminal activities. So that these are the ethical treatises, and then we have the theoretical treatises, and the theoretical treatises, there are, we have at least three. So, one is called on piety and we only have one fragment, and it's ascribed to against the piano. And it's about Pythagoras and number theory, and in the text, piano or pseudo piano, challenges, Aristotle's interpretation of this theory on the Pythagoras claim that numbers are the principles of all things. And then we have two three pieces, which are the texts I've been working on more recently, together with Julia the chase that is, and

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one treatise is ascribed to pedicure on it again, and it's titled on wisdom and ease about what philosophy is what philosophy is about, and how philosophy relates to the sciences, natural sciences, or quantitative sciences, such as mathematics. So, she comes up with a hierarchy of activities, theoretical activities, and places philosophy at the top, women are not mentioned at all. And then we have on human nature, which is ascribed to Zara, and these texts are about the soul. Zara engages with the Platonic theory of the true partition of the soul, and how that provides a standard of justice for the cosmos on the one hand, and for the cosmos, the city as well as the household. So again, except for that brief mention to the household, its text is about psychology and is about the Platonic theory and is metaphysics it's about metaphysics, rather than winning. Great,

19:14

Thank you. So, a question. This is just a curiosity. But do they in either the treaties, or and I'm thinking particularly about what you said about wisdom as a virtue for women? Do they cite any examples from ancient literature? I'm thinking maybe, you know, Medea would be a good example, wisdom as a virtue for women.

19:37

Yeah, no, they aren't the only reference, which is what these are difficult texts to work on because there are limited references, which makes it would be useful for dating, if they if they did, which I am, but they don't. The only reference I could think of is in a letter. It's not about literature. So, I'm not sure if it answers your question, but in a letter in which a woman is writing to her female interlocutor saying that she, she, she borrowed her copy of Plato's for many days and asking for that copy back. So that I mean, again, that's the, but there is no reference to women in literature. So not unfortunately not. But that

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supposedly also points the fact that there was a there was a there was a readership. And there was a circulation of texts that went beyond the kind of male sphere, assuming that these were women authors.

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Yes, yes, exactly. I guess that letter is also often cited, because it would be just a very odd letter, to make up for it. I think it's more understandable to think why if you're writing a letter about, here's this house behavior, you want to write in under a pseudonym. If it's just a letter asking for a copy of your book back, it looks a bit more personal. So, some scholars have raised the question whether we should challenge the authorship there. But again, I try to not get too involved in the authorship question. And because as you say, there's not much we can know beyond that. The

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other question is about what you mentioned about Diotima, in Plato's Symposium, so you mentioned how it's a very sort of interesting question, because next year, our students are going to go on data symposium as UCL classical play, so I'm sure there'll be very interested to know the answer to this question. So, because you were mentioning how it might be interesting, and it might be useful to use literary figures, such as Diotima, or philosophical figure for these female philosophical figures to prove that there was in fact, or they were women, philosophers in antiquity. So how valuable is that as evidence as a piece of evidence? And how, yeah, how would you make that argument that is useful?

