

Proclus and Theodore of Asine on female philosopher-rulers: Patriarchy, metempsychosis, and women in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition

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Feminist interpreters of Plato's works have long noted that what Plato appears to give with one hand in *Republic* v he takes back with the other hand at various points in the dialogues. Superficially, *Republic* 451c-57b looks like an argument that women do not differ from men save insofar as 'the male impregnates while the female bears the young' (454d10-e1). Thus both men and women who possess the relevant natural aptitude should be educated to be philosopher-rulers. But an examination of the details of the argument reveals a position on women that is much more equivocal, for Socrates appears to grant to his interlocuters the premise that women are, on the whole, less competent than men in nearly everything (455e1-2). It is unclear whether this is merely a dialectical concession to the imagined patriarchal interlocuter or some sort of veiled renunciation of the conclusion of the argument itself.¹ Worse, when we turn to *Timaeus* 42b5-c2 we find the view that women exist as a result of male moral failure. It is part of the 'law of fate' that the creator god announces to souls that incarnation as a woman is punishment for a failure to master the intellectual and moral challenge of embodiment in the previous incarnation. It is difficult to see how to reconcile this view with the seemingly more progressive tone of *Republic* v.

One way to do this is to consider carefully the question of whether there really is such a progressive tone in *Republic* v. Some writers have supposed that the female guardians are merely being afforded the opportunity to become men.² More precisely, what Plato really supposed was that some women were so constituted that it was possible that they should acquire the traits characteristic of the Greek masculine gender identity. Women become rulers alongside men only by being or becoming *manly*. Such critics say that this is not merely an accidental fact about Platonism. They charge that Platonism both incorporates and lends legitimacy to social practices of oppression and exploitation. It builds a philosophy around dualisms such as soul/body or transcendent forms/visible nature.³ In

¹ The latter, highly contentious reading is championed by Bloom 2003, 381-389.

² The case is put clearly in Bluestone 1987 and Buchan 1999.

³ Examples are legion here, but I think that Spelman 1982 is one early piece that puts the case for the body/soul dualism most forcefully. For the alignment of women with the realm of visible nature and thus the affinity of anthropocentrism and patriarchy, see Plumwood 1993.

each case, the prior term in the opposition is valued; the latter not. Women, however, are consistently aligned with this second term. Thus, Platonism serves to portray these binary oppositions as correct responses to an objective order of value. Worse, this naturalizing of these oppositions has the effect of helping to perpetuate the relations of oppression and exploitation that inspired them in the first place.

Rather than pursue this charge in the familiar territory of Plato's very own dialogues, I wish instead to look at the reception of Plato's views on sex and gender in the Neoplatonic commentators. We have works from Proclus (410-485 CE) on both the *Timaeus* and on the *Republic*. In each commentary, he takes up the question of how to reconcile the one with the other. He also reports the views of Theodore of Asine (died c. 360 CE) on the question of female guardians in the *Republic*. In both cases our ancient authors largely ignore the part of the dialogue that we moderns think is the most crucial stage of the argument, focusing instead on aspects of the discussion to which we do not pay much attention. For this reason alone, it is historically interesting to look at what Proclus and Theodore have to say. A second reason to consider the views of these little-known commentators has to do with the manner in which Proclus seeks to reconcile the *Republic* v arguments with the *Timaeus*. Here Proclus does explicitly what critics have said Plato does implicitly: he differentiates between male and female souls. Indeed, he even gives these sexed souls sexed 'astral bodies' that are prior to their incarnations in human bodies. The result is simply a projection of patriarchal views to a cosmic level.

The root of Proclus' difficulties lies in the need to deal with the *Timaeus* passage in a serious way. I think that our limited evidence supports the hypothesis that Theodore of Asine resisted the temptation to try to make all of Plato's claims about women consistent. This provides some evidence for a different hermeneutic approach to the dialogues on the part of Theodore—one that perhaps sheds light on Proclus' characterization of him as someone who is 'filled up with the teachings of Numenius'. The difference between Proclus and Theodore also warns us of the dangers of assessing 'Platonism' as a monolithic philosophical tradition that may or may not be bad for women. I conclude by assessing the potential that even Proclus' version of Platonism had for empowering women in the context of the 4th and 5th centuries of the common era. The moral I would draw from this is that we should evaluate the capacity of any philosophical view to oppress or empower women against the specific and concrete forms of the domination of women that occur at a particular time.

I. Proclus' arguments (*in Remp.* i 236.1-250.12)

The arguments around the notion of female guardians that we are about to consider are drawn from Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Republic*.⁴ Unlike his

⁴ Greek text, Kroll 1899; French translation, Festugière 1970; Italian translation, Abbate 2004. David Pass and I are working on an English translation. Like the soon-to-be-completed six volume translation of Proclus' *Timaeus Commentary* from Cambridge University Press, this project is sup-

other commentaries, the *Republic Commentary* does not go through the dialogue line by line, interpreting each quoted lemma and relating it to the overall theme or *skopos* of the dialogue. Instead, the *Republic Commentary* consists of a series of essays—some shorter, some longer—on topics related to that dialogue.

There are in fact *two* essays on the arguments in *Republic* v 451c-457b. The first of these (Essay VIII) is nearly three times the length of the other (Essay IX). The shorter one is entitled ‘On the arguments of Theodore of Asine intended to establish that the virtue of man and woman are the same, and an examination of the words of Socrates’. The longer essay makes no reference to Theodore. The shorter Essay IX prefaces the arguments of Theodore with a general discussion of the text of the *Republic* (i 251.6-252.31) that is nearly identical to the start of Essay VIII. It then shifts to announce: ‘These things having been set down, it is necessary to recall as well what the great Theodore has contributed in addition to this’ (253.1-2). Proclus then attributes five arguments to Theodore, concluding with the following:

Such are the things that it is necessary to contribute to the arguments of Socrates from what the great Theodore has written in defence of similar education for women as for men—an education through which there is a pathway to complete virtue in men and women. (*in Remp.* i 255.25-29, my translation)

Following this, Proclus introduces two problems and resolutions of these problems (*in Remp.* i 255.25-257.6). These problems and solutions bear a strong resemblance to the concluding section of Essay VIII.

The most likely hypothesis is that Essay IX represents an earlier draft of Proclus’ lectures on this subject, incorporating material from his predecessor Theodore.⁵ A subsequent, longer version—Essay VIII—replaced this material with arguments of Proclus’ own. It is significant that Essay VIII utilizes the material in the introduction and the concluding problems and solutions from IX. This makes sense if the beginning and end of IX represent the contribution of Proclus, not Theodore.⁶ In what follows, I will assume that this explanation is correct. As we shall see, it makes a difference.

In his introduction to Essay VIII, Proclus makes clear what is at stake in the argument concerning the possibility of female philosopher-rulers.⁷ The fundamental issue is whether men and women are *homoeidēs* or ‘of the same kind or

ported by a generous grant from the Australian Research Council.

⁵ Cf. Festugiere 1970, ii 55n1: ‘il faut la tenir pour une nouvelle dissertation sur le même sujet, peut-être composée longtemps après précédente’. Cf. Abbate 2004, 372-373.

