delightfully kaleidoscopic view of these two “small, if colorful,” figures and the strange worlds of which they were a part.

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Edward J. Watts. *Hypatia: The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher*. Women in Antiquity. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp 224. ISBN: 9780190210038, \$29.95.

As one of the most attention-grabbing figures from antiquity, the necessity for further biographical scrutiny of Hypatia of Alexandria is a question that demands consideration before even opening this slim and handsome volume. But Edward Watts’ balanced and mature study of the female philosopher and mathematician firmly dispels any such reservations. With a clarity and consistency that is the welcome trademark of his scholarship, Watts makes a valuable contribution to the critical reception of Hypatia.

Watts’s approach is admirably systematic, taking the reader by the hand in the opening chapter (“Alexandria”) and building a picture of the late-antique city to contextualise the broadly chronological approach to Hypatia’s life that follows. Chapter Two, “Childhood and Education,” provides a useful introduction to a philosophical education in antiquity, with some informed speculation about the kind of learning Hypatia would have been exposed to in her early life. Chapter Three (“The School of Hypatia”) explores her role as a teacher and how she fitted within different philosophical traditions. Watts sees Hypatia as a Platonist who rejected the ritualised elements of Iamblichan philosophy, teaching a sort of “retro-Neoplatonism” that emphasised contemplation (50).

Chapter Four, “Middle Age,” considers Hypatia’s life and achievements in a wider context of the later fourth century, especially the shifting contours of religion. Watts emphasises Hypatia’s role as embedded in the urban life of Alexandria, with her teaching providing an antidote to the conflicts and divisions the city suffered in the 390s. Working mainly from the letter-collection of Synesius, Chapter 5 (“A Philosophical Mother and Her Children”) examines Hypatia’s circle of students. Watts argues that the community was bound together by wisdom and intellectual affection, and functioned as a model of religious cooperation in Alexandria. Chapter Six, “The Public Intellectual,” foregrounds Watts’s interpretation of Hypatia as occupying a public role as a

philosopher with obligations to the community as well as philosophically-minded students.

Chapter Seven (“Hypatia’s Sisters”) and Chapter Ten (“A Modern Symbol”) are the most valuable and progressive parts of the book. Chapter Seven incorporates a discussion of gender by juxtaposing Hypatia with four female contemporaries. Chapter Eight provides the background and narrative of Hypatia’s murder in AD 415. Chapter Nine, “The Memory of Hypatia,” details the subsequent reception of Hypatia in antiquity, and Chapter Ten (“A Modern Symbol”) continues this analysis by surveying the reinaginations of Hypatia from the seventeenth century to the near-present day. Watts argues that religious extremism and social decline inhibit the modern reception of Hypatia, obscuring centuries of history following her death as well as the significance of her life. The final chapter, “Reconsidering a Legend,” functions as a short conclusion that mirrors the introduction, “A Lenten Murder.”

Throughout the book, the thread of the argument is easy to grasp, and is well substantiated with historical detail that avoids overloading the text or reader. The result is credible and convincing, a beguilingly simple introduction to a subject that can be complex because of the nature of the fragmentary and ideologically loaded evidence. Watts strikes a fine balance with a style that makes his fascinating subject accessible without detracting from the significance of his argument and holds the reader’s attention throughout each brief and well-balanced chapter. The result is a light and easily comprehensible, but not a superficial, analysis.

Watts embarks on his study of Hypatia with the explicit aim to make her life rather than her death “the true centerpiece of the book” (xi). This is not an easy path to tread, especially as the representation of Hypatia in the historical record is largely determined by the fact and nature of her murder. Watts manages this tension effectively, resisting the temptation to slip into sensationalism, a quality not commonly found in scholarship on Hypatia.¹

In approaching Hypatia principally as a philosopher, Watts again sets himself a difficult task; little is known directly or securely about Hypatia’s philosophical beliefs or affiliations. His analysis relies heavily on the letters of Synesius to read backwards into Hypatia the philosopher (87), a process not without peril. But using his expertise on ancient philosophy and education, Watts skilfully

1. Further exceptions include H. Harich-Schwarzbauer, *Hypatia: Die spätantiken Quellen. Eingeleitet, Kommentiert und Interpretiert* (Bern: Lang, 2011) and Al. Cameron and J. Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

navigates complex derivative philosophical traditions in his attempt to locate Hypatia as a philosopher (50).

