

A large, close-up, sepia-toned photograph of a woman's face, looking slightly to the right. The image is the background for the top half of the cover.

ROMAN
WOMEN



Edited and with a New Introduction by
AUGUSTO FRASCHETTI

EIGHT

HYPATIA THE INTELLECTUAL

Silvia Ronchey

Hypatia, or the Partisan Spirit of the Alexandrians

In the years of the decline of the Western Roman Empire, a century after the edict of 313 A.D. that had granted freedom of cult to the Christians, the tolerance then showed by Constantine gradually developed, under his successors, into an intolerance against the pagans. In 391 A.D. Theodosius issued a constitution that made Christianity the state religion, and in the following year a special law against all pagan cults was issued in Egypt, "cradle of all Gods" according to ancient philosophers. The policy of the Christian religious authorities of Alexandria, the main Greek cultural center of the Mediterranean *koiné* and the epicenter of this ideological seism, aimed at the annihilation of ritual paganism, the religion of the ancient temples.

Everything happened as in the poets' myths, when the Giants held supremacy on earth: the religion of the temples in Alexandria and in the sanctuary of Serapis was dispersed to the winds; not only the ceremonies but the edifices themselves, under Theodosius, when . . . the temple of Serapis was destroyed . . . and war was waged to seize the temple's treasures.

These are the words of Eunapius, the biographer of the last Neoplatonists. The statue of Serapis, a God-demon sitting on a throne, the work of the Greek sculptor Briaxis, represented both the power of Hellenistic sovereigns and the dominion of the secrets of Hades. A mantle, covering his body, made of a bluish alloy and strewn with precious stones, represented the stars in the sky and the astrological/astronomical knowledge of the Orient. The Serapeum, with its one hundred steps in front, was the destination of pilgrims coming from all over the *oikouméne*. Its destruction, carried out by Theophilus, who very readily complied with Theodosius's edicts, was made even more appalling by its sacking. As Eunapius points out, "the only part of the Serapeum they did not steal
160 was the floor, because the stones were too heavy to carry away."

The whole Church of Egypt participated in this campaign against paganism at the beginning of the fifth century. The monks came down from the mountains of Nitria to support their patriarch. "They were allowed into the holy places and were called monks whilst they, men only in appearance, lead a pig-like life and openly favored and committed a number of abominable crimes." Again the monks, five hundred of them, will come back to frighten the city at the time of bishop Cyril, Theophilus's grandchild and a future saint, who succeeded the latter in the bishopric of the main Christian metropolis of the East exactly one hundred years after Constantine's edict.

"There used to be a woman in Alexandria," Socrates, a contemporary and lawyer at the Court of Constantinople, narrates in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*,

by the name of Hypatia. She was the daughter of Theon, a philosopher in Alexandria, and had reached such heights of wisdom that she had by far surpassed all the philosophers of her circle. She inherited from her father the teaching (*diadoché*) of the Platonic school deriving from Plotinus, and expounded all the philosophical doctrines in her addresses to a free public . . . From everywhere people would come to her to philosophize.

In *Hypatia, or the Partisan Spirit of the Alexandrians*, a long article from Suidas, a Byzantine lexicon from the tenth century, we read that Hypatia "had become such an experienced teacher, was so just and wise, but also so beautiful and attractive," that her students would fall in love with her. Suidas's information stems from two by now lost accounts from the time of Justinian: the first, whether true or fake, is by Hesychius of Miletus, and the second, of which only a few fragments have survived, is the *Vita Isidori*, the last priest of the temple of Serapis, written by the Neoplatonic Damascius, the last scholar of the Academy of Athens. Presumably it is the first that states that Hypatia,

being more naturally gifted than her father, did not limit herself to the technical-mathematical teachings of her father, but dedicated herself to real and true philosophy, to great result. Although a woman, she would wear the *tribon* [the cape of Cynic philosophers] and would go about the city publicly, explaining to whoever felt like listening, Plato, Aristotle, or any other philosopher.

It is well known that a complex relationship tied the Roman governor to the local elites of the provincial territories in the fourth and fifth cen-

turies of the Roman Empire. Among the various centuries-old privileges inherited by birth, there was the special "Hellenic" education, which was of strong political connotation. Influential among the aristocracy, the heiress of the intellectual dynasty that referred to the School of the Mouseion, Hypatia was mainly the teacher of the Hellenic lifestyle (*helleniké diagogé*), mostly political, that inspired the pagan aristocracy. Suidas, still probably with Hesychius's words, confirms this: she was "fluent and dialectical (*dialektiké*) in her speech, cautious and shrewd (*politiké*) in her action, so that the whole city revered her and paid homage to her."