⁶ Baltzly 2009, 24-26 argues that we find a similar ‘doublet’ in Proclus’ *Timaeus Commentary* at ii 195.24-211.30 and 218.2-224.3 where the latter text represents a re-working of material largely drawn from Syrianus in the former.

⁷ These arguments have received relatively little attention. Given the wider scope of his project, O’Meara 2003 must be relatively brief. Xirogianni 2007 deals only with this passage from the *Republic* commentary and not with the corresponding passages in the *Timaeus* commentary, while Abbate 2006 is principally concerned with the manner in which Proclus’ metaphysics shapes his views in political theory and ethics.

species'. The sort of education or *paideia* that ought to be provided to a creature depends entirely on what the form of the creature is: you do not educate a child the way you would a dog, or vice versa. Moreover, as *paideia* is consequent on the nature of a thing, so too *aretê* or excellence is consequent on *paideia*. Indeed, *paideia* is the perfection of nature, as *aretê* is the perfection of *paideia*. So if women are *homoeidês* with men, then the question of their education is settled.

Proclus goes directly on the attack against those who deny that men and women are the same in kind or that their virtue consists in the same thing as male virtue. This is a very different and much more direct strategy than that taken by Socrates in Plato's dialogues. Proclus considers two possible positions that he assigns, perhaps unfairly, to the Peripatetics and the Stoics. To the former he attributes the view that men and women are the same in form, but nonetheless have different virtues. To the latter, he attributes the view that although all rational beings—gods and humans alike—have the same virtues, men and women are different in form.⁸

Proclus argues against these claims by looking at the relation of activity or *energeia* to form in other cases. In the case of living things, the *energeia* is a distinctive way of life. All lions, says Proclus, are brave, while cattle are self-contained and cranes are endowed with wisdom. It is true that individual members of a kind may exhibit this common way of life to a greater or lesser extent, yet these are variations *within* a unified way of life. Proclus regards it as proof of this that 'more or less' differentiates among those things that are the same in form (cf. Simplicius, *in Cat.* 235.14-25).

The (putatively) Stoic and Peripatetic positions are thus shown to be mistaken by a combined appeal to metaphysical connections between form, activity, and virtue. If *x* and *y* are alike in form, then they share the same activity. If they share the same activity, then, provided similar *paideia*, each will achieve the same virtue. Thus the Peripatetics are mistaken: if men and women belong to a single *atomos eidos*, then they *must* have the same virtue. The other half of the biconditional refutes the Stoic view. If they concede that men and women have the same virtue, then they must also recognize that they are the same in form.

It might be thought that Proclus has left himself open to attack from a less extreme position. One need not insist that men and women are entirely *different in species* in order to resist the idea of female guardians. One might just seek to capitalize on Proclus' own admission that, among things that are the same in kind, we find 'the more and the less'. We might concede that all lions are

⁸ *in Remp.* i 237.5-13; 252.19-30. It is unclear whether this is a fair characterization of the Stoic view. Von Arnim includes *in Tim.* i 351.11-15 as *SVF* iii 253. There Proclus repeats the familiar claim that there is the same virtue for men and gods. Von Arnim does not, however, include either of the two passages from *in Remp.* Certainly what Proclus tells us does not accord with the evidence of Clement: οὐκ ἄλλην τοίνυν πρὸς τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα φύσιν ἔχειν ἢ γυνή, ἄλλην δὲ ὁ ἀνήρ φαίνεται, ἀλλὰ τὴν αὐτήν· ὥστε καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν (*SVF* iii 254). On the Stoic view, see Asmis 1996. I suspect Proclus just wants a label for an opponent, and finding that the Stoics satisfy half the bill, he assigns them the whole of it.⁹ It is uncontroversial among the Platonists of late antiquity that

brave—at least compared with deer—but nonetheless insist that *male* lions are invariably braver than lionesses. Suppose that the situation with male and female humans with regard to the *ergon* of governing is analogous. The opponent might insist that while women are more capable of being good governors of the Kallipolis than chimpanzees would be, they are less able in such matters than men.

Proclus uses more metaphysically loaded premises to defeat this suggestion. Proclus treats Socrates' remarks about guard dogs at 451d-e as the most important phase of the argument for female guardians. The argument at 455b-e that modern interpreters largely focus on is not given extensive consideration by Proclus. Socrates' remarks about guard dogs are not, Proclus claims, merely an analogy or an argument from example. Drawing on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 1397b12 ff., he treats it as 'an argument from the more and the less', which he is able to supplement with premises concerning Neoplatonic 'ranks of essences'.

If things which have less natural similarity between the sexes because they have a lower sort of life than humans nonetheless possess this similarity in nature [viz. sharing the protective quality between male and female dogs], then humans must be even more likely to share [qualities between the sexes] since they have a more powerful and clearer kind of life. Among things that are superior in essence, there is a greater commonality of nature between those that have the same rank than there is in the case of inferior beings. (*in Remp.* i 240.27-241.3)

Variation among individuals within a kind is inversely proportional to the kind's place on the scale of being. Male and female *dogs* share a canine counterpart of the guardian capacity and the variation among dogs with respect to this *ergon* is pretty small. But humans are much higher on the scale of being than dogs, so the differences between the male and the female of the species as regards suitability for the same tasks should be even less. Thus if both male and female dogs are equally capable of undertaking the task of guarding the sheep, male and female humans will diverge even less in their capacity to perform the various tasks for which different individuals are naturally suited. This analogical argument is, to Proclus' eyes, the key stage in the *Republic* v argument.

Predictably, Proclus also argues from the transmigration of souls.⁹ Talents for governing or most other things are lodged in the soul. The body is merely the instrument. But souls come to inhabit male and female bodies in turn.

If then the same souls alternatively come to have the lives of men or of women, and if the virtues are those of souls—not bodies—what process could bring it about that the perfections

the transmigration of souls in Plato's dialogues is not meant merely as metaphor. Indeed, Proclus' biographer tells us that Proclus was himself the reincarnation of the soul of Nicomachus of Gerasa, author of the famous *Introduction to Arithmetic*! The philosophically contentious issue among the Neoplatonists involved not the reality of transmigration but the sense in which a human soul might be incarnated as an animal (see Sorabji 2005a, 213-216).

are different due to their respective bodies? Rather, the perfections will be the same due to their souls. The same fact that provides a sufficient proof that the virtues are common between the sexes also shows, significantly prior to this, that the souls that belong to both sexes are common. (*in Remp.* i 249.16-21)

Proclus' arguments presuppose substantive metaphysical premises of a very controversial nature. In the first we have the notion of a hierarchical order of value in nature—a great chain of Being, if you like. This notion of hierarchical order is invoked in the argument about guard dogs: as animals, they are inferior to humans and so variation in aptitude ought to be greater between individuals. Similarly, Proclus' second argument presupposes a radical soul-body dualism. In this soul-body dualism, sex seems as significant to a person's identity as her eye colour.

