

E. Watts

Hypatia: The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher (Oxford University Press, 2017) £19.00.

One of the bitter truths of the legacy of Hypatia, a late Neoplatonic philosopher of Alexandria, pivots on the fact that she is unfortunately remembered more for her tragic and horrific death at the hands of an angry mob than for her intellectual and political accomplishments. Taking into consideration the scant evidence scholars have for reconstructing her life and thought, Edward Watts' *Hypatia: The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher* attempts to refocus attention on the astonishing impact Hypatia had as a mathematician, philosopher and public intellectual by rigorously detailing the socio-economic, political, cultural and historical parameters of what her life may have looked like in the Alexandria of the 4th and 5th centuries. Watts opens his manuscript with a detailed narrative of her Lenten murder, laying out the causes for her brutal demise before steering the introduction to his own intentions by making an astute parallel between Hypatia and Martin Luther King's respective assassinations. Their tragic deaths admittedly make them both powerful symbols, martyrs for the causes they may or may not have championed, but "that does not make their lives unimportant." (4) Instead of reducing Hypatia to her role as victim, Watts hopes to remind his readers of the courage and determination that it took for her to be a public intellectual at a time when the world was dominated by men and women who were not expected to wield authority or show academic prowess. To do this, Watts' book is divided into ten chapters, bookended by an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter, "Alexandria" (admittedly an expansion of his *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, Berkeley, 2006, Chapter 6), rehearses the socio-economic and political conditions of Hypatia's beloved city so as to set the stage for understanding Hypatia's background in the privileged elite class of pagan aristocrats and intellectuals before turning, in Chapter 2, to the evidence and conclusions one can draw about Hypatia's childhood and education. It is in this chapter that Watts discusses Hypatia's early accomplishments in the arena of mathematics and the publication of her edition of Books 3-13 of the *Almagest* as well as her attempts to reorient the relationship between mathematics and philosophy. Here, Watts follows Damascius and continuously emphasizes that Hypatia, who surpassed her father in philosophical adroitness, was able to lead a shift in the intellectual *Zeitgeist* of the time. Watts argues that unlike her father, Theon, or her other more mathematically focused contemporaries like Pappus, Hypatia prioritized philosophy over mathematics, seeing the later as an important tool in philosophical contemplation.

Chapter 3, “The School of Hypatia”, begins with the philosopher’s ascent to the position of primary lecturer in the 380s and 390s at her father’s school before focusing on her particular brand of Platonism. After outlining, in an unfortunately simplistic fashion, the differences between Plotinian contemplative and Iamblichean theurgic/ritualistic approaches to Platonism, Watts admits that “Hypatia has always been an awkward fit in this story” (43) insofar as she would have had little to no exposure to Iamblichean philosophy in her early career while, by mid-career, Hypatia’s Alexandria would have been saturated with the ideas of the Syrian. Attempting to weigh in on this possible influence on Hypatia, Watts begins with Socrates Scholasticus’ comment that she was “heir to the Platonic interpretative tradition handed down from Plotinus” (*HE* 7.15) before analyzing the letters of her pupil Synesius for Iamblichian echoes. Watts concludes that Synesius’ letters “do not represent definitive evidence for either point” (45) and so he argues that we are obliged to take Socrates Scholasticus’ comments as evidence that she was a Plotinian/Porphyrion Platonist who would have emphasized unity with the divine exclusively through contemplation versus theurgic rites and practices. Overall, this becomes one of Watts’ most important conclusions and frames the rest of his narrative regarding Hypatia’s strength as a philosopher and political advisor in the religiously eclectic city of Alexandria. Believing that the emphasis of her teaching was on philosophy, as opposed to confessional identity, i.e. that what matters is the practice of philosophy rather than the particular rituals that mark one as pagan or Christian, Watts emphasizes that Hypatia was therein able to offer a philosophically rigorous curriculum that would have appealed to Christians and pagans alike. While this is, indeed, an attractive portrait, it is here that Watts’ conclusions are too sweeping and bold, arguably compromising his picture of Hypatia insofar as there is simply not enough evidence to conclude that “she was not interested in the ritualized elements of Iamblichian philosophy” (50) or, more strongly, that “Hypatia offered a purely contemplative path toward union with the divine and had no interest in theurgy at all.” (54) In these sweeping suppositions, Watts reveals a lack of nuance and finesse in analyzing the evidence we have for Hypatia’s brand of Platonism. Conceding that Socrates Scholasticus’ remarks would seem to align her more with the Plotinian tradition, it should be noted that Hypatia may have been drawn to Iamblichus insofar as both philosophers saw mathematics as a divine touchstone and, as such, she may have been sympathetic to the Iamblichian belief that practicing mathematics was a form of theurgy (see Shaw 1995, 189-25). Of course, there is no non-speculative evidence for this but there is also no evidence that would definitively cement the view that Hypatia lacked such sympathies while still being a Plotinian Platonist. Similarly, Watts