

Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Pythagorean Women. Their History and Writings*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2013, pp. XXII-172, ISBN 13: 978-1-4214-0956-6

Whatever may have been the nature of the ancient Pythagorean fellowship, it seems certain that women played a prominent role in it. Pythagoreanism seems to have offered an "attractive way of life for women" (p.12). Pomeroy's book represents the first comprehensive study on this subject, and its professed aim is to fill a gap in the field. The importance of women is well attested by the ancient tradition, as well as by the existence of writings bearing the name of Pythagorean women, whose origin and dating are very uncertain. P. consequently distinguishes between Pythagorean women who were contemporaries of the founder of the school – including his wife Theano – and who are believed to have composed some writings, and their female heirs, who shared "the same philosophical views and sometimes the same names" (p.XIX). The latter group – a very heterogeneous one, even linguistically – is attested by letters, aphorisms and brief treatises, some of which written in Doric. These texts have all been usefully translated and commented upon in the second part of the book (pp. 54-116). The topics they discuss are mainly related to female virtue and the proper marital conduct for women: they recommend chastity, temperance and obedience to one's husband. The letters also contain practical instructions and woman-to-woman advice on such topics as hiring a wet nurse or how to treat slaves; but more philosophical themes such as wisdom (Perictione), the theory of numbers and the immortality of the soul (Theano) are dealt with as well. Following H. Thesleff's suggestion (*An Introduction to the Pythagorean Writings of the Hellenistic Period*, Åbo 1961), P. dates these writings to the Hellenistic period (4th-2nd cent. BC); she also accepts the distinction between writings composed in the west and ones from the east. P.'s approach thus runs counter to the main trend among scholars over the last fifty years, who have proposed a much later date for most *pseudopythagorica*, usually between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. Städele's detailed study of the letters (*Die Briefe des Pythagoras und der Pythagoreer*, Meisenheim am Glan 1980), for instance, dates the majority of them to the 1st/2nd century AD – some even in the 5th century. The main argument adduced by P. in this regard is that Thesleff "is the only scholar who demonstrably read all the texts by both women and men", and that therefore his proposals "should take precedence" (p.43). It would certainly be a serious fault on scholars' part to have ignored these texts, since reading them does not require a great effort; but perhaps P. is here too uncharitable towards some of her male colleagues (besides Städele, see the many references to Perictione, Phytis and Aesara-Aresas in P. Moraux, *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen 2*, Berlin 1984) and in my own edition of the *Pseudopythagorica ethica* (Naples 1990), p. 288-9, *pace* Pomeroy, p.152 n. 19). P. does not advance any specific arguments against the later dating proposed by the majority of scholars after Thesleff's edition. Sometimes she endeavours to confirm an Hellenistic dating by reference to the social-historical context. For instance, Phytis' rejection of governance by women might be seen as a reference to Hellenistic queens; her rejection of luxury, as a reference to the excesses of Hellenistic cosmopoleis. Such vague and generic hints, however, are compatible with very different dates. If these texts are mainly scholastic imitations – and P. would disagree – any conclusion drawn about an author's character and cultural background rests on shaky ground. For instance, it is difficult to believe that the use of the example "in Tarentum" for the (Aristotelian)

category of "where" by ps. Archytas (dated to the 3rd century BC by Thesleff, but demonstrably later than Andronicus) indicates that the writing was in fact composed in Tarentum; it is rather a device employed to support the idea of Archytas' authorship. Sometimes P. recognizes that we are dealing with imitations (p. 110, *Periktione* 2). Elsewhere (p.59) she rightly remarks that the penning of letters (e.g. of exhortation) was formally taught in Hellenistic schools. So, framing the *pseudopythagorica* in a historical-geographical context remains a desperate enterprise, as is shown by wide range of suggestions which scholars have made regarding their possible provenance (Rome, Alexandria, or southern Italy). The very existence of Pythagorean communities in the Hellenistic age is debatable, as is the idea that the interest in Pythagoreanism in this period may have been more than just an antiquarian literary pursuit. More generally, once it is conceded that these texts are spurious, their attribution to women cannot be taken for granted. Their bearing the name of women does not imply that they were actually composed by women (any more than the fact that many *pseudopythagorica* bear the name of Archytas implies that the historical Archytas is their author). Why, then, should one exclude the possibility that texts attributed to male authors (e.g. "the male author of Charondas", p.58) may have been composed by women, once the existence of women-philosophers in this age has been ascertained? P. brings forward some arguments for female authorship which are mainly grounded on the sympathetic attitude to women that can be detected in some writings. According to P., the authors are very sensitive to women's problems: they "consistently employ a woman's perspective, examining the matter from a female viewpoint" (p.60). One example is the special attention paid to wives' response to unfaithful husbands. What we make of this is largely subjective. In my view, the general attitude towards women expressed in these writings suggests that their authors were men who sought to persuade women to accept their subordinate position. P. holds instead that the view expressed is a female one and that we could hardly expect anything more radical from such a staunchly patriarchal society. Personally, I still find Wilhelm's (*Die Oeconomica der Neupythagoreer Bryson, Kallikratidas, Periktione, Phintys*, "Rhein. Mus.", LXX (1915), p. 161-223, cf. p. 186) old argument more convincing: that the female endorsement of submissive conduct for women was intended to ensure a more peaceful acceptance of their subordinate position by the reader.