Both ideas have been the target of feminist and eco-feminist criticisms. The dualism between soul and body is frequently offered as an example of a binary opposition in which one element is devalued in relation to the other. Women are aligned with the inferior, bodily element.¹⁰ Thus the dualism itself is both a manifestation of women's oppression and an also instrument for perpetuating it insofar as this philosophy portrays it as natural. The notion of a chain of Being in which subsequent levels in the emanation from the One into plurality are axiologically inferior just makes the implicit valuations in such binary oppositions explicit. Masculine domination of (allegedly) inferior species is along a continuum with domination of women, who are inevitably aligned with the body and with nature. These presuppositions, such critics say, are endemic to Platonism (broadly construed) and thus Platonism is bad for the planet in general and bad for women in particular—and for much the same reasons (Plumwood 1993, 70 ff.).

Though these charges are often not worked out with careful detail to the texts of Plato or those of subsequent Platonists, there is *something* to this.¹¹ Proclus is one Platonist who seeks to provide a consistent reading of the dialogues. The position that he ends up with is one that, in some measure at least, resembles this dark picture of Platonism. This emerges most clearly when he grapples with the passage on reincarnation in female form in the *Timaeus*.

¹⁰ In addition to Spelman, see Lloyd 1993, chs. 1-2.

¹¹ As the anonymous referee for *Ancient Philosophy* has pointed out to me, there is nothing objectionable from a feminist point of view about the specific deployment of these ideas in this argument from *in Remp.* The embodied souls of both men and women can be aligned with the inferior, corporeal element in this opposition, depending on how those souls conduct themselves. As we will see, however, when we turn to Proclus' *Timaeus Commentary*, these presuppositions can be mobilised to make the case for women's general inferiority to men. It is this potential that makes Platonism suspect in the eyes of many feminist philosophers.

II. Proclus' reconciliation of *Timaeus* and *Republic*

Because of the Iamblichean interpretive norms that govern his reading of Plato's philosophy, Proclus also feels constrained to deal with potential objections about the consistency of what is said here in *Republic* with other passages in Plato.¹² In doing so, he significantly qualifies his position. In the *Timaeus* (42a1-3, 42b3-d2, and 90e6-91a1), souls that sin in their first incarnation enter the bodies of women in their second life.

And if they could master these things that happen to them [sc. the psychic disturbances resulting from embodiment], their lives would be just; whereas if they were mastered by them, they would be unjust. And if a person lived a good life throughout the due course of his time, he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star, to live a life of happiness that agreed with his character. But if he failed in this, he would be born a second time, now as a woman. And if even then he still could not refrain from wickedness, he would be changed once again, this time into some wild animal that resembled the wicked character he had acquired. And he would have no rest from these toilsome transformations until he had dragged that massive accretion of fire-water-air-earth into conformity with the revolution of the Same and uniform within him, and so subdued that turbulent irrational mass by means of reason. (Plato, *Timaeus* 42b2-d1, trans. Zeyl 2000, with slight modifications)

Proclus asks in his *Republic Commentary* how this passage in the *Timaeus* is to be explained if women are not deficient in virtue? His response is that:

when Plato sets out the order of the procession of the souls that leave the intelligible realm and the souls proceed to the region down here, they are appointed with respect to *lives*—not in order that the similarity of women's lives to men's in respect of virtue should be removed, but because he realized the inferiority of the female sex in comparison to the male even with respect to the aptitude for virtue that is common to both of them. He knew that not every case where we have relative deficiency is one where there is a difference of form. This happens only where the same form that is in the superior thing could *never* be manifested in something different. But in the case at hand, the form of virtue that is in some women is such as to be capable of appearing in males, with the result that women will preserve the same¹³ virtue as that found in men better than

¹² On Iamblichus' reading order of the dialogues and the idea that each dialogue has a single *skopos* to which every aspect of it relates, see Hadot 1987.

¹³ Reading *αὐτήν* for *αὐτῶν* in 1.248.14-16 ὡστ' εἶνά τινων ἀνδρῶν γυναῖκας μείζονας

some men do. (*in Remp.* i 248.4-16, cf. 256.4-12)

It seems to me that this strategy undercuts somewhat the argument we just considered in the previous section. Proclus takes Plato to be conceding women's general inferiority to men, while preserving a few exceptional women who show that we are not here dealing with different species. Now, Plato has already made the point that it is not unusual for female guard dogs to participate in the guardian function appropriate to them. This passage seems to concede that human females with the capacity to become guardians will be relatively rare. Since diversity among individuals within a kind is supposed to be proportional to that kind's proximity to the intelligible causes, women's aptitude for virtue should be *more general* among the class of humans than the corresponding capacity among dogs—not more rare. Thus the discussion of the *Timaeus* passage in the *Republic Commentary* seems to me to already contain an important concession to women's inferiority.

Proclus' commentary on the relevant passage in the *Timaeus* presents a much more complex approach, but it only adds to the difficulty noted above. He poses the question: why should a soul in its *first* incarnation not be incarnated as a woman? *If* the female were simply a deviant version of the male,¹⁴ then it *would* be necessary for male incarnation to precede female incarnation, 'for in every case what is natural comes before what is extraneous and unnatural' (*in Tim.* iii 293.1). But this is not, in fact, the case because 'the female [character] is present among the gods too' (293.2). If the difference between the sexes is present among the gods, then women are not simply a poor copy of men: they are images of a distinctly female intelligible nature that is prior to every kind of thing that is corporeal.

Not only is there nothing that *prevents* souls from entering female bodies in their first incarnation, there is actually a necessity that this very thing should in fact happen in some cases. Proclus reasons to this conclusion by considering the opposite psychic movement: the *ascent* of souls that have lived in such a way as to merit a 'time-out' from incarnations to return to their native star.¹⁵ Proclus thinks that it is clear that some women live such pure lives as to merit a time-out. If this were not so, then the commonality of male and female virtue would be threatened:

For if women *never* manage to live purely, but men *frequently* live a life that brings the cycle of reincarnations to an end, the virtues could no longer be said to be common between them. In

ζώσας κατ' ἀρετὴν τὴν αὐτῶν τῶν ἀνδρῶν.

¹⁴ *in Tim.* iii 292.28-9 κατὰ παρατροπήν τοῦ ἄρρενος; cf. Aristotle, *GA* 737a27-29 τὸ γὰρ θῆλυ ὡσπερ ἄρρεν ἐστὶ πετηρωμένον καὶ τὰ καταμήνια σπέρμα, οὐ καθαρὸν δέ.

¹⁵ Proclus says that such souls live '*apokatatastatically*'. An *apokatatastasis* is a return to a starting point. So, for instance, the Platonic Great Year is the period of time that is determined by the alignment of all the heavenly bodies to the same relative position—their *apokatatastasis*. Proclus reads *Timaeus* 42b in light of *Phaedrus* 249b, where there are cycles of reincarnation. A soul that lives *apokatatastatically* is one that has returned to its starting point and is about to ascend to inhabit its native star for a period of time.

addition, it would be absurd that when Socrates learns the lessons of love from Diotima [in the *Symposium*], he is led up to the Beautiful Itself *through her* and yet Diotima herself—who, by her wisdom, put the ascent in motion—should not achieve the same form of life due to the fact that she is surrounded by a woman’s body. But if we agree that [some] women go through life in such a way as to bring an end to the cycle of reincarnation, then it is absurd that souls should *go up* starting *from* this [female] nature but should nonetheless never *go down* out of the intelligible [directly] *into* it [in their first incarnation]. (*in Tim.* iii 281.21-30)

In short, the way up and the way down are one and the same. On the way up, it seems clear that souls pass from female bodies to the intelligible realm. Diotima seems to be an example of a soul poised to achieve a respite from reincarnation. So this must happen on the way down too and some souls must have an initial incarnation in a female body.