As Socrates Scholasticus informs us, "from the Hellenic culture (*paidéia*) she had derived a self-control and a directness in her speech (*parrhesia*)" that helped her to "directly confront the powerful and to attend men's meetings without fear. All of them held a deferential attitude for her extraordinary wisdom and looked up to her, if anything, with reverential awe." Hypatia was the spokeswoman of the city aristocracy to the representative of the central Roman government, and namely with Orestes, prefect of Egypt. "The political leaders administrating in the city," Suidas tells us, "were the first to go and listen to her, as still happened in Athens. If paganism was finished, there, anyway, the name of philosophy maintained its stature and appeared worthy of consideration to those holding the most important city offices." Philosophy strongly and directly influenced the internal policy of her city. In a letter of introduction, Synesius, a pupil of hers, wrote to her: "You have always had power, may you hold it for long and may you make good use of it."

It is from this very power, however, local and based on a system of patrons, that the transformation of the ruling classes took its very first steps, having started in the provincial capitals by the political legitimization of the Church. The *polis* of late antiquity witnessed from then on the bishop, and not the philosopher, become the consultant and the "civic defender" of the imperial representative. "The Christian bishop had to have the monopoly of *parrhesia!*" wrote Peter Brown, proposing a historical, perhaps too direct syllogism on the very case of Hypatia: if during the transition from paganism to Christianity the roles of the philosopher and the bishop developed to such an extent that they coincided, what was the bishop to do if not eliminate the philosopher? "A personified *phthònos* raised arms against her," accuses Socrates. The *phthònos* of the Christians against the pagans, according to all sources, and a common opinion in ancient literature, was the cause of the violent end not only

of Hypatia but together with her of the old lifestyle of the *polis*, the same one outlined in the nuanced reference to Athens on the part of Suidas.

“Because of the frequent meetings between Hypatia and Orestes,” writes Socrates, “there arose among the people the suspicion that it was Hypatia’s fault if Orestes did not reconcile himself with their bishop.” In fact this idea is reaffirmed two centuries later in a fourth and no less important source of our study: the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiû, probably written in Coptic a few years short of the Arabic conquest of Egypt, and often neglected by scholars, as it only survived in a late Ethiopic version. In the allegiance between the prefect and the philosopher, the Coptic bishop read, in all probability rightly, “the reaction of the pagan will against the outrageous Christianity of Cyril” (Rougé).

If the Hellenic aristocracy is linked to the offices of the imperial government by means of their implicit and common adhesion to paganism as if in a sort of Freemasonry, in the political game played out in Alexandria between those forces and the emerging Christian authorities one has to take into account a fourth element: namely the Jewish community, once before Christianity the predominant party and now a rival one.

An old antagonism had opposed the Jewish mother Church to Christianity, once a simple splinter group or diverting sect in the first centuries, when it grew “in the shadow of the synagogues.” On the Christian side, rivalry in proselytism was added to the theological hostility against the race “responsible for the murder of God.” Bishops, from Cyril of Alexandria to Theodoret of Cyrrihus and Basil of Seleucia, preached against the Jews. The first scripts and acts of Cyril’s episcopal career were characterized by a more anti-Jewish than antipagan stance: his first festal letter in 414 is an example.

In the provinces, the traditional violence between Jews and gentiles goes back to the times of the first emperors. Synesius calls the Jewish people “archenemies of the Hellenes,” still bearing in mind the rebellion of the Jewish colonies in Egypt and Pentapolis in 117 under Trajan and the subsequent slaughter, according to Dio Cassius, of two hundred and twenty thousand gentiles. In the fifth century A.D., street fights were an everyday, ordinary event, like the Samaritans’ riots in Palestine. Anti-Jewish rancor was as strong as ever in Alexandria, where the Jewish colony numbered one hundred thousand.

Socrates narrates, with likely impartiality, that in 414 the Jews had convinced the prefect Orestes to imprison Hierax and torture him in public. A teacher of grammar, Hierax, employed by Cyril as an agent

provocateur, used to disturb and upset the citizens' assemblies in the theater. (John of Nikiû transforms him into "an educated and capable man, who had the saintly habit of reproaching the pagans as he was entirely devoted to the illustrious patriarch, and most knowledgeable in the Christian doctrine.") The Jews then ambushed Christian activists in the streets of Alexandria, at night, and according to Socrates killed "a large number" of them.