P. sees continuity between the doctrines of ancient Pythagoreanism and those endorsed in these later writings. Unfortunately, the reconstruction of the doctrines that can be safely attributed to ancient Pythagoreanism is extremely controversial, and it is not clear what image of Pythagoras and ancient Pythagoreanism P. is relying upon. Nowhere does she seem to question the information we have about the ancient tradition, which is frequently ambiguous and contradictory. By reading this book, an inexperienced reader may remain perfectly unaware of the difficulty of providing a reliable reconstruction of the original Pythagorean way of life. Those doctrines that supposedly represent continuity in Pythagorean thought essentially amount to general prescriptions for urban living (e.g. rules on conjugal intercourse, sexual monogamy, bonds of friendship, caring for one's parents, and forgoing luxury). Sometimes these are merely projections of doctrines developed much later, and there is a concrete risk of circularity; on the other hand, the ethical doctrines of the more specific Pythagorean *akousmata* are hardly detectable in these writings.

P.'s concern with a reappraisal of female figures sometimes leads to ingenuous results, such as the identification of the author of the treatise "On the Harmonious Woman", bearing the name of Perictione, with Plato's mother (not so H. Thesleff, *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period*, Åbo 1965, 142, who only remarks, *pace* Pomeroy, p.70, that Perictione was the name of Plato's mother). The treatise presupposes the Platonic division of the soul, and the distinction between *thymos* and *epithymia* is here approached as an established doctrine (unless one ventures to assert that Plato inherited it from his mother), along with the canon of cardinal virtues. Moreover, the treatise is written in Ionic. Among archaic Pythagorean women P. includes Pythais, Pythagoras' mother, giving credence to Hermippus' account (Diog. Laert. VIII 41) about Pythagoras' descent into Hades, which is clearly parodistic (Pythagoras disappears for several years in a cellar in his house; his mother keeps him updated on the latest events; the philosopher finally shows up again, claiming to have been to Hades). As W. Burkert (*Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, Cambridge Mass. 1972, p. 158-9) has argued, the mention of Pythagoras' mother is to be connected to the tradition of a chthonic cult of Demeter, the divine mother, in which Pythagoras possibly played the role of a hierophant. A "Pythagorean" corpus could hardly lack some writings by the most renowned Pythagorean women. A name such as that of Theano, Pythagoras' wife, served to confer the imprimatur of authority. Too much credit is given by P. to Diogenes Laertius' claim that Theano wrote some works (*syggramma tina*). What comes into play here is the much debated question, whether Pythagoras left any written works. Since Diogenes himself reports that Philolaos was the first to edit Pythagorean treatises, P. is forced to conclude that Theano's texts were never published. This is an easy solution, which allows one to explain the absence of any reference in the sources to the content of the alleged writings. Unfortunately, the very existence of Theanos' writings is unattested prior to the apocrypha themselves. So, it seems safe to accept the generally shared view that the legend of Theano is a later fabrication, intended to prove the authenticity of apocryphal writings. Even the tradition concerning Pythagoras' family seems to be a legend strictly tied to the production of pseudepigrapha, the aim being to explain why his writings had suddenly cropped up again after such a long time (cf. in Lysis' letter, Hercher *EG* 601-3, the role of Damô, a supposed daughter of Pythagoras, in transmission of allegedly Pythagorean *hypomnemata*).

P.'s book has the merit of drawing attention to the need for a detailed and wide-ranging study on the writings attributed to Pythagorean women, in order to gain a comprehensive view of the phenomenon of Pythagoreanism. The process has been initiated, and some progress can be observed, yet a great deal remains to be done.

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