Proclus thus recognizes that there is potentially a serious tension between the *Republic*’s thesis that the virtue of men and women is the same and the *Timaeus*’ account of the cycle of reincarnations. How does he finally resolve this tension? He utilizes an analogy with the order of descent in the case of constitutions and psychic types in the *Republic*. In the realm of human history, it is not *inevitable* that democracy always arises from oligarchy, although it may be how nature operates *for the most part*. The decline of a state into tyranny might skip a step, going from oligarchy directly to tyranny, for example. The same seems to be true of initial incarnations. It is thus the *typical* order of incarnations that is given in the *Timaeus* according to Proclus (*in Tim.* iii 282.8-23). Superior souls are generally, but not inevitably, found in male bodies. Such a view would be consonant with his remarks about ‘relative deficiency’ at *in Remp.* i 248.4-16 that we discussed initially.

Proclus has one other gambit for dealing with the *Timaeus*’ problematic passages about women being incarnations of previously failed men (42b5-c2). We noted above his remark that ‘the female’ (*to thêlu*) is present among the gods as well. In his account of the soul’s ascent back to god, Proclus attaches great weight to the myth of *Phaedrus* 246e4ff.). In the myth, each of our souls follows a specific god among the Olympians up toward the vault of heaven to gaze out upon the forms. This patron or leading god’s individual identity constitutes an ethical ideal specifically for us, since our souls are have a certain character depending upon which god we followed (*in Tim.* iii 262.6-14). The goal of life and of philosophy is to render the soul similar to god and we should strive to assimilate to the divine by assimilating ourselves to our own proper leading gods (Baltzly 2004). Thus, if your patron god were Helios, your natural station and its duties would be as a priest or a healer (iii 279.14-19). When he is commenting on Plato’s remark at 42b5-c2, Proclus connects this assimilation to one’s leading god with the idea that some leading gods are female:

what precludes its being the case that souls not only imitate the leading gods appropriate to them in the respect that is attributed to them—i.e. in the way of life appropriate to them—but also with respect to the nature of the living creature [i.e. the sex] that is native to those leading gods? (*in Tim.* III 293.2-5)

This means that souls themselves are sexed. Those attendant upon a goddess will bear her imprint, both in terms of ideal way of life and also in terms of sex. Moreover, this sex will be reflected in the sex of the souls' *psychic vehicles*. It is part of the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus* 41e1 and *Phaedrus* 247b2 and 250c6 that souls—both divine and human—have psychic vehicles.¹⁶ This idea may seem alien to modern readers of Plato, but it was pervasive in post-Hellenistic Platonism, perhaps originating with Galen. Proclus' version of the theory of soul vehicles sees human souls enveloped in a series of bodies. The first is the 'astral body' that is composed of luminous aether. This is followed by a pneumatic body that the soul acquires as it descends from its native star into Becoming. Finally there is the 'oyster body' of the material vehicle. Even the divine souls that correspond to the encosmic gods will have the primary and connate 'astral body'. When souls are mounted in these vehicles alone—and thus not incarnated in the grosser forms of bodies that souls assume in their descent into becoming—there is always a match between psychic sex and (astral) bodily sex.

There is no need to doubt although the [sexed] vehicles are connately conjoined with the souls up there, down here there will be times where they are switched. In the former case the union [between vehicle and soul] is essential, while in the other case it is a matter of choice. It is for this reason that up there the division of the vehicles [into the sexes] follows from the essence of the souls [in question], but down here it follows from the different choices [that the souls make]. (*in Tim.* iii 293.14-17)

Proclus *somehow* thinks that the introduction of sexed souls and sexed psychic vehicles helps us to understand *Timaeus* 42b5-c2. He writes:

If you interpret 'the female nature' literally, we will render a judgment on [the meaning of] the words [in the lemma] in this manner. If, however, you were to say that the use of the word 'woman' symbolically connotes every form of life that is weaker or is rendered effete (*thêlunomenon*) or sunken into the realm of Becoming—as some of those who have come before us interpret (and people who count too!)—then you would have no need for this sort of solution. It is permissible to say whichever of the two you like; especially in view of the fact

¹⁶ Cf. *Elements of Theology* propositions 205-210. On the doctrine generally in the commentary tradition, see Sorabji 2005a, 221-241.

that Plato is keen to conceal many [of his views] through the use of symbols. (293.24-31)

In what follows, I will urge the hypothesis that the ‘symbolic’ approach to *Timaeus* 42b5-c2 belongs to Theodore of Asine. The alternative involving sexed souls and sexed astral vehicles is, I think, Proclus’ own. How does this innovation help us to understand the problems that Proclus initially raised about the descent of some souls into female bodies?

Proclus supposes that the problem with 42b5-c2 is that we know from independent argument that *some* initial psychic descents must be into female bodies. (This was the point of the reasoning about the correlative *ascents* from *apokatastatic* lives.) *Timaeus* 42b5-c2 tells us that souls who have botched their initial incarnation are reincarnated as women. But if the soul’s initial descent was into a female body, how can this be deemed appropriate? It will not be the sort of demotion that the Laws of Fate stipulate is the just desert for being mastered by one’s body. The answer is that, once he has introduced the idea of sexed souls, Proclus can suppose that a female soul who botches her first incarnation will return the second time around *as a man*. This will be, in a sense, a demotion relative to the goal of successfully imitating her leading *goddess*. In being a man, she is alienated from the version of divine assimilation that is proper for her.

This is an interesting development. Another standing criticism of Plato’s conception of female guardians in the *Republic* is that it seeks to make women men. That is to say, it holds up a masculine gender identity as necessary condition for a woman’s having a role in the state. Proclus’ notion that souls themselves are sexed makes this explicit, transferring it from a psychic masculinity and femininity to psychic sex differences. At the same time, it also opens up a possibility that might be welcomed by some difference-feminists. What is common to male and female souls ensures a common core of virtues. Yet if male and female divinities differ, and if the virtues are the qualities through which one resembles the divine, then there will be additional virtues proper to men or to women through which they become assimilated to their distinct, but equal and complementary, divine paradigms. Is this possible form of difference-feminist virtue theory one that Proclus’ moral and psychological theory actually realizes?

The answer to this question depends on what sexual differentiation for *gods* amounts to. After all, it is this sexual differentiation that is imitated (albeit in a more pluralised and deficient way) by the sex differences among human souls and this, in turn, by the differences between sexed psychic vehicles.¹⁷ If the sexual differences of gods and goddesses are simply projections of misogynistic gender identities onto a cosmic scale, then Proclus’ innovation is hardly preferable to the idea that female incarnation is a punishment for a life badly lived.