The patriarch immediately reacted with the great pogrom, a prelude to Hypatia's assassination, perpetrated by Cyril's *parabalani* against the synagogues. Stirred up by agitators, the Christian population pillaged the houses of the Jews, who were eventually banned from the city. "The Jews, who had lived in the city since the time of Alexander the Great, all had to emigrate, lost all their property, and were dispersed here and there." The patriarch's act of force was momentous: not a spontaneous and popular uprising, but rather an abuse of the Church, which once again, after the destruction of the Serapeum, made use of the violent monks as its instrument.

The development of monasticism into a mass phenomenon enhanced every political act and, as has been written, created repercussions throughout the entire history of the fifth century. At the time of Anthony of Tebaid, the desert fathers used to preach refusal of organized life, abstinence from social food rites, retreat from the world (*anachoresis*) and from nature itself. They practiced asceticism and celebrated the inner desert (*éremos*) by transferring themselves to a real one. Though a great mystic movement, Egyptian eremitism was still a limited phenomenon, in a way elitist. But its revolutionary potential, as yet unexpressed in the fourth century A.D., paved the way for currents of subversive asceticism, which in the fifth century constituted a deviance. Zealots, "beings with incandescent and fiery spirit," as Socrates calls them, these monks, often illiterate, hired by Cyril, were bands of hoodlums wandering from town to town inflamed by social hatred of the pagans, the civilized world in general, and city dwellers. As Evelyne Patlagean has written, "they pushed ascetic imperturbability over the brink of subversion. All in all, the whole monastic world was animated by the claim of their supremacy . . . and all monks had, at that time, free access to the cities."

At this precise moment the monks make their appearance in Hypatia's story. "Some monks from the mountains of Nitria, whose spirit was seething since the time of Theophilus, who had maliciously armed them . . . , and had consequently become zealots, in their fanaticism decided to fight in Cyril's name," Socrates reports. The new patriarch, who

had long dwelled among them in the desert before his appointment, absorbed them in the body of the *parabalani*, "nurses/stretchers bearers," in fact clerics, who constituted his private militia in Alexandria. Suidas defines them as "abominable beings, true beasts." References to the "beastly" uncouthness of the monks, already found in Eunapius, often recur in Byzantine writers, hinting not only at the actual opinion of them, but also at a passage in Aristotle's *On Politics* saying that "the renunciation of the life in the *polis* can only make men Gods or beasts."

The attack against the prefect of Egypt's train in 415 occurred shortly before the slaughtering of Hypatia. Socrates narrates that the monks started verbally abusing Orestes, accusing him of sacrificing to the gods and of being a "Hellenic." The prefect pled innocent to these accusations of paganism, claiming to have been baptized by Atticus, bishop of Constantinople, and to be a Christian. But it is likely that it was this imprudent mention of the rival seat of Constantinople which roused the Egyptians. Someone named Ammonius seems to have thrown a stone, hitting Orestes on the head inside his own carriage. Blood spurted out, staining the toga of the representative of the Roman government. Having gone far too far, Ammonius was imprisoned and died under torture. Two reports were soon sent to Constantinople, Orestes' and Cyril's. Cyril immediately ordered a state funeral for Ammonius, and in his public eulogy not only called him a martyr but also changed his name from Ammonius to Thaumasius, "the admirable," as his gestures had been admirable: an act which openly offended the prefect.

With his behavior, however, Cyril estranged, as Socrates informs us, the more moderate wing (*hòi sophronoùntes*) of the ecclesiastical body (*laòs*), moderate at least compared to the mass (*pléthos*) of the integralists. Perhaps for this reason Cyril was advised to meet Orestes. He presented himself bearing the Gospels as a gift: the symbol of the state religion as opposed to the Old Testament of the Jews, who were in fact the actual subject matter of the discussion. With his act, Cyril was confident, Socrates writes, "that the respect for the new religion would have induced the prefect to quell his anger." But Orestes "was not softened, and an implacable war went on between them."

It is at this very moment that Suidas's sources ascribe *phthònos*, as the triggering element of the drama, to Cyril and not in general to the Christians. *Phthònos*, then, no longer as "evil will," but with the more specific and personal meaning of "envy": the bishop's rivalry against the philosopher, combined with the natural jealousy of the cleric for a woman of the world; the former and the latter belonging to two catego-

ries that, over the course of history, have nourished either great mutual love or great mutual hatred.

