Hellerman, Wendy Elgersma, *The Female Personification of Wisdom* Lewiston: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2009. 338+xiv pp. Paperback \$49.95 978-0-7734-4666-3

From the wisdom literature of Ancient Judaism to Gnosticism and up to the present day, the figure of Sophia has aroused perennial interest. Feminist concerns in religious, biblical, socio-cultural and literary studies are responsible for renewed attention to a feminine figure personifying philosophy and wisdom. Hellerman studies four such literary images: Penelope (Homer), Macrina (Gregory of Nyssa), Lady Philosophy (Boethius) and Beatrice (Dante). Although the texts that Hellerman chooses vary in character and genre, she unites them all by the underlying theme “reason opposing the passions” (273).

The book begins with an extensive and excellent review of the literature on allegory and personification. Hellerman (hereafter H.) ascribes the allegorical use of the Homeric Penelope to the category of ‘interpretive allegory’ while Gregory of Nyssa’s Macrina, Boethius’ Lady Philosophy and Dante’s Beatrice all fall under the category of ‘compositional allegory’. H. makes mention of Whitman¹ and Paxson’s² valuable work on allegory and personification, and focuses in particular on feminist literature and its “hermeneutic of suspicion with regard to patriarchal social values”. Barbara Newman, for example, raised the issue of the ontological status appropriate to allegorical feminine personifications: are they to be thought of as angels, or objects of vision or epiphany, or deities, or human beings, or just literary constructs (23). Hellerman asks whether, or to what extent, authors appeal to well known social realities, aspects of feminine life, or the female body in presenting Lady Philosophy as feminine. How does the feminine personification of philosophy relate to the role of women in Greek culture or in the schools of philosophy? Few women are found among the well-known philosophers of antiquity despite documentation of female adherents in the Academy as well as in the Cynic, Cyrenaic, Stoic, Epicurean, Pythagorean and Neoplatonic Schools.

In Chapter Two H. focuses on the symbolic use of Penelope, on the part of Stoic interpreters, to represent philosophy and enhance the status of its pursuit. Hellerman turns to Bion of Borysthenes (ca. 325-255 BCE), Aristippus of Cyrene (ca. 435-350 BCE), the founder of the Cyrenic school of philosophy, and Ariston of Chios (fl. ca. 250 BCE), who was influenced by Zeno the Stoic. These interpreters claim that the fact that the suitors take advantage of willing servant girls instead of the unattainable Penelope is an allegory for students who do not give

¹ Jon Whitman. 1987. *Allegory. The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

² James J. Paxson. 1994. *The Poetics of Personification*, Cambridge University Press.

priority to the study of philosophy but waste their time engaging in lesser studies such as music or mathematics. Penelope represents philosophy itself as the true object of desire. Unlike Plato, the Stoics, according to H., did not value the study of music and mathematics as a preparation for abstract thought. They prioritized First Philosophy. In a second allegorizing account, the focus is on Penelope's weaving, the main source being Eustathius' Scholia on the *Odyssey* in the twelfth century, in which is preserved an older allegory of weaving as a symbol of logic.

In *Vita S. Macrinae* and *De Anima et Resurrectione*, Gregory of Nyssa eulogizes his ascetic sister Macrina as an exemplar of *aretē*. She rose above nature and went "beyond patience and courage" by not giving vent to "base womanish lamentation" (60). She was composed and rational even when hearing of her brother's death. Her life was one of philosophical combat, her enemy being the passions and nature, against which she raised herself to the heights of virtue through philosophy. Virtue is a unifying theme in other biographical writings of late antiquity, comparable to the themes of martyrdom and asceticism in Iamblichus' life of Pythagoras, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* and Christian ascetic literature. In this encomium to his sister, Gregory uses terminology characteristic of Stoicized Platonism, *sōphrosunē*, for example one of the four key virtues for Zeno. For Plato, it meant subjecting lower parts of the soul to the higher rational part (*Rep.* 430e-32a, 442c) (69, n. 37). Like Porphyry's Marcella, Eunapius' Sosipatra and Hypatia, Macrina was connected with aristocratic circles. Porphyry's *Letter to Marcella*, in which he advises her to "Flee all that is womanish in the soul, as though you had a man's body about you... Let reason... direct all your impulses..." abounds in similarly prescriptive language.