Perhaps in pursuit of a wider audience and to produce a neat synthesis of evidence for the reader, Watts has an occasional tendency to “read-in” more than is actually evident, leading to overly simplistic results about what Hypatia thought or believed (18). Although the work never lacks integrity, the likelihood that it will achieve canonical status increases the risk that more partial interpretations will be echoed factually by less critical audiences. However, Watts generally displays excellent critical judgment and is not afraid to challenge received or convenient views (64-5). While he does not entirely resist the tendency to see the historical Hypatia as a marker of periodization, understanding that she “held back a massive social and intellectual tide” (120), he brings his own interpretation to the issue (118).

Watts’s *Hypatia* is the tenth contribution to a book series intended to shine a biographical light on women in antiquity. Because of Hypatia’s exceptional status as a female philosopher and mathematician in antiquity, and because her image is often sexualised, issues of gender are particularly important. An immediate stumbling block in exploring Hypatia is that one inevitably reverts away from her to men: either those who determined her life and death (like Theon, Theophilus, Cyril, Orestes) or those who told her story (Socrates, Damascius, John of Nikiu). As Watts observes, Mademoiselle B.’s letter on Hypatia from the eighteenth century provides a unique female insight, but her contribution made little or no discernible impact (138-9).

This androcentric orientation in the reception of Hypatia is unavoidable, but Watts’s analysis benefits from critical gender awareness (105), highlighting the obstacles Hypatia would have faced and understanding her achievements as a sort of feminist resistance (5). He discusses Hypatia’s mother as well as her father (21), and integrates evidence on women within education in antiquity (25). The silencing and stereotyping of women could have received more attention, but Watts’s comparison of Hypatia with Pandrosion, Sosipatra, Asclepigenia, and Maximus’s wife in Chapter Seven is insightful.

Some of Watts’s readings can be seen as overly generous: for example, Watts understands that Damascius had a “mixed judgement” of Hypatia (77), and represents Damascius’ emphasis on her gendered dress as “an elegant little quip.” Damascius’ portrayal of Hypatia can be understood in much more misogynistic terms, particularly in his comparison of Hypatia with Isidore and her self-deprecating display of her menstrual rag.

Watts's interpretation of Hypatia's sexuality can also be queried. He argues that Hypatia's celibacy "served as a powerful and tangible reminder of the particular emphasis that her teaching placed on temperance" (77). He underlines the philosophical reasons why Hypatia wanted to remain an unmarried virgin (151), and contends that Hypatia was exceptionally gifted not because she had more chances than other female intellectuals, but because she was "uniquely willing to accept the harsh sacrifices her career demanded of her" (155). But Hypatia's situation was unique because her father was the mathematician and astronomer Theon, from whom she received her education; choosing not to get married and not to have sex meant that she was able to pursue a philosophical and pedagogical role that was not available to other women, regardless of their ability or willingness to make sacrifices.²

Any quibbles highlighted take issue with intellectual interpretation, and should not detract from the overall impression of Watts' achievement. Watts has provided an invaluable starting point for those interested in Hypatia, including the general reader, the undergraduate student, and the researcher. He has succeeded in expertly gathering together the ancient evidence and modern reception of the female philosopher and synthesising it into a comprehensible format that is a pleasure to read. Particularly through his work on gender and modern reception, Watts's study rebalances the more melodramatic and prurient attention Hypatia tends to attract, considerably improving existing scholarship on this important figure from antiquity.

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2. As argued by G. Clark, *Monica: An Ordinary Saint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 93. Clark sees Hypatia as exceptional even within a female philosophical context, arguing that marriage and child-bearing were not considered obstacles for female philosophers.