Suidas writes:

One day the bishop of the opposing sect, Cyril, was passing by the house of Hypatia and noticed a number of people crowding in front of her door, men and horses gathering together, some coming, others going, others waiting outside. . . . After inquiring what they were all doing and the reason for such hustle and bustle, he was informed that it was Hypatia's day for receiving and hers was that house. Having learnt that, Cyril felt his soul bitterly bitten and for that reason he soon organized her murder, the most impious of all assassinations.

This took place "in the fourth year of Cyril's episcopate, the tenth of Honorius's consulate, the sixth of Theodosius the Second, in the month of March." Socrates writes that at the time of the aggression the monks' rage was made worse, ironically enough, "by the period of fasting." Monks and *parabalani* gathered together under Peter the Lector, also a cleric as his name tells us, and contrived "a secret plan." Both Suidas and Damascius state that a "multitude of bloodthirsty men fell upon Hypatia while she was, as usual, returning home." Theon's daughter was pulled out of her litter and dragged "to the church named after Caesar emperor," that is, in the courtyard of the Cesaraeum, recently built by Theodosius. Here, "heedless of

the revenge of gods or of humans, these truly wicked massacred the philosopher," writes Damascius, "and while she was still faintly breathing they gouged out her eyes." "They stripped off her clothes, slaughtered her, cutting her body with sharp potsherds, and carried her remains to the so-called Cinaron and set them on fire," Socrates writes. "The pieces of her brutalized body were scattered all over the city, and all that she suffered because of the hostility (*phthònos*) against her outstanding wisdom, namely astronomical," according to this pagan source, which also defined her lynching as an "appalling crime and an immense shame to the city."

The *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Philostorgius, now lost, was written a few years after these events and has been handed down in the summary given by Photius. In Philostorgius, openly Arian and therefore hostile to the bishop of Alexandria, one reads: "The woman was slaughtered by the hand of those who profess consubstantiation." But also for Socrates of Constantinople, "what Cyril and the Church of Alexandria committed

was no small act of infamy. For murders and wars and the like are something totally alien to the spirit of Christianity.”

John of Nikiû, who in a very clear, almost provocative way took Cyril’s side, gives us an almost unrecognizable version of the story. The Coptic narration considers Hypatia’s lynching almost as a legitimate execution, something to be proud of for “the flock of believers” who committed it. Peter is not only a lector, but also a magistrate and a perfect servant of Christ. The encounter between the executioner and the predestined victim, guilty “of hypnotizing her students with her magic” and of exercising the “satanic” science of the stars, was neither casual nor contrived in the secrecy of an ambush, for it happened in the very place where Hypatia taught: it is emblematic that in this version she was dragged away from her teacher’s cathedra and not from her carriage.

Then, apart from Philostorgius’s brief mention, we are confronted, in the ancient Christian sources still available to us, with a double report of the facts. The first, the *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Socrates, a contemporary of the events, probably gives us the official version. The second, John of Nikiû’s *Chronicle*, of a slightly later time, manifestly mirrors both the thesis and the ideology of the local Egyptian Church, which developed Cyril’s doctrine in antithesis to the Constantinopolitan orthodoxy. The chronicler concludes triumphantly: “The whole population gathered around the patriarch Cyril and called him the new Theophilus, as he had liberated the city from the last of its idols.”

The year of Hypatia’s death was 5096 from the creation of the world for the Alexandrians, the twelfth indiction, the eighth year of the reign, in the East, of a child emperor: Theodosius II was looked after by his elder sister Pulcheria, who at court was called Augusta, and, although only fifteen years old, she was the actual empress. Hostile to the pagans, Pulcheria was so generally devoted to Christianity, and namely to the Alexandrian orthodoxy, that she was defined by one historian as “the purple-clad nun.”

So Hypatia’s murder went unpunished. The magistrate in charge filed the case. Damascius writes: “The wrath of the emperor would have fallen on Cyril had Edesius [probably the emperor’s emissary] not corrupted both judges and witnesses so as to avoid punishment for the murderers.” Pulcheria’s devotion prevailed over the indignation of Orestes, who obtained from the government he represented, in exchange for his silence, few measures, not enough anyway to limit the bishop’s interference in the lay administration. The number of *parabalani* was reduced and from then on they were put under the control of, and chosen by, the prefect

of Egypt. They were also forbidden entrance in a few cities, according to the report sent to the imperial court by the city council, whose answer is contained in the *Theodosian Code*. Cyril the bishop was then acquitted and probably politically absolved too. To see him condemned by history one has to wait not until the year 451 A.D., when Monophysitism, the heresy based on Cyril's doctrine, was condemned at Chalcedon, but until the judgement of posterity, so much more appreciative of Hypatia's than of Cyril's doctrine.