In Macrina, as *logos* personified (85), key Platonic and Epicurean ideas are mixed with scriptural notions concerning the cosmic battle of good and evil in Christ's life. Once the Christians had appropriated the pagan epistemological concept of *logos* for Christ (84), the theme of the triumph of *logos* over *pathos* came to evoke Christ's redemption. H. deepens her discussion of the issue with material from the secondary literature on Gregory, such as Daniélou (1944),³ who identifies at least five different meanings for the *pathē*.

H. confines her discussion of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* to the opening sections of the treatise, emphasizing the Neoplatonic context. Lady Philosophy appears to Boethius in the gloomy darkness of the prisoner's cell in which was imprisoned in 525 CE for treason, astrology or magic, before being condemned to death. At times, she appears to be so tall that her head reaches right up to the heavens (1.pr1.2 [8-13]). Commentators use the fact that her garment

³ J. Daniélou. 1944. *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*. Aubier Montaigne.

was said to have been woven by herself of the finest of threads, in one indivisible piece, to associate her with Athena, the goddess of wisdom who was also believed to have woven her own robe (*Iliad* 5. 74). H. gives ample coverage to the scholarship surrounding the *Consolation*, especially that related to the female personification of wisdom. While some scholars suggest that the dialogue between the poet and the Lady is some kind of Menippean satire, a genre loosely connected with Cynic philosophy, H. argues that this does not do justice to the seriousness of the philosophical discussion of problems of providence, fate and philosophical consolation for the experience of evil and injustice.

Chapter Six focuses on the fourteenth century and Dante's creation of "one of the most celebrated women in all of literature, Beatrice" (208). Like her predecessor, Macrina in the fourth century, Beatrice is an advocate of "reason against passion". Unlike Macrina, she is an object of desire, who points not to herself but to God as the ultimate source of wisdom. H. supplements *The Divine Comedy* with Boethian elements in *Vita Nuova* and *Convivio*, in which Boethius describes Philosophy as the most noble and beautiful daughter of God. This confirms Dante's presentation of Lady Philosophy's beauty and virtue as an exemplar of reason and "the divine exemplar for God in creating all things" (215). In the *Commedia* she is a personification of Love as well, differing from the other three figures in this book. In the service of the poet's quest, she discourses on many philosophical issues: the order of the universe, divine prudence etc. Her role as object of Dante's love and desire guide him to "understand the divine cosmic love that moves the sun, the stars and planets and all human life" (221).

H. reviews the extensive literature on Beatrice. She focuses on Singleton,⁴ who associates Beatrice with Christ as 'wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1 and 2), using the Advent sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux (who speaks of wisdom as the link between Christ and Grace). H. argues that Beatrice can be understood on analogy with Mary, a claim that receives support from the popular devotion to Mary in the hymns and the liturgy, as well as in centers of worship in Dante's time. H. concludes that "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Dante would... have considered Mary as the quintessential Lady Wisdom" (243).

The four figures that Hellerman treats in this book embody reason as linked to virtue and nobility of character. Penelope represents theoretical thought, Macrina reason in the face of irrational passion, Lady Philosophy insight into philosophical truths, and Beatrice is the true guide to the love of God. The contextualizing of the four figures within the *paideia* and the circumstances of their time is excellently done, although the conflation of these four figures under the one umbrella,

⁴ Charles S. Singleton. 1970. *Dante Studies*. Vol. 2 *Journey to Beatrice* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

'personifications of wisdom' may well have overlooked essential differences. The link that H. seeks to establish between Lady Wisdom and the Christological theology of the *logos* (277) is a *leitmotif* of the book. In consistently addressing feminist issues, she may seem to overplay her hand; see, for instance her claim that "Desire is a human quality and in literature the desiring subject is usually the (masculine) philosopher" or "all the authors of the texts were men" (249-250).

These caveats notwithstanding the book is a rewarding read and a treasure trove of scholarly references and intriguing speculations on the role of 'lady' philosophy' as an enduring literary icon.

Emilie Kutash

Saint Joseph College, New York

eeekut@optonline.net