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Yes. So, I think when it comes to Diotima, there are at least three ways in which three possible reactions so we can take. So, some scholars have taken her as a historical woman, woman, and a philosopher. Some scholars have taken her as a fictional woman philosopher, so completely made up by Plato. And, or we could take as what Katherine O'Reilly, who is my co-editor in the book, quite acquaintance, or in the book calls a fictionalized woman. So, it may have been a woman that existed, but whatever arguments we find in in the symposium are Plato's own and not the ottoman. And then in terms of scholars, you have those who do engage with the question of the historicity or functionality of the character, those who think that we should not engage with that at all, and look at the philosophy, but exclusively the philosophy. So, I would say, on the one hand, they don't really have a horse in this race. But on the one hand, I think that there are very, very valuable texts that were written about the philosophy in the symposium and the Artemis teachings, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of why were they ascribed to a one philosopher, is it relevant that the Ottoman is a woman? Is it relevant that she's a priestess? Or a prophetess? Is that sort of more? Does that affect the character and the story more? And again, some Peter Adamson, for example would suggest, yes, it is irrelevant that she is a woman because the argument is mostly about love and the philosophical role of arrows. And so, we include a female character, other scholars, such as please be Sheffield instead think that Plato's point is exactly that it is irrelevant that she was a woman. The point is that philosophy for Plato is genderless. And it is not about me, this is his argument in the fifth book of the Republic, it is not about whether you're a man or a woman, but it is about your intellectual abilities. And the ultimate would be an example of that. And so, I think this is very valuable in terms of the historicity, I guess, the interesting question that I have, I agree that it might not necessarily be possible or, or even important to, so that the ultimate was existing figure, rather than fictional or at least a fictionalized figure. But I guess an interesting question would be, what is Plato and Plato's audience puzzled about when reading the symposium? Is it the fact that it's a woman talking, coming up with his with the core metaphysical T theory in Plato's metaphysics? Is it the fact that it's a woman teaching Socrates? Or is it more about what she's saying? Because if the challenge doesn't seem to be these arguments are from a woman, perhaps, that's, that was not I mean, perhaps that was not as puzzling integrity, perhaps the fact that Socrates had a female teacher and especially, again, a pretest and a post test. Maybe that's enough to show that this was not an old character for Plato to introduce. So, in answer to your question, On the one hand, I'm not. I don't I don't think that whether or not you have the ultimate was real is the key issue here. I think the on the one hand, the question is, what is she teaching is? Does her gender have an impact or not in the argument? On the other hand, the question is, was it very puzzling to have a woman writing I mean, many operators' characters are existing figures. And perhaps, again, the fact that is a woman philosopher is not the challenge is not the puzzle. And so that might tell us something about rather than about whether the world women, women doing philosophy in antiquity, more about I mean, two things are certain. I think the fact that we have a woman voicing these arguments may still reveal something about the way women were engaging in philosophical activity. First of all, some of the influence of Plato could have been the Pythagoras and women themselves. That could and again, as I said, the Artemis is a priestess is a professor. So that might that is important to highlight. Third, we know that there might been women in Plato's Academy. This is more doxographical. So yes, I mean, I don't think he's as absurd to think of a woman coming up with philosophical argument not even in Plato, but maybe.

26:17

Thank you. So, as we're drawing a conclusion, I think of our very interesting conversation. I think one last question, maybe, perhaps to your students who would like to engage with this kind of topic in the future? What kind of sources do you have to deal with when you're researching ancient women? Philosophers?

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Yes. So, we have, I would say, so the good news is that in terms of secondary sources, much more has been written recently about women philosophers in antiquity. And even though most of the scholarship available at the moment focuses on their lives through sort of names, dates, and places, women philosophers, there is secondary to what we can include in our curriculum. Mary Ellen wait has an encyclopedia history of women philosophers that was published in the 80s. But then again, more has been written more recently more focused on Greek antiquity. And in terms of primary. So, I guess the biggest issue there is whether or not we have text as we have these two groups of thinkers. On the one hand, we have women to whom texts are ascribed, such as the typography and women that are very good additions that were published recently of these texts, by Sarah Pomeroy and especially Toronto, Dutch very recently. And again, the challenge there is the authorship question. So of course, it's tricky to present them as incontestably written by women, but we have text, which is quite, which is great, because that's the only example from Ricans equity. And then we have a group of women that are mentioned in our sources, but from whom we have no evidence. And I still think that these raise interesting questions for students to engage with. So, for example, we have several biographies of women doing philosophy, such as a park, in cynicism. So, can we find any philosophically valuable information from a biography from the way a philosopher lived? But we have other questions, it could be about the fact that most of what we have about women philosophers is written by men, does that have any impact on so if our aim is to recover the thought of women philosopher, does that have an impact on does the fact that the that the evidence comes from a male offer? Could we use it? How do we use it and so on? And then moving sort of beyond Greece? For example, in the case of vans out that I was mentioning earlier, the challenge there is that again, we do have text in that case, but the text has not as never been interpreted as philosophical. So, what makes the text philosophical? Do we need to look for arguments? Do we need to look for philosophical questions? And how can we draw philosophical current content from an apparently methodological text? So, I think, I guess the good news for both teachers and students are that all these examples of women philosophers that we have in our edited volume, they may not be, you might not have the pretty texts that are easy to read with your students. But on the other hand, they do really raise very interesting methodological questions applying to the history of philosophy specifically when it comes to what I work on. But I assume even more broadly, that invites you to rethink about how you approach a text. How do you read it? How do you evaluate your evidence, and that's a skill that is useful, whatever subject you're interested in.

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Thank you. Thank you so much Caterina for this very insightful and fascinating conversation on ancient women philosophers. And thank you for listening to this episode of ancient world new voices, so you can drop as usual, you can drop your comments in the feedback form on the podcast webpage, and we look forward to welcoming you back for the next episode in a month's time. You can find more information about this podcast guest speakers host material on UCLA, Department of Greek and Latin word site at www.ucl.ac.uk Classics ancient world New Voices Podcast and this podcast was brought to you by Mateen Ahrgandhapoor , Giovanna Di Martino and Sofiia Bongiovanni and Mélissa Pires Da Silva. Thank you again for listening