The Fortune of Hypatia

Supposing Mme. Dacier was the most beautiful woman in Paris, and that in the *querelle* between the ancients and the moderns the Carmelites claimed that the poem about Mary Magdalene composed by one of them was immensely superior to Homer, and that preferring the *Iliad* to a monk's verses was an atrocious, impious act; and supposing that the archbishop of Paris had taken the side of the Carmelites against the city governor, a follower of the beautiful Mme. Dacier, and had induced the Carmelites to massacre this handsome lady in the church of Notre Dame, and to drag her naked and bleeding body to the place Maubert; well, there would have been nobody able to deny that the action of the archbishop of Paris was an evil action, one which must be repented. This, though, is precisely the story of Hypatia.

So writes Voltaire in his *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1772). To Anne Dacier, the great Huguenot lady philosopher (but certainly not "la plus belle dame de Paris"), Gilles Ménage had dedicated his *Historia mulierum philosopharum* (1690): the evidence against Cyril had emerged for the first time in the absolute monarchy of France, after the mediaeval Byzantine autocracy. The complete collection of the ancient sources on the murder of Hypatia was published a few decades later, in the *Mulierum Graecarum, quae oratione prosa usae sunt, fragmenta et elogia* (1735), by the Protestant Wolf.

As a German historian has said, in the modern age "*Kulturkampf* and clericalism have placed Hypatia's case in the battlefield." On Hypatia's death and as on other episodes of early Christianity, Catholic historiography has been confronted with the Protestant, Anglican, and Jansenist schools, as well as the Enlightenment and lay schools. Voltaire spoke of Hypatia again and in more severe terms in other works, and in his *Histoire de l'établissement du Christianisme* (1777) he listed her death

among the “excès du fanatisme”; via Voltaire’s quotations, the characters of Hypatia’s drama appeared in French eighteenth-century fiction and *en travesti* in Schiller’s tragedies, and also in Vincenzo Monti’s lines:

La voce alzate, o secoli caduti,
Gridi l’Africa all’Asia e l’innocente
Ombra d’Ipazia il grido orrendo aiuti.

Raise your voices, fallen centuries / might Africa cry against Asia / might
her cry help the shade of Hypatia.

The first of a group of three polemic poems including *Superstition* and *Danger, Fanaticism* is what prevents reason from triumphing and leaves the Church to meddle in the affairs of state.

But before France, England had already shared the posthumous case of Hypatia, in an essay dedicated to her by the Irishman John Toland, by the title of

Hypatia; or, The history of a most beautiful, most virtuous, most learned, and every way accomplish’d lady; who was torn to pieces by the clergy of Alexandria, to gratify the pride, emulation, and cruelty of their archbishop, commonly but undeservedly styled St. Cyril,

which was soon contradicted, in 1721, by a pamphlet by Lewis

The history of Hypatia, a most impudent school-mistress of Alexandria, murder’d and torn to pieces by the populace, in defence of Saint Cyril and the Alexandrian clergy: From the aspersions of Mr. Toland.

Hypatia enjoyed vast fame and reputation throughout the Protestant eighteenth century, as the literary production of German and English anticlericalism testify: from the *Satyres* by Henry Fielding, who imagines a very unlikely engagement between the lady philosopher and the emperor Julian the Apostate and who laments the loss of the ring in the fire of the Cinaron, to Wieland’s *Moralische Briefe*, which exalts her and places her next to Socrates.

Entering into the midst of this already advanced stage of afterlife is Gibbon, who in the *Decline and Fall* certainly did not restrain himself from attacking Cyril’s reputation:

On a fatal day, in the holy season of Lent, Hypatia was torn from her chariot, stripped naked, dragged to the church, and inhumanly butchered

by the hands of Peter the reader and a troop of savage and merciless fanatics: her flesh was scraped from her bones with sharp oyster shells, and her quivering limbs were delivered to the flames. The just progress of inquiry and punishment was stopped by seasonable gifts; but the murder of Hypatia has imprinted an indelible stain on the character and religion of Cyril of Alexandria.