When we turn to the characteristics of the female sex in as it is manifested in the divine realm according to Proclus, we find associations that are in keeping

¹⁷ That is just how emanationist metaphysics works. Distinctions that are implicit or present in a more unified way in higher orders of being are ‘worked out’ in the descent into plurality.

with Pythagorean traditions. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* i 5.986a22 is our earliest source for the Pythagorean columns of coordinated pairs.¹⁸ In that list, male and female are coordinated with several oppositions that loom large in Proclus' metaphysics: Limited and Unlimited (with all the associations from the *Philebus*); One and Plurality (with all the associations attendant upon the reports of Plato's unwritten teachings); and Rest and Motion (associated with the five greatest kinds in the *Sophist*). In the most general of terms, Proclus thinks that female gods or metaphysical principles are distinguished by playing a *pluralising* or prolific and *differentiating* role in the emanation from the One.¹⁹ Proclus, following Iamblichus, seeks to integrate his understanding of Pythagoreanism into Platonism (cf. O'Meara 1989 and Bonazzi, Lévy *et al.* 2007). Thus these columns of opposites are just as authoritative for him as Plato's own dialogues.

This fact, in itself, need not have any implications for the question of female equality. It is characteristic of the tradition of Greek cosmogony to suppose that all things arise from the interplay of opposites in a way somewhat analogous to the manner in which future human beings arise from sexual intercourse between women and men. A cosmogonic division of labor is not, in and of itself, such as to naturalize women's oppression. What has been correctly observed, however, is that in the Pythagorean column of oppositions, those of the female side are implicitly or explicitly regarded as *subordinate and inferior* to those on the male side (Buchan 1999, 16). This is certainly true of Proclus' treatment of these binary oppositions.²⁰

The consequences for the different gods and goddesses to whom sexed human souls are to assimilate themselves come across clearly in Proclus' comments on *Timaeus* 18c1-4. At this point in the dialogue, Socrates is reviewing the previous day's discussion of the place of women in the *Republic*. Proclus begins his commentary by summarizing the content of his own commentary on the *Republic*. But, because he thinks that the recapitulation of the *Republic* at the start of the *Timaeus* is intended to present an image of cosmic unity (while the story of Atlantis presents an image of the cosmic opposition), he reads the passage with reference to the divine forces that order the cosmos. When we turn from male and female in the human realm to male and female gods, we find that they are even more integrated than are the male and female guardians. Some divinities, such as Hermes, are even hermaphroditic, combining the sexes in one divinity. Even where we have deities that have one sex or the other, the divinities perform the same tasks. However—and here is where the qualifications start—the male sex performs the task in a *primary* way, while the goddesses perform it in a subordi-

¹⁸ On gender and numbers in early Pythagoreanism, see Burkert 1972, 30-37 and 432-438.

¹⁹ Cf. *Plat. Theol.* iv 33.15-34.11; 85.2-4; 86.20-87.4; 112.17-18 Καὶ γὰρ ἡ ἑτερότης αὐτὸ τὸ θῆλυ καὶ τὸ γόνιμὸν ἐστὶ τῶν θεῶν; in *Crat.* 70.7-8.

²⁰ Proclus, in *Prm.* 741.5-9 καὶ τὸ μὲν κρείττον τῶν ἐναντίων μμεῖται τὸ πέρας, τὸ δὲ καταδέεστερον μμεῖται τὸ ἄπειρον· ὅθεν δὴ καὶ οἱ φυσικοὶ λέγουσι τὸ χεῖρον τῶν ἐναντίων στέρησιν εἶναι τοῦ πέρατος (cf. Aristotle's *Phys.* iii 2.201b16-26). The superiority of the first column (limit...male) to the other (unlimited...female) is also clear from in *Tim.* i 183.15-17.

nate manner.²¹

Hence in mortal creatures too nature has revealed the female to be weaker in all things than the male. Indeed, everything that proceeds from the male, is also brought to birth by the female, preserving its subordinate role. So Hera proceeds in company with Zeus, giving birth to all things with the Father, for which reason she is called his equal accomplisher.²² (*in Tim.* i 46.24-47.1, trans. Tarrant 2007)

It is important to stress that what proceeds is not generated *equally* by both of them. Moving down from the level of intelligible gods to intellectual and encosmic ones, Proclus next assigns the Sun to the rank of male divinities and the Moon to the distaff side. Each plays a different role in bringing about change in the realm of becoming here below. Even though the Moon is more proximate to terrestrial realm, its contribution is secondary and derivative, for its light is *reflected*. It is for this reason that the goddess Selene—the Moon—has been described as ‘a lesser Sun’, i.e., a junior man.²³ Moving further down the chain of being, there are both male and female *daimones*, or spirits who mediate between the gods and humans. The female spirits work together with the male and bring about in a *secondary manner* all those very things that the former bring about in a *primary manner*.²⁴

Freed from the inconvenient facts of sexual reproduction in mortal living creatures, in which the product requires an equal contribution from *both* parents, Proclus is able to suppose that Zeus generates in a superior paternal manner *the very same things* that Hera gives birth to in a secondary manner. This picture of causation is distinctive of Proclus’ metaphysics. In the descent from A to B to C, A not only causes B, which in turn causes C, but A is also a cause of C.²⁵ Moreover, due to A’s position as a higher cause, A will be a cause of C in a superior and more universal manner than B is. In the case at hand, male divinities by themselves cause in a primary manner the same effects that female divinities cause in a secondary and inferior mode. As the female Moon basks in and reflects the cre-

²¹ *in Tim.* i 46.21-23, ὅπου δὲ καὶ διήρηται, κοινὰ τὰ ἔργα ἐστὶ τοῦ ἄρρενος καὶ θήλεος τῶν ὁμοταγῶν, πρῶτως μὲν <ἀποτελούμενα> ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄρρενος, ὑφειμένως δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ θήλεος.

²² διὸ καὶ ἰσοτελῆς αὐτῷ προσαγορεύεται, cf. *Orph. fr.* 163, Kern 1963.

²³ *in Tim.* i 47.9-12 πάσα γὰρ ἡ γένεσις ἔκ τε ἡλίου κυβερνᾶται καὶ σελήνης, μειζόνως δὲ ἀπ’ ἐκείνου καὶ πατρικῶς, ἀπὸ δὲ ταύτης δευτέρως· διὸ καὶ ἐλάττων ἥλιος ὑπὸ τινῶν προσωνόμασται. I think that Tarrant is right to excise the following sentence, which assigns lunar orders corresponding to the male gods of the Sun. Festugière keeps the sentence, but seeks to explain it by reference to the Hermetic texts. As Tarrant notes, however, it adds nothing and reads like a gloss.

²⁴ *in Tim.* i 47.15-17 τοῖς μὲν γὰρ θείοις δαίμοσιν αἱ θεῖαι δαιμονίδες ἡνωμένως πάντα ἀποτελοῦσι δευτέρως, ἄπερ ἐκεῖνοι πρῶτως.

