

Edward J. Watts, *Hypatia: the Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 205; 9 illustrations. ISBN: 9780190210038. \$29.95.

The OUP series *Women in Antiquity*, which Watts' book is a part of, aims to provide "compact and accessible introductions" to the life and times its various individual subjects. Watts has accomplished this aim well with his new book. In it, he goes beyond introduction and presents us with a bold new account of this indeed remarkable woman and her achievements. The chief claim of the book is this: we not only do Hypatia (ca. 355–415) a disservice, but more importantly we impoverish our understanding of the late antique world, if we focus on her death at the expense of her life.

For much of *Hypatia: the life and legend of an Ancient Philosopher*, Watts is offering an up to date synthesis, drawing on a wide array of primary sources and recent scholarship. This he does with insight and clarity. But by contextualizing her intellectual and political choices, he puts forth an unprecedentedly strong case that Hypatia represented a publicly engaged and religiously conciliatory style of philosophy which she crafted to serve her unique historical moment (Ch. 1–7). He also supplies one of the most nuanced and compelling narratives to date of her death and the events which led to it (Ch. 8), as well as a new synthesis and interpretation of the way her historical memory became consolidated (Ch. 9–10). The book is at all times very readable, and filled with perceptive characterizations of late antique society and politics.

Watts builds his argument from the ground up, starting with a vivid picture of late antique Alexandria's material and social environment (Chapter 1). This includes the living conditions and education level of the working classes (meager), famous public cultural institutions such as the Serapeum and the Museion, and even the Ptolemaic Library which was long gone by Hypatia's day. This is important background for two central features of Watts' argument. First, the dynamics of ecclesio-political conflicts in late Roman Alexandria (there were many) were heavily interwoven with mass sentiment and crowd behavior (this becomes clear in Chapter 8). Secondly, the fact that Theon, Hypatia's father, was a member of the Museion (amounting to a public stipend of some kind for intellectual work) helps Watts make sense of her close relationship with the Alexandrian civic elite.

Theon plays an important role in Chapter 2, in the account of Hypatia's childhood and education, which includes many inferences drawn from what we know more generally about the education of Roman women. This chapter combines with the following one, on Hypatia's school, to present us with the curricular framework to what might be described as the Hypatian style of Neoplatonic philosophy. In the time of Theon, Alexandrian philosophy had been dominated by math professors like Pappus (d. circa 350), who had not been interested in the mystical and eventually theurgic Neopythagoreanism associated then with Iamblichus. Theon did well in this environ-

ment, and Hypatia proved her credentials to Alexandrian intellectual society by editing mathematical texts under his supervision, including (probably) significant portions of Ptolemy's *Almagest*. She continued to devote significant teaching energy to astronomy and geometry, but in her own career she shifted against the prevailing orthodoxy by assigning primacy, over mathematics, to a more ethical and contemplative philosophical system originating with Plotinus and Porphyry. Evidence from many sources, especially the works of her best known student, Synesius of Cyrene, strongly indicate that Hypatia offered training in a philosophy which eschewed theurgy and participation in polytheistic cult, and in other ways made a very decided effort to accommodate the concerns of Christian students (and probably their parents).

In Chapters 4–6, Watts explains how this curricular plan fit into a bigger story. Emperors after Julian (d. 363) briefly took a more accommodating stance toward paganism. This fueled enough optimism for cooperation that Hypatia's school with its metaphysically cosmopolitan tone attracted a substantial student body that was – and this is key – representative of the religiously diverse civic and regional elite, and thus had a tendency to support the stable status quo. Theodosius' anti-pagan laws, as well as the destruction of the Serapeum in the government crackdown on a pagan riot led by the philosopher Olympus, made the Iamblichian Platonism that the disruptive Olympus championed unpalatable. This eliminated what would otherwise likely have been a source of educational competition, especially since Iamblichianism was on the rise in rival Athens at the time. Hypatia built skillfully in her niche and assembled a significant network of patronage and influence. This, combined with her reputation for wisdom and virtue, made her a desirable person for elites in the city to associate with – her contacts included imperial governors and major ecclesiastics. Hypatia thus emerged as a figurehead of a balance of civic powers that for the most part resulted in peace and mutual tolerance, within certain parameters, for a huge and often volatile city.

This view of Hypatia is exciting, both because it figures her as a very active agent in late Roman political affairs and because it paints its robust portrait with careful attention to the sources. One example of this relates to her much discussed virginity and the anecdote about her rebuffing a student with a menstrual napkin, from Damascius. These choices of hers drew much comment from her male contemporaries, but Watts suggests that these accounts might originate in a public image management strategy which she somehow fostered herself (p. 75). As he shows (p. 41), Hypatia probably read the *Life of Plotinus* and other philosophical biographies with her students, and she must have been sensitive to how public opinion would judge her according to current paradigms for philosophical behavior.

I found Chapter 7, "Hypatia's Sisters," in which Watts contrasts other near-contemporary female philosophers, to be one of the most fascinating and original. Pandrosion, known to us only from Pappus' criticisms of her, taught some similar material but did not manage to establish herself as the city's leading mathematician like Hypatia. Sosipatra and Asclepigeneia taught male students high philosophy, but

only selectively, through private lessons, and did not enjoy major civic influence. Maximus of Ephesus' anonymous wife, a philosopher like her flamboyant husband, bore herself well in the public eye, but Hypatia eventually established her notoriety in a way that did not depend directly on a single man, and she was much more involved in affairs. Thus Watts brings out Hypatia's uniqueness; but each of these characters which he at times vividly sketches are themselves worthwhile lessons in the gender dynamics of late antique intellectual life.