If we consider the Catholic side, from the very beginning we find a clear resistance to even hint at the subject and in any case to put it in correct perspective. From the time of the Counter-Reformation, Cardinal Baronio's *Annales* try to alter the information on Cyril's politics and start to question the reliability of the sources, in particular Socrates. In the last century, it was even stated that "as Cyril was sanctified by the Church, every good believer ought to consider him completely justified." Still at the beginning of this century, those events were considered by religious writers as topical facts and Cyril's innocence or guilt has been the subject of animated discussions. In 1901, after a close examination of the sources, Schaefer recriminates: "If Orestes had accepted the offer of peace, or had with good will taken into consideration Cyril's changed attitude, probably the bloody crime would have been averted." Trying to defend the bishop, the historians end up accusing the mentality of the Church, revealing that it remains similar to what it had been in those years.

It might be surprising that in his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique*, Tillemont, otherwise a quite severe judge, shows a more prudent justificative attitude towards Alexandrian Christianity. He writes, in fact, that Hypatia's murder not only "appeared heinous to Christian souls," but "caused great damage to the bishop." In his *Mémoires* he mentions, even if without giving them too much credit, the news of Hypatia's belated conversion and an openly false Latin epistle stating that the philosopheress had supposedly explained Nestorius's Christian, though duo-physite, doctrine to Cyril on the occasion of the Council of Ephesus, which took place a good fifteen years after her death. But Jansenists like Tillemont, of course, defended the right of the Church to exercise political hegemony. Proof of this is the fact that another Jansenist, Claude-Pierre Goujet, later openly celebrated Cyril's attempt in his *Dissertation sur Hypacie où l'on justifie Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie sur la morte de cette savante* (1727).

The stances of the historians, in their nuances and subtlety, have had unrestrained effects on poets. The marchioness Diodata Saluzzo Roero,

a member of the Academy of Sciences in Turin and of Arcadia under the name of Glaucilla Erotria, who besides the splendour of her high birth added “that of a soul embellished by all virtues,” wrote a long poem entitled *Hypatia, or On Philosophy* (1827). She is here described as a Christian Hypatia—perhaps autobiographical—inwardly torn between her faith, the discussions of her academic entourage, and a promise to marry no one else but the Neoplatonic Isidore, the protagonist of Damascius’s *Life*, probably at that time still an infant:

Mentr’ei seguia, la vergin tra l’oscuro
 Volgo precipitando: Io son cristiana,
 Gridò, cristiana, né celarlo curo.
 Nulla può sul mio cor possanza umana;
 Nulla! saria delitto or l’occultarlo,
 E delitto appressar l’ara profana.
 Ahi lo sdegno del padre! e chi frenarlo
 Potrà? . . . l’allor perduto! . . . il perder quelli
 Sì fidi amici! . . . lassa, di che parlo?
 Pera il mio nome, il volgo empia m’appelli!

While he followed the virgin running / amid the dark throng: I am a
 Christian, / she cried, and I do not intend to hide it. / Men have no power
 over my heart / None! It would be a crime to hide it, / a crime to approach
 the altar profane. (Alas for my father’s scorn! But who could have pre-
 vented it?) / . . . The lost glory . . . the loss of such loyal friends / . . .
 Enough, what am I speaking of? / That my name might die, / might the
 crowd call me unholy!

Trembling at the thought of her father’s anger, the heroine is rescued
 by Cyril himself, who

Udì ’l gran fatto, venne: Io t’apparecchio
 Tetto umil d’alga, o de la vincitrice
 Virtù d’Iddio (sclamò) trionfo e specchio.
 Seguimi, vieni, vergine felice!

He heard of the trouble and came to her. I will build you / a humble roof
 of seaweed, O / triumph and mirror (he exclaimed) / of God’s conqueress
 virtue! / Follow me, come, happy virgin!

The story would have had a happy ending if the “impious Altiphon, a
 furiously passionate and unrequited lover,” had not come up and stabbed
 her. The dying of Hypatia is presented here as a Christian martyrdom:

Languida rosa sul reciso stelo
 Nel sangue immersa la vergine giacea
 Avvolta a mezzo nel suo bianco velo
 Soavissimamente sorridea
 Condonatrice de l'altrui delitto
 Mentre il gran segno redentor stringea.

Languishing rose on the severed stalk, / the virgin lies steeped in blood, /
 wrapped in a white veil, / most suavely smiling, / she forgives the crime of
 others / while clutching the Savior's cross.

In the Biblioteca Angelica in Rome, next to the seat of the Arcadia, there still hangs an oil portrait of Glaucilla Erotria, holding in her hand a book inscribed with the name Hypatia. A lightly conservative patriot (as "a moral purpose of her work" she was determined to prove "how ruinous are the effects of discordant opinions of the parties"), she was also the correspondent of Monti, Parini, Manzoni, Madame de Staël, and above all a reader of Tillemont, on whose description of Hypatia her poem is apparently based (or better, "hung," as she herself wrote). The Jansenist version of the story is partly responsible, then, for her total misunderstanding of history.

Another odd case of a doctrinal dispute in literary form is the novel by the Anglican Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia; or, New Foes with an Old Face*. His prose has been defined as "a pageant of sadistic eroticism" and its author "a perverted clergyman."

On, up the nave, fresh shreds of her dress strewing the holy pavement, up the chancel steps themselves, up to the altar, right underneath the great still Christ; and there even those hell-hounds paused. She shook herself free from her tormentors, and springing back, rose for one moment to her full height, naked, snow-white against the dusky mass around, shame and indignation in those wide, clear eyes, but not a stain of fear.

However, aside from the Victorian style, we ought to consider that the Reverend Mr. Kingsley was a follower of Carlyle, a supporter of Social Reform, and yet the main literary advocate of the Christian Socialists against the contemporary Oxford movement. His *New Foes with an Old Face* actually owes much less to the aesthetic canons à la Pierre Louÿs, to whom Kingsley has been justly enough compared, and much more to the persisting controversies on heresies by which the figure of Hypatia has been able to survive in history. We could define it as an ideological-religious *Puppenspiel*. Underneath their Alexandrian gar-

ments, the targets are clearly recognizable: Tractarianism, i.e., the “heretical” claim to rebuild Anglicanism as a *via media* between Christian Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, based on proto-Christian patristic writings, and its chief exponent, Cardinal Newman, hidden behind the mask of Cyril.

But in actual terms, Hypatia’s great fortune both in poetry and literature, which could never be fully retraced here, is due to the dramatic contrast between her being a woman and her being involved in two virile contexts: philosophy and a violent death, which developed into martyrdom, although lay. The reason underlying the “pure” literati’s love for Hypatia was by no means her presumed conversion to Christianity but on the contrary her faithfulness to Platonism and to Hellenism, attacked by cultural barbarism from inside as well as by the ethnic barbarism from outside the empire’s borders. In this fully lay predilection for Hypatia, modern poets have realized a bridge with the Alexandrians that goes beyond all other literature. As Charles Péguy wrote:

What we love and honor is this miracle of faithfulness, . . . that a soul could be so perfectly in harmony with the Platonic soul and its descendant, the Plotinian one, and generally with the Hellenic soul, with the soul of her race, of her master, of her father: in a harmony so profound, so intimate, as to reach the very sources and roots, so that in a total annihilation, when her entire world, the whole world, was losing its accord, throughout the temporal life of the world and perhaps of eternity, she alone remained in harmony until her death.

The following are the words of an epigram attributed to Palladas, whose translations, starting with the Latin one by Grotius, have shown debatable Christian allusions and only seldom have understood its definite and secretive astrological meanings:

Quando ti vedo m’inchino e quando odo
le tue parole guardo la casa
astrale della vergine:
poiché i tuoi atti si segnano in cielo,
Ipazia venerata, perfezione
di ogni discorso,
stella purissima della filosofia.

I bow when I see you, and when I hear / your words I look / at the astral
house of the virgin: / because your acts are traced in the heavens, / vener-
ated Hypatia, perfection / of all speech, / purest star of philosophy.

Leconte de Lisle envisioned her as “the last chaste beam from the heavens of the Gods,” gifted with “Plato’s breath and Aphrodite’s body,” and—reversing Diodata’s conclusion but still with the same freedom—imagined not Hypatia’s conversion, but a return of Cyril’s followers to paganism:

Et la terre écoutait, de ton rêve charméc,
Chanter l’abeille attique entre tes lèvres d’or. . . .

Le grave enseignement des vertus éternelles
S’épanchait de ta lèvre au fond des coeurs charmés;
Et les Galiléens qui te rêvaient des ailes
Oubliaient leur Dieu mort pour tes Dieux bien aimés.

And earth, enchanted by your dream, / heard the buzzing of the Attic bee
between your golden lips. . . . / The grave teaching of eternal virtues /
flowed from your lips down to the bottom of enchanted hearts; / and the
Galileans, seeing you winged in their dreams, / forgot their dead God for
your beloved Gods.

The second poem by Leconte de Lisle describes these gods of Neoplatonism in Hypatia’s exchange with Cyril:

. . . tels que les ont vus de sublimes esprits:
Dans l’espace étoilé n’ayant point de demeures,
Forces de l’Univers, Vertus intérieures,
De la Terre et du Ciel concours harmonieux
Qui charme la pensée et l’oreille et les yeux.