²⁵ Indeed, the higher an entity is in the order of procession, the lower down the series its causal influence extends. This is why the One is the sole cause of matter: all other causes have run out of steam before we get to matter; cf. *Elements of Theology*, props. 60 and 72.

ative power of the male Sun, so too the creative power of female divinities is secondary and subordinate to the paternal order. Proclus' insistence on the cooperation among the gods in the procession into Becoming is thoroughly permeated by an implicit assumption of male superiority.

Each of Proclus' attempts to disengage himself from the sexism inherent in *Timaeus* 42b2-d1 only leaves him in a worse position. At the end, he simply projects assumptions of male superiority onto a cosmic scale.

III. Theodore of Asine's arguments

Theodore of Asine was a pupil of Iamblichus and perhaps also of Porphyry. Apart from that, we know nothing at all about him. We have perhaps 46 testimonia on the content of his works.²⁶ Proclus regards him as one of the genuine Platonists since the re-emergence of the true Platonic philosophy with Plotinus (*Plat. Theol.* i 6.16-24 = Theodore test. 2). In spite of this, Proclus—who is the major source of our testimonia on Theodore—usually cites him only to disagree with him subsequently. It appears, however, that they find some common ground on the *Republic's* arguments concerning philosopher-queens.

In the lengthy testimonium preserved in Proclus, Theodore points out that his opponents are forced either to grant women no share at all in virtue or to assign them some virtues, while assigning other virtues to men (*in Remp.* i 253.2-14). The first option should be closed to anyone who supposes that you can have a proper city. If women have no virtue whatsoever, then the city is born maimed, having half its citizens in a miserable condition.²⁷ On the other hand, if we suppose that some virtues belong to women and others to men, then there may still be trouble. Even the Peripatetics accept that the virtues—in the fullest sense—entail one another. So if self-control is really a woman's virtue while courage belongs to men, then the women cannot *really* be self-controlled without being courageous. Anyone who holds even an attenuated version of the reciprocity of the virtues must allow that women and men are the same in virtue.²⁸

Proclus reports that Theodore also pursued this question from a physical point

²⁶ The testimonia are collected in Deuse 1973, the only book dedicated to the subject of Theodore of Asine.

²⁷ *in Remp.* i 253.6-9 εἰ μὲν γὰρ μηδεμίαν, κολοβὸν ποιήσομεν τὴν πόλιν ἐξ ἴσων σπουδαίων καὶ ἀσπουδῶν αὐτὴν ποιῶντες καὶ τὰ γεννώμενα ἐκ τούτων ὁμοίως εὐφυῆ καὶ ἀφυῆ πρὸς παιδείαν.

²⁸ *NE* vii 1.1144b30-1145a2 allows that an agent may have *natural* courage and yet lack other virtues, in particular *phronēsis*. But this is not so in the case of full virtue: τούτο γὰρ κατὰ μὲν τὰς φυσικὰς ἀρετὰς ἐνδέχεται, καθ' ἧς δὲ ἀπλῶς λέγεται ἀγαθός, οὐκ ἐνδέχεται· ἅμα γὰρ τῆ φρονήσει μὴ ὑπαρχούση πάσαι ὑπάρξουσιν. Of course, it is open to the Aristotelian to say that the distinct, sexed complete virtues are such as to imply one another. So if any woman has the complete version of women's justice, she has women's self-control and courage as well and the same goes for men. Aspasius is the only Peripatetic who addresses the 'Socratic' thesis that the virtue of men and women is the same, and he does not consider anything resembling Theodore's *ad hominem* against the Aristotelian position (*in NE* 176.30f.f). On the question of Aspasius' target in this passage, see Barnes 1999.

of view (i 254.10ff.). The common parts between men's bodies and women's bodies serve the same purpose. Both men's and women's eyes subserve the goal of seeing. The brains of both sexes are for the sake of awareness, etc. What, then, Theodore asks, could prevent the parts of the *soul* that they share in common from serving the same function? If this is so, then they will possess—or fail to possess—the same virtues:

Thus, since reason is common to both sexes and the life lived in accordance with reason, it follows that wisdom is common to both. Moreover, since the capacity for desire, as well as desiring in an orderly way, is common, it follows that self-control is common. Since the spirited part of the soul is common between the sexes, so too is the exercise of courage, for surely it is not the case that though women have been granted spirit, they nonetheless always live irrationally. It would have been pointless to grant women this unless they were able to live a life subordinate to reason. *In Remp.* i 253.23-29 = Theodore, test. 40 (part).

Alongside this argument of a physical sort, we also find arguments from vaguely theological premises. Theodore assumes that everyone will agree that there are both gods and goddesses. If these beings are to be truly blessed, they must have all the virtues. Theodore concludes: 'Therefore if it is the case that up there the male and the female each share in the entirety of virtue, then surely it is obvious that the analogous sexes in our case will have the same kind of virtue as the kinds up there' (*in Remp.* ii 254.7-10). This is obvious, Theodore seems to think, when we consider particularly god-like women. According to Proclus, Theodore argued on the basis of a certain Egyptian prophet's account of the real story about Helen. According to this Egyptian account, Helen was no less divine than the Dioscuri and she was filled, both body and soul, with all the charms of Aphrodite. Owing to her divine powers, Helen deceived Paris and went instead to Egypt where she took part in the most advanced of religious rites. Theodore concludes: 'If this is true and souls that are divine in form go into females, then what is there to prevent the virtues from belonging to them in common with men?'

Essay IX, in which Proclus presents Theodore's arguments, contains a similar attempt to reconcile what is said here in the *Republic* with *Timaeus*.²⁹ In doing so, Proclus makes the same concessions to the thesis of women's general inferiority noted above in §C. Did Theodore hold the same view? The transition between these sections within Essay IX does not suggest that Proclus is continuing an exegesis of Theodore's views. The similarity of what follows to the passage in Essay VIII, which does not mention Theodore at all, suggests that these concerns about consistency with *Timaeus* are solely Proclus' own.

Proclus and Theodore philosophize in what Proclus himself takes to be a very

²⁹ Compare *in Remp.* i 247.27-249.21 with *in Remp.* i 255.30-256.15. Essay IX also includes a problem about how one should reconcile what is said here with the political arrangements described in the *Laws*. This problem about the *Laws* is missing from Essay VIII.

different manner.³⁰ Proclus reads the Platonic corpus systematically, so that apparent inconsistencies between dialogues must be explained away. Our (admittedly limited) testimonia on Theodore *never* exhibit him relating a reading of one dialogue to that of another. In fact, Proclus' not infrequent criticisms of Theodore are sometimes on just this point (*in Remp.* ii 255.8ff. = Theodore Test 16). In the one testimonium where a reading of the *Timaeus* on time and eternity is related to the *Phaedrus*, Proclus admits he is *speculating* on how the view he hears attributed to Theodore might have arisen (*in Tim.* iii 24.30-25.7 = Test 23).

Did Theodore then have *nothing* to say about *Timaeus* 42b2-d1? Proclus' *Timaeus Commentary* is certainly full of testimonia from Theodore that have some bearing on that dialogue. We have titles for two works by Theodore: 'On Names' (which Proclus probably knew by way of Iamblichus' commentary on the *Phaedrus*) and 'That the Soul is All Forms', which probably dealt with the transmigration of souls. We have no explicit evidence of a *Timaeus* commentary. Even if Theodore wrote no commentary on the *Timaeus*, it is hardly likely that a Platonist writing on transmigration could entirely omit some discussion of this passage. No testimonium in Deuse's edition supports any inferences, but I think that Proclus in fact tells us how Theodore handled this question. Recall that at the point at which Proclus presents his solution to the puzzle about *Timaeus* 42b5-c2, which involves the supposition that female souls are further alienated from their divine patronesses by subsequent incarnation as men, he also notes another alternative:

If, however, you were to say that the use of the word 'woman' symbolically connotes every form of life that is weaker or is rendered effete (*thêlunomenon*) or sunken into the realm of Becoming—as some of those who have come before us interpret (and people who count too!)³¹—then you would have no need for this sort of solution. (*in Tim.* iii 293.26-29)

The solution being advocated here is one that relies on a non-literal reading of the passage. It recognizes the negative views of being female among the Greeks and says that Plato only intends to convey that a failed soul's second incarnation is a

³⁰ This comes across most clearly in the way in which Proclus describes Theodore's work at various points. For example, at *in Tim.* ii 215.29ff.: 'the philosopher Theodore goes through a line of argument peculiar to himself'; or iii 65.1 'Both Porphyry and Theodore say these things, working from their own personal suppositions'; or at the beginning of Proclus' longest testimonium on him (ii 274.10): 'The philosopher Theodore of Asine, being filled up with the works of Numenius, produced views on the generation of the soul quite novel, creating accounts derived from linguistic items (*grammata*), characters, and numbers.' The imputation of originality or innovation is *not* a way of praising someone in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition; cf. Sorabji 2005b, iii 43-46.

³¹ ὡς τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν ἤκουσάν τινες οὐχ οἱ τυχόντες. Compare Proclus' other ways of referring to Theodore. He is not infrequently ὁ μέγας Θεόδωρος (*in Remp.* i 255.25; *in Tim.* i 213.3) or ὁ θαυμαστός Θεόδωρος (*in Tim.* i 322.7; 427.13; cf. *Plat. Theol.* i 6.23) or someone worthy of our reverence, *in Remp.* ii 110.17-18 εἰ καὶ ἡμῖν ἄνδρες αἰδοῖοι τοῦτο ὑπέλαβον, Θεόδωρον λέγω τὸν Ἀσιναῖον. Proclus' relationship to Theodore's ideas is a complex one. He frequently cites him only to disagree with him, or to comment on how unorthodox his approach is. Yet he nonetheless regards him as someone whose views are worthy of consideration.

worse one. One can recognize the language's capacity to use the word 'woman' to convey inferiority without thereby endorsing the thesis that women are inherently inferior. The symbolic reading mentioned here seems to suggest that Plato uses the word 'woman' not to talk about women, but rather to talk about inferior souls of any kind. This may not be a very plausible account of the meaning of Plato's text, but it is one that does not endorse the idea that women are inherently inferior to men.

This non-literal approach to Plato's seemingly straightforward statements about reincarnation are consistent with other things we know about Theodore's views. He denied that human souls literally *enter* the bodies of animals and animate them. When Plato speaks of souls coming back as animals, he means only that such souls are 'bound in a relation of life to the soul of the irrational animal that enlivens the appropriate animal body without the need for any additional human soul'.³² To be 'reincarnated as a wolf' is thus not for one's soul to animate a wolf's body, but for one's soul to be psychically related to an animal soul that does animate such a body. What causes such a psychic relation? This happens if the values that dominated our previous life are *symbolically associated* with the things that are dominant in a wolf's life. If Theodore was willing to treat this aspect of Plato's claims about the transmigration of souls non-literally, what would prevent him from taking a similar line with *Timaeus* 42b5-c2? In the only other major discussion of Theodore's views on women, O'Meara hypothesized that Theodore's views on this subject were more radical than those of Proclus. The additional evidence adduced here suggests that O'Meara was right.

IV. Conclusions and Reflections

Proclus' arguments in support of a common education for women in the *Republic* are undercut by concessions that he makes in order to preserve consistency with other, less enlightened passages in the Platonic corpus. There is no evidence that Theodore of Asine made similar concessions, and this may well be because—unlike Proclus—he did not feel the need to read the Platonic corpus as systematically. Each dialogue may have been read on its own and mined for such potentially disparate insights as Theodore thought it might contain.³³ This hypothesis would also explain the apparently frayed relations between the followers of Theodore and those of Iamblichus, for if my hypothesis were true then the two Platonists would differ on fundamental methodological points about the correct approach to the Platonic dialogues.³⁴

³² Proclus, *in Remp.* ii 309.30-310.6 = Theodore test 38 (part), ed. Deuse: οὐκ ἐνοικίζεσθαι τοῖς σώμασιν αὐτῶν (αἱ γὰρ φυσικαὶ διοργανώσεις μάχονται πρὸς τὴν τοιαύτην κατάταξιν), ἐν σχέσει δὲ μόνῃ τῆς ζωῆς συνδεῖσθαι πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων ψυχὴν τὸ οἰκεῖον σῶμα ψυχώσασαν, οὐδὲν τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης προσδεομένην· τούτο γὰρ καὶ ὁ Ἀσινάϊος Θεόδωρος αὐτὸς πρῶτος ἐπιβάλλων καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀνέπεισε φρονεῖν τε καὶ γράφειν.

³³ Proclus associates Theodore with Amelius and Numenius. The evidence for both these thinkers is pretty limited, but certainly Numenius' engagement with Plato's dialogues seems to be much freer and selective than that of Proclus.

³⁴ There are two pieces of evidence for such a rift. The first comes from one of letters of the

More broadly, Proclus' reading of *Republic* and *Timaeus* shows that, in some sense, Platonism's potential for a misogynistic metaphysics is real. Though Proclus' work is not subjected to detailed scrutiny by feminist writers such as Lloyd or Spelman, what we have seen in Proclus would confirm their profound suspicion of Platonism's implicit misogyny. But let us keep in mind that Proclus' reading also shows the plasticity of Platonism. It is *a way*—but by no means the *only way*—of constructing a dogmatic Platonism from Plato's dialogues. Other less systematic and less literal engagements with the Platonic corpus were possible and, indeed, actualized. Theodore of Asine seems to be no less a Platonist than Proclus and yet his version of Platonism seems to eschew Proclus' cosmic patriarchy that subordinates even goddesses to gods.³⁵

Platonisms are what Platonists make of the dialogues of Plato (and, of course, such other texts as they suppose to partake of the same, Platonic wisdom). Similarly, versions of Christianity are what various Christian writers make of the Old and New Testaments (and such other writings as they suppose to hold authority for them). There is probably more heat than light generated by any attempt to assess either Platonism *tout court* or Christianity *tout court* on the question of whether women are or are not generally inferior to men and so ought to assume a subordinate position. The emancipatory or oppressive potential of such complex texts is always realized in a specific reading by a specific person at a particular time and against the backdrop of historically specific forms of women's oppression.