The account of Hypatia's death (Chapter 8) is engaging and balanced, and stands out for its detailed analysis of the main actors in the dispute, their motives, and the interest groups they were connected with. For instance, Watts makes use of the fact that March was a period of high unemployment, and destitute seasonal workers were likely to look to the bishop Cyril or his agents for assistance. Such dependents are the sort of people who could thicken a coherent gang into an indiscriminate angry mob. Peter the Lector, named by our sources as the mob's leader, likely did not set out with the intention of murdering Hypatia – mobs were usually more profitable to their instigators when they intimidated with threats of violence rather than actually killing. But because Hypatia had helped the governor Orestes forge an anti-Cyril alliance with prominent city council members, she was a meaningful target – i.e., probably more than just an innocent scapegoat. Though Cyril can hardly have intended her murder, he nonetheless deserves blame for calling in from the desert a force of “ascetics” (etc.?) whom he could not reliably control.

Hypatia's death meant different things to different people; Watts contextualizes major late antique sources to identify the various agendas into which they co-opted her memory (Ch.9). There were strong but short-lived governmental reactions against Cyril (imperial legislation). The general opprobrium resulting of from the incident did not ultimately stop Cyril from consolidating power in Alexandria, though it became part of a larger narrative criticizing his other policies, including his anti-Novatian stance (Socrates). Though some have interpreted Damascius' treatment as hostile, Watts sees much admiration – Damascius must anyway magnify Hypatia in order to achieve his history's purpose of magnifying Isidore. But even for the sympathetic Damascius Hypatia is most significant for (besides her gender) her death – she is a turning point, perhaps a cautionary tale, symbolizing how Christians have chased anything he would consider philosophy out of the public sphere. We know of no pagan philosophers after Hypatia who achieved a comparable level of sustained social prominence as she did, and Watts links this with the fact that they chose a more uncompromising Iamblichanism over Hypatia's approach. Her death can thus be understood as marking a shift not so much in society's attitude toward philosophers as (some) philosophers' attitude towards society. An interesting account of Hypatia from the early modern period up through the film *Agora* follows (Ch.10). There is every reason to suppose mythmaking and appropriation will continue, given Hypatia's continued contemporary notoriety, or at least name recognition – kept fresh, for instance, by the recent controversy when the eponymous feminist philosophy journal published an article on

transracialism and transgenderism, an event which transpired shortly after this volume's publication.

One point on which this admirable book could have been strengthened, in my view, is under the heading of late antique rhetoric, its role in society and its place in Hypatia's school. Watts does include some important references on this question, but expresses diffidence at several points about whether Hypatia had much of a rhetorical education or emphasized the discipline in her own curriculum (e.g. p. 27; 150). But if other sources are silent on Hypatia's rhetoric, Synesius is loud. Watts already makes excellent and nuanced use of his works – especially the letters – for the curricular content and institutional tone of her philosophy (Chapters 3, 5, and 6). Yet even in his most “philosophical” passages, Synesius draws heavily on the classical and post-classical rhetorical tradition (see e.g. Russell's contributions in Russell, Nesselrath (eds.), (2014) *Dreams and Human Imagination. Synesius, De insomniis: Introduction, Text, Translation and Interpretative Essays*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck). His treatise *Dio*, sent first to her with an accompanying letter (discussed in Watts, pp. 70–71), is a carefully qualified argument for the importance of rhetoric to philosophy, criticizing opponents he and his teacher shared. Rhetoric, i.e., the practical deployment of *paideia*, was of central importance in late antique public life, and in my view Hypatia, especially as Watts portrays her, would have devoted more attention to it than he has suggested. Considering “Hypatian philosophical rhetoric” might shed light on other aspects of her career: if her intellectual praxis was a timely revival of third century philosophizing, might she have been like earlier imperial intellectuals in other ways? Synesius, at least, was more at home emulating Plutarch, Dio, and Philostratus than Plotinus or Porphyry.

Hypatia is frequently referred to as a “Public Intellectual” in the book (e.g. the title of Chapter 6). Watts is fully aware of the differences between modern public intellectuals and their possible ancient equivalents. But I found myself, in the wake of recent work such as Kimberly Bowes' *Private Worship, Public Values* (2008), wanting more explicit discussion of how differently from us the ancients thought and spoke about the private vs. public distinction, and how this related to philosophical practice in Hypatia's day. For instance, Hypatia's public career depended on her importance as a joint in the structures of (elite) civic power, in a way publicly prominent academics today might be more hesitant to acknowledge of themselves.

But perhaps such a methodological excursus would have distracted from the aims of this book, and would best be saved for a discussion with students or friends who have read it. One of *Hypatia's* merits is that it is at the same time thought provoking for specialists and would make great reading for more general interest audiences, or on undergraduate syllabi. It should also be included among important bibliography for scholars working in the fields of ancient education, the status of women in late antiquity, late Roman civic life, and philosophy as an institution in the empire. The real Hypatia, herself a contributor to all these fields, has been well served.

ALEX PETKAS
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY