Introduction
The Value of Women Philosophers for the History of Philosophy[*]

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Including Women in the Picture

Thales of Miletus is commonly taken to be the first philosopher to write in Greek: Aristotle, for example, introduces him as the first ancient thinker to dedicate himself to natural philosophy (*Met.* 983b18).[1] Rarely is it acknowledged that Thales was a close acquaintance of Cleobulina, herself a philosopher, known for authoring riddles.[2] Cleobulina is one of the figures who prompted us to work on this volume: ancient female thinkers whose breakthroughs and contributions have long been left out of the history of philosophy.

Our sources suggest that in antiquity there were women engaging in philosophical activity alongside men. However, with the only – and very contested – exceptions of the Pythagorean women from the first century BCE and the Confucian writer Ban Zhao in the second century CE, almost no direct evidence and no writings by these thinkers have survived. We are left with a list of names and sparse information about these women's lives and intellectual activities, all of which has been written by men. As a result, the ideas of female ancient philosophers remain unrecorded and untaught.

This book is about ancient women philosophers, their ideas and contributions to the history of philosophy, and the methods we use to retrieve and re-evaluate them. In what follows, we outline the objectives and key questions of the volume. We devote a substantial section to the specific challenges in the study of ancient women philosophers, with special focus on source issues. We also discuss the methods our contributors have

[*] Our title is an homage to Antognazza (2015). We dedicate this chapter to her memory.
[1] See Cantor (2022) for an important troubling of the assumption that the Ancient Greeks shared this view.
[2] D.L. 1.22. Diogenes writes that Cleobulina was given an education (1.91). Plutarch lists her among the most prominent women thinkers of antiquity (*Mor.* 145e – see also Clem. *Strom.* 4.19.122–23) and writes that Thales admired her wisdom (*Mor.* 148d). For recent work on Cleobulina's riddles, see Plant (2004: 29–32), Hueso (chapter 3) and Potamiti (chapter 4) in Chouinard et al. (2021: 31–60).

adopted to face the challenges and approach these thinkers philosophically. We argue that the study of ancient women philosophers has a special value for our understanding of the history of philosophy. While at first a daunting enterprise, work on this unique set of thinkers and the available evidence both enriches our insight into the methodology of the history of philosophy and re-introduces philosophical contributions that would otherwise be lost.

This Book: Rationale, Scope, and Objectives

We start by asking three questions to problematise the very title of this volume. The book is about a broad range of thinkers, who lived at different times and in different places, and discussed a wide variety of topics. They share three features: they are women, philosophers, from antiquity. Each of these features, however, raises further questions.

The first question is whether it matters that these thinkers are women and, if so, why. Should we be interested in these figures *insofar as they are women*? Do we ever think of Plato and Aristotle as *men* doing philosophy? Our answer is yes, it matters, to some extent. Our aim is not to argue that in ancient philosophy we come across female-specific ways of thinking, sets of issues, or approaches and solutions to puzzles. This book makes no essentialist claims about women's ways of reasoning and doing philosophy. On the one hand, then, the answer to the question of whether it matters that these philosophers are women is no. While some women philosophers, such as the authors of the Pythagorean letters and Ban Zhao, write about topics traditionally associated with the female gender, such as motherhood and married life, this book shows that ancient female thinkers discussed a much wider range of questions, from home economics to rhetoric; from ethical theories about pleasure, the self, and renunciation to theoretical doctrines about the structure of the cosmos and the knowledge of first principles; and from gynaecology to the fate of the soul at death.

There is, however, at least one reason why it *does*, and should, matter that these thinkers are women. One of the aims of this volume is 'reparatory': we redress a historical wrong and reclaim a place in the history of philosophy and the philosophical canon for those thinkers who have not received enough academic attention. The reasons for this exclusion range from the lack of primary sources to the fragmentary and dubious nature of the available evidence. Yet we suspect that at least part of the reason why

women thinkers have been overlooked is because they were women. For example, insofar as in their own time women had a less direct access to philosophical practice or because some of them discussed female-coded topics, which modern scholars did not consider worthy of philosophical investigation. Since these figures were partly disregarded *because they were women*, it is partly *as women* that we now propose to reintroduce them in the scholarship.

That said, we are primarily interested in these female intellectuals *insofar as they are philosophers* and had philosophical ideas. This leads us to our second, more challenging, question: what does it mean for a woman, or for any ancient thinker, to be a philosopher?

Scholars have proposed various criteria to decide which ancient female intellectuals should be classified as philosophers: women are called philosophers (i) when they are referred to as such in the sources,[3] (ii) when they author philosophical texts,[4] (iii) when they live with and study under other (male) philosophers,[5] and (iv) when they have philosophical ideas.[6] For the purpose of this book, we are interested in *philosophical ideas*. Specifically, we focus on women philosophers either insofar as they contribute original arguments to ancient philosophical debates or because the study of these thinkers offers new perspectives to the understanding of our philosophical history. As detailed in the next section, most of the existing studies on women philosophers focus on their lives. In a sense, therefore, our volume aims to give a philosophical, rather than historical and biographical account of these figures and their intellectual contributions.[7]

[3] This criterion is discussed by Waithe (2015). For a recent overview of the criteria for women philosophers, See Bonelli (chapter 1) and O'Reilly (chapter 2) in Chouinard et al. (2021: 3–30).

[4] This criterion is especially strict, for male thinkers such as Pythagoras and Socrates are commonly referred to as philosophers and nonetheless did not leave any written works. The criterion is used by Waithe (1987b), who lists sixty-five women philosophers from Greece and Rome, and Snyder (1989), who lists only eight women writers.

[5] The first to divide women by philosophical schools is Gilles Ménage in his *Historia Mulierum Philosopharum* (1894).

[6] For a more inclusive list of criteria, see Warren (2009: 4). For a discussion of the issues each criterion raises, see Pellò in Bonelli (2020: 55–78).

[7] It should be noted that these approaches are not always at odds with each other, for certain traditions conceive of philosophy as a way of living. On how the historical milieu in which a philosopher lived sheds light on their arguments, see Hutton (2019). This is discussed further in the 'Biographical Focus' section. We also want to clarify that we do not view these other approaches as less valuable. While our focus is recovery of the philosophical ideas and novel contributions of women philosophers, we recognise that the importance of their place in the history of philosophy extends well beyond ideas and their novelty.

Finally, one may ask, which period counts as *ancient* in the history of philosophy?

Another limit of the existing literature on *ancient* women philosophers is that it is focused on *ancient Greek and Roman* women. As such, current scholarship risks promoting the narrative according to which philosophy was first invented by the Greeks in the sixth century BCE with thinkers like Thales. This raises several difficulties: first, there is evidence that philosophy was not an exclusively Greek phenomenon and that the Greeks themselves acknowledged the influence of other philosophical traditions.[8] Second, in the case of female thinkers, the argument that philosophy was invented by the Greeks seems less relevant, as most of these figures are not described as philosophers in the sources.[9] Third, it is unclear how one might draw boundaries between what counted as Greek or Western in antiquity and what did not, especially when we consider figures such as Hypatia of Alexandria, who lived in Egypt but wrote in Greek. Not all studies are as Eurocentric: Buxton and Whiting's recent book *Philosopher Queens* (2020) includes women thinkers like Ban Zhao and Lalla, and Waithe and Boos Dykeman are currently working on a volume on women philosophers outside the Greek, Roman, and Judaeo-Christian tradition. Finally, more work on non-Western women thinkers has been done by scholars of Indian and Chinese philosophy, but this work has been largely ignored in Hellenic studies.[10] By bringing women philosophers from the ancient philosophical traditions in India and China into dialogue with those of ancient Greece and Rome, our book aims to contribute to the ongoing work of decentring ancient philosophy.

As a result, the volume comprises women from various philosophical traditions. Different traditions, however, have different periodisation and different ways to date antiquity. We cover women who count as 'ancient' within their culture and consistent with the categories operative within those traditions. For example, ancient Greek and Roman philosophy is dated approximately between the Archaic Age in the sixth century BCE and the spread of Christianity in the fifth century CE. Yet Indian philosophy

[8] On the Eastern influence on Greek philosophy, see, for example, West (1971); Burkert (1992); and Whitmarsh and Thomson (2013). Challenging the Western philosophy narrative and the belief in the Greek invention of philosophy are Lloyd (2005); Park (2013); and Allais (2016), as well as a forthcoming volume by Lea Cantor and Josh Platzky Miller.

[9] It is not entirely irrelevant, of course, since Ancient Greeks had a concept of 'philosophy', and female thinkers were understood to occupy a position relative to this. But the disciplinary lines are blurred, in ways we discuss in the 'Job Title and Genre' section.

[10] On women in ancient Indian philosophy, see, for example, Brodbeck and Black (2007). For Confucianism, see Mann and Cheng (2001) and Lui et al. (2013).

begins around the eighth century BCE with the composition of some of the earliest philosophical texts from antiquity – namely, the Upanishads – and Chinese philosophy extends into the fifth century CE.[11]

Status Quaestionis: Previous Scholarship from Ménage to the Philosopher Queens

The attempt to include women thinkers in the history of philosophy is not unprecedented. In recent years, the scholarship on women philosophers has been expanding and attracting growing academic attention. The initial trend has been to recount the lives of women philosophers – to *name*, *date*, and *place* ancient female thinkers. This was an essential first step, which laid the foundations for current work on women philosophers and enabled researchers to go beyond biography and engage with these thinkers' philosophical ideas. We should then start by recognising our debt of gratitude to those scholars who first raised the questions of what role women played in the history of philosophy and why their voices had mostly been silenced, and by so doing, put ancient women philosophers on the academic agenda.

In Europe, modern engagement with ancient women philosophers starts in 1690s France with the publication of *Historia Mulierum Philosopharum* by Ménage. After reading Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Ménage compiled his own philosophical history focused on women philosophers to challenge the assumption that there had been none up to the early modern period. The result is a list of sixty-five names, divided by schools: Platonists, Academics, Cyrenaics, Cynics, Peripatetics, Stoics, and Pythagoreans. The focus is exclusively on women philosophers from Greece and Rome.

Recent scholarship on ancient women philosophers can be grouped according to two trends: scholars interested in what philosophers said about women and scholars who focus on ancient women who were themselves philosophers, but who primarily give biographical accounts of these thinkers.

More attention has been given to ancient philosophical theories *about*, rather than *by*, women, and concerning gender, family life, and the female role in society: notable examples are Tuana's *Feminist Interpretations of Plato* (1994), Freeland's *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle* (1998), Pang-White's *Handbook of Chinese Philosophy and Gender* (2016), and Howard's

[11] For a timeline of ancient Indian and Chinese philosophy, see Harrison (2012: Appendix 1).

Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender (2019).[12] The advantage of these studies is showing that ancient thinkers considered women and other topics traditionally linked to the female gender, such as home economics, to be philosophically valuable. Yet this approach leaves the canon itself unaltered. Our aim is to include women philosophers in the philosophical canon *alongside* Plato, Aristotle, Buddha, and Confucius.

In 1987, Waithe published her *History of Women Philosophers*. The first volume of this anthology, *Ancient Women Philosophers 600 BC–500 AD*, focuses on Greek and Roman philosophers. Waithe's approach is optimistic and charitable. Despite the several and challenging source issues we discuss in the next section, she argues that the available evidence shows that through history there have always been women doing philosophy. After Waithe's epoch-making anthology, scholars turned their attention to women philosophers. Further examples are Kersey's *Women Philosophers* (1989) and Warren's *Unconventional History of Western Philosophy* (2009).[13] The former is a biographical dictionary of women thinkers. The latter puts women philosophers in conversation with better-known male philosophers by comparing their theories and arguments. Both strategies succeed in including women in the existing canon. Yet they risk conveying the idea that either we cannot engage with these women's ideas or that women are philosophically interesting only when in dialogue with men. Our aim is to show that women are philosophers *in their own right*.

Subsequent to Ménage and Waithe, only a few article-length works engaged with the ideas of ancient Greek and Roman women: for example, Wider's 'Women Philosophers in the Ancient World' (1986), Hawley's 'The Problem of Women Philosophers in Greece' (1994), and Deslauriers' 'Women, Education, and Philosophy' (2012). More work has been done on Indian and Chinese women philosophers, both historical and fictionalised, such as Blackstone's *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha* (1998), Wang's *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture* (2003), and Lindquist's 'Gender at Janaka's Court' (2008). Recent and forthcoming publications include studies of female thinkers throughout the history of philosophy, such as *Philosopher Queens* by Buxton and Whiting (2020), *Women's Perspectives on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* by Chouinard et al. (2021), and a forthcoming book on teaching women philosophers by Hagengruber and Hutton. Others look at women both as authors and as

[12] On Plato, see also Blair (2012). On Aristotle, see Connell (2016) and Trott (2019). For feminist interpretations of ancient philosophy, see Bar On (1994); Ward (1996).
[13] See also Acker (2002).

subjects of philosophical investigations: for example, *Filosofe, Maestre e Imperatrici* by Bonelli (2020), and the new *Routledge Handbook on Women and Ancient Philosophy* by Brill and McKeen (forthcoming).

Our book complements and builds upon these works. The original contribution we hope to make to the ongoing conversation about ancient women philosophers is threefold. First, we introduce new figures to the academic discourse, such as the Cyrenaic Arete and the Pythagorean Perictione. Second, and related, we do not restrict antiquity to Graeco-Roman philosophy. Rather, we include chapters about the ancient Indian, Chinese, and Arabic philosophical traditions. Third, and most importantly, we pay special attention to these women's philosophical achievements, their novel arguments and, where extant, their writings. As argued in the next section, this enquiry takes different shapes in different schools and different stages of the history of philosophy, and ranges from close argument analyses of philosophical texts to studies of ancient philosophical communities that include women, as well as philosophical readings of ancient biographies, medical treatises, novels, and poems.

This leads us to our final remark: while this book aims at including a wide variety of figures, ideas, themes, and scholarly approaches, it is not exhaustive. The panorama of female intellectuals in antiquity is much wider, and there are more figures, traditions, and methodologies one could discuss. Our hope is that the chapters in this volume will encourage new scholarship in the field of ancient women thinkers, globally.

Challenges and Approaches

In this section, we discuss the methodological challenges we face when we attempt to learn more about the philosophical ideas of ancient women. These can be divided into two groupings: those that impact the recovery of women's ideas *where we have texts written by women,* and those that impact the recovery *where we have no texts*. We include women covered in the chapters of this volume, as well as some others (Figure 1).

We include in each discussion a defence of the approaches our contributors have taken to make use of the sources notwithstanding these issues. Looking across these case studies, we have found that engagement with ancient women philosophers raises questions that have wide-ranging implications for the methodology of the history of philosophy. We begin by describing the general state of the source material.

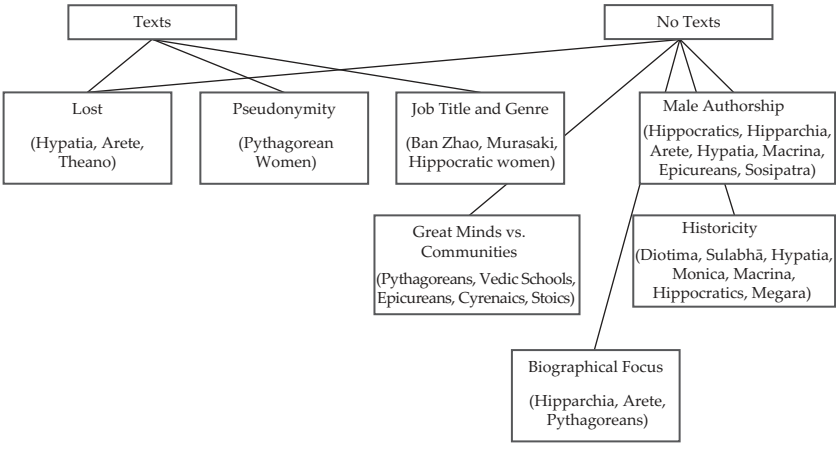

Figure 1 Methodological Challenges

The Source Issue

It is difficult to overstate the challenge we face regarding sources for the philosophical thought of ancient women. After all, in the Greek and Roman philosophical traditions, there is not a single surviving text incontestably ascribed to a woman philosopher. On the face of it, you might think that would, or *should*, sink a project like ours before it even gets started. We want to begin the discussion of challenges and approaches by facing up to the source issue and discuss how it is that there is material for a book on ancient women philosophers at all. We feel it crucial to be frank about the state of the evidence, the significant challenge it poses, and the ways we (and our contributors) have found to engage with the ideas of ancient women notwithstanding these.

There are a few different source categories. Outside of the Greek and Roman traditions, we find a comparatively rich set of sources. However limited, this is one of the many benefits of widening the scope of this volume to the degree that we have. We have direct evidence for Ban Zhao in the Confucian tradition, for instance. Though work on Ban Zhao faces other challenges (e.g., the Job Title section, below), her voluminous writing, across a number of genres, is well preserved.[14]

[14] See Chapter 11. Other examples might include Murasaki Shikibu, a Japanese philosopher and novelist of the (late ancient) Heian period. See Wawrytko (2019).

Some women left writings that are now lost. This includes Hypatia of Alexandria, Arete the Cyrenaic, and possibly Theano the Pythagorean.[15] Others, such as the group known as Pythagorean women, are credited with writing letters and treatises, but their philosophical status, authenticity, and dating is now contested.[16] We will discuss these rich yet challenging texts in the Pseudonymity section.

The bulk of our evidence of ancient women philosophers (e.g., the Hippocratic women, Hipparchia the Cynic, Arete, the Neoplatonists Hypatia and Sosipatra, Macrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa, the Epicurean women) is to be found in works authored by men.[17] These are more often accounts of their lives than their doctrines (e.g., Hipparchia, Arete, Hypatia). In some cases, it includes men's reflections on women's ability to practise philosophy (e.g., in Plato and Aristotle, but also Musonius Rufus in the Stoic tradition).[18] Within the group of women whose evidence is all via male-authored works, there is then a category of fictional or *fictionalised* women – where the latter are representations of historical women philosophers (e.g., the Hippocratic women, Hypatia, Macrina, as well as Augustine's mother Monica) or of those who may have been real (e.g., Diotima, Sulabhā).[19] Finally, there are depictions of fictional women in the works of men that are nonetheless evidence of the role of women in ancient philosophical communities (e.g., Megara in the Stoic tradition).[20]

The situation is complex, and there is a question of how to approach each of these types of evidence. We have found that doing so requires both specificity and generality: each case needs to be researched carefully and considered contextually. At the same time, it is helpful to look up from the specifics to the landscape of ancient women's philosophical engagement and the sources to draw some general methodological conclusions. In the rest of the introduction, we aim to provide some of this latter perspective.

Challenges with Texts

Lost Texts

Bridging our main groupings (Texts and No Texts, Figure 1) is the category of lost texts – that is, instances where we know of the work of

[15] On Arete and Hypatia, see Chapters 5 and 10. There is evidence in the *Suda* that Theano may have written books (*s.v.* Theano [*theta* 83]).
[16] See Chapters 7–8. [17] See Chapters 2, 5–6, 9–10. [18] See Chapters 6 and 12.
[19] See Chapters 1–2, 9.
[20] See Chapter 6. Macrina may also fit under this category, since she is historical, but her philosophical abilities are believed to be fictionalised and to be properly attributed to her brother. For a defence of Macrina's philosophical independence, see Chapter 9.

some ancient woman, usually only by title, but this has been lost. Sources like Diogenes Laertius are full of lists of lost works from male philosophers. Thus, we should perhaps not be surprised that so many works by ancient women failed to survive. Yet, when we look across the oeuvre of ancient women generally, we think it is – and should be – shocking how little direct evidence of their thought is available to us. To dismiss this worry too quickly by pointing out that many works by men are also missing too prevents us from enquiring further into the historical and cultural forces that have resulted in the current loss. We urge scholars not to shy away from this issue. In the chapters of this volume, many of our contributors find interesting ways of dealing with lost texts, including considerations of what information can be gleaned from a title, speculations regarding the content of lost works, and reflections on the reasons why certain works have failed to be preserved. We can also step back and consider the wider question of why so few texts by ancient women have reached us, which is a question worth asking in both research and teaching contexts.

Pseudonymity

The sole texts allegedly by women surviving within the ancient Greek tradition are the Pythagorean texts a collection of ten letters and five treatises ascribed to named Pythagorean women. The dating of these texts is debated, though the prevailing view places them between the first century BCE and the first century CE. These texts have not received the sustained scholarly attention one might expect of the only surviving works by ancient women philosophers in the Western tradition. This is, principally, for two reasons: their content and authorship.

The letters are written by women to other women, and many discuss female-coded topics such as female virtues, the married life of wives, childcare, household management, and the role of women in society. This has led to them being perceived as non-philosophical. In our volume, Twomey makes the case for reading them as philosophical, especially when considered against some of Aristotle's remarks about home economics (Chapter 7). Doing so demands a broadening of what is considered a properly philosophical topic, including re-thinking the philosophical concerns that can emerge in practical ethics in the domestic sphere. We consider this outcome a philosophically provocative one, whose impact goes beyond these specific texts. Furthermore, not all of the texts are concerned with female-coded issues. For instance, Aesara's *On Human Nature* concerns the make-up of the human soul. In Chapter 8, Pellò and De Cesaris discuss Perictione's *On Wisdom*, which concerns metaphysics,