This last point may be worth dwelling on for a moment. We have just seen how Proclus uses the Pythagorean associations around male and female to construct a patriarchal order among the divine causes. The Pythagoreanized Platonism of Proclus is significantly Iamblichus' creation. The other contribution to Neoplatonism that Iamblichus made, of course, was to emphasize the soteriological role for theurgy: the system of ritual magic built around the *Chaldean Oracles*.³⁶ One of theurgy's modes of operation was ascent or *anagôgê*. By the use of the proper material elements and incantations, the theurgist was thought to be able to cleanse the soul's vehicle of the accretions that bound it to the world of Becoming. Thus purified, the theurgist's soul might ascend to conjunction or *systasis* with a god. For the purification of the soul and the ascent to the divine, Proclus thought that the art of theurgy was especially valuable—more so than philoso-

Emperor Julian (*Epistle* 12) where he asks Priscus to acquire for him corrected copies of the books of Iamblichus. He urges Priscus not to pay heed to οἱ Θεοδώρειοι who say that φιλότιμος ὁ θεῖος Ἰάμβλιχος. The second bit of evidence is the existence of a work by Iamblichus entitled *Refutations of Amelius and his school and of Numenius* (in *Tim.* ii 277.28-30). Proclus describes Theodore as 'filled up with ideas of Numenius' and uses arguments from Iamblichus' book as if these applied equally to Theodore.

³⁵ We could, of course, describe him as a neo-Pythagorean given his affinities with Numenius. But, then again, we could equally well characterize *Proclus* as some sort of neo-Pythagorean. In any event, Proclus himself supposes that he and Theodore belong to the real Platonic school; cf. *Plat. Theol.* i 6.16-24 = Theodore test. 2.

³⁶ Perhaps the most thorough treatment of the subject is that of Shaw 1995.

phy.³⁷

There is thus a certain delicious irony in the fact that Proclus himself supposedly learned theurgy from a *woman*. His biographer, Marinus, reports that he learnt the ‘invocations of the Chaldeans’ from Asclepigeneia, the daughter of Plutarch of Athens and granddaughter of Nestorius (Marinus, *Vit. Proc.* §28 33.8-15, Saffrey, Segonds *et al.* 2001). Asclepigeneia is but a name to us, but Eunapius (b. 347 CE) gives an account of another woman similarly in possession of knowledge of the means for summoning the divine and working various wonders: Sosipatra. Like Proclus, she moves in the orbit of the inheritors of the school of Iamblichus.³⁸ Like Asclepigeneia, and subsequently Proclus, she learned the wisdom of the Chaldeans in particular. Unlike Asclepigeneia, however, we have a lengthy biography for her.³⁹

After being initiated into the mysteries of the Chaldeans, Sosipatra was permitted by her father to ‘live as she pleased, and he did not interfere in what she did, save that he was sometimes displeased with her silence’ (Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* vi 8.1-2). Eunapius shows how her mastery of Platonic philosophy and the rites associated with Chaldeans provided her with a degree of autonomy that was unusual for the time. Her arcane wisdom and communion with the gods set her apart from most women (and men) and thus amply justified these uncharacteristic liberties. It is perhaps natural that women should have been deemed to have some special affinity for the rituals of the Chaldeans. The goddess Hecate, associated with the feminine Moon, is by far the most prominent deity in the *Chaldean Oracles* (Johnston 1990). It is thus unsurprising that women should have a special aptitude for theurgy.⁴⁰

If there is a moral to be drawn from the irony that Proclus is indebted to a woman for the precious knowledge of theurgy, it is that questions about philosophical texts and their connections with gender and women’s oppression need to be posed at the level of the specific. The peculiar stew of ideas from which Theodore and Proclus each drew their versions of Platonism supported different ideas about women. Moreover, the Proclean version of Platonism, which seems so misogynistic to us from our perspective, in fact created room in the culture of its time for a social identity that women, as well as men, could occupy. The cultural identity of a Platonist philosopher in late antiquity was inextricably inter-

³⁷ in *Tim.* iii 300.13-17 εἰς δὴ τὴν ἀποσκευὴν τῶν τοιοῦτων ὀχημάτων, ἃ δεδήλωκεν ὁ Πλάτων ἕκαστον τῶν στοιχείων ἰδίᾳ κατονομάσας, συντελεῖ μὲν καὶ ἡ φιλόσοφος ζωὴ, καθάπερ φησὶν αὐτός, τὸ δὲ μέγιστον κατὰ γὰρ τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν ἡ τελεστικὴ συμβάλλεται. On this passage, see van den Berg 2003.

³⁸ She was married to Eustathius, who was the successor to Aedesius, who in turn relocated Iamblichus’ school from Apamea to Pergamum.

³⁹ Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists* vi 6.5-9.15, ed. Giangrande 1956. On the biographical sketch of Sosipatra, see Salisbury 2001, 329.

⁴⁰ This is not to say that female Platonists were confined to the ‘spooky’ Chaldean end of Platonic philosophy. Hypatia of Alexandria was a notable example of what we might regard as a ‘real’ philosopher. But it nonetheless remains the case that many of the names of women associated with Platonism in late antiquity were lauded for their command of theurgy.

twined with that of the ‘holy man’ (or woman!) and wonder-worker: someone in communion with the gods.⁴¹ Some ingredients within the Proclean stew (*Timaeus* 42b5-c2, for example) confirmed Graeco-Roman prejudices about women’s inferiority. Other ingredients (notably the emphasis on theurgy) made the social identity of the philosopher one that could be stretched to include the occasional woman. Whatever its other constraints, this social identity did in fact free some women from some of the specific forms of patriarchal oppression in late antiquity. Of course, no woman *now* would want Sosipatra’s liberty (such as it was) on the basis of her identity as an intimate of Hecate and possessor of Chaldean wisdom. But this should not blind us to the fact that, at that place and that time, Platonism had both oppressive and emancipatory potential for women. The real history of the relations between philosophy, culture, and women’s oppression is local, specific, and complex.⁴²

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⁴¹ Cf. Brown 1971 and Fowden 1982 for early work on the social identity of the philosopher in late antiquity, and recently the essays in Smith 2005. Proclus’ own political influence among the Athenian aristocracy was grounded in no small measure in his intimate connection with the gods and his (putative) ability to heal with magic (see Watts 2006). The association in popular consciousness of philosophers with priests or prophets is also evident in Artemidorus’ work on the interpretation of dreams (cf. Hahn 1989, 48-49).

⁴² An earlier version of this article was presented at the 9th Symposium Platonicum in Tokyo in August of 2010. I am grateful to members of the International Plato Society for their comments. It was substantially revised in February and March of 2011 while I held a fellowship at Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study. This fellowship was supported by the USA’s National Endowment for the Humanities. Finally I would like to thank Ron Polansky and the anonymous referees at *Ancient Philosophy* for a final round of comments that led me to revise substantially yet again so as not to say too many contentious things about Plato’s own intentions in the *Republic* and thereby distract from the observations I wanted to make about these less well-known later Platonists.

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