. . . such as they were seen by the sublime spirits: / without dwelling in the
starry expanse, / Forces of the Universe, interior Virtues, / harmonious
concourse of Earth and Sky, / which charms the mind, the ear and the eye.

“Black holes, invisible stars with a prodigious force of attraction,” do exist also in the firmament of human memory, writes Mario Luzi in his *Libro d’Ipazia*. The word *hypàte*, etymologically connected with the concept of something acute and dominant, a feminine superlative derived from the preposition *hypér*, designates the highest note in the Greek musical scale. For Luzi the name of the daughter of Theon is a mantram: from which is issued “a flow, message or warning or reserve of an unexpressed power.” Why Alexandria? why Hypatia? Luzi wonders, the latest one to tell her story, taking poetic license with time and space, aware of not actually being interested, as a poet, “in those people

glimpsed between the summary lines of a philologist," aware of not really being "led to recognize them." History "is not finished only because it has happened"; in fact no poet speaks except in the first person of the present tense; but as a modern poet, Luzi is not afraid of poetic unfaithfulness. On the contrary, he celebrates it:

Questo timore d'infedeltà . . . a che cosa, diciamo al preciso struggimento
dell'attimo come fu vissuto—o come ci parve.

Eppure quale realtà è più reale in sé
che nella sua trasformazione in altro. . . .

This fear of infidelity . . . to what, to the precise torment / of the moment
as it was lived—or as we liked it. / Yet what reality is more reality in itself /
than in its transformation into something else. . . .

The Judgment and Prejudices of the Sources

Originally, there were two versions of Hypatia's murder, the first pagan and the second Christian, and both of them existing also in two variants: a more moderate one and a more radical one. During the three centuries between the events and the formation of the properly Byzantine historical tradition after the Arab conquest, one of the narrations was lost for the West and was kept only in its oriental version: as we have already said, the *Chronicle* by John of Nikiû has survived in its Coptic edition. The two pagan accounts, one by Hesychius, the other by Damascius, have been passed down to us thanks to Suidas's lexicon; and from them flowed that line of interpretation leading to Voltaire, Gibbon, Kingsley, up to the contemporary Anglo-Saxon historians, who all believe in Cyril's responsibility.

Damascius was a pagan and therefore hostile to the bishop. Also, in the Arian (*dyssebès*) Philostorgius, the hint at the responsibility in the murder of the party of the Homoousians is evidently influenced by doctrinal rancor, by the will to damage his adversaries. It is interesting that some locutions present in Photius exactly correspond to those used in Suidas: perhaps their pagan and Arian sources, both undermining Cyril's reputation, drew upon the same literary tradition. But the most disseminated version remains nonetheless that of Socrates Scholasticus, whose *History* in this case probably complies with the point of view of the central Church, neither accusatory like Suidas or Philostorgius nor surely in favor of the bishop of Alexandria, as we have already seen. Socrates

was lawyer (*scholastikòs*) at the court of Constantinople, but surely not Cyril's advocate.

Besides its diffusion in the West, starting with Cassiodorus's *Historia tripartita*, the story of Hypatia was passed down to later Byzantine historiography: to the *Chronicle* of Malala, close to the court clergy but mainly to the Church of Antioch, traditionally hostile to the Alexandrian Church; to Theophanes' *Chronicle*, during iconoclasm; to Photius in the ninth century; to Suidas in the tenth; to Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos in the fourteenth. The condemnation of Cyril's politics in the ecclesiastical sources from mediaeval Byzantium certainly derives from the stories of the fifth and the sixth centuries A.D., from their influence as well as from the manuscript tradition; but the very fact they were so carefully handed down has perhaps an explanation of its own.

The fifth century was equally dominated by Christological disputes as by barbaric invasions. While the ethnic crisis in the Mediterranean Empire expanded the social turmoil, in the *poleis*, the wars between the internal factions of young Christianity were intertwined with but also prevailed over the ongoing fight against paganism. After the disputes over the Trinity in the fourth century, in which the Arian heresy had been defeated and the Alexandrian doctrine had been established as the true one by the first ecumenical council in Constantinople, the relationship between the divine and human nature of the God-Word made flesh engaged the schools of the East in a new and larger argument, in which theology was more openly transformed into politics; and the "people of the Church" became its instrument. Never as in this epoch of migrations of races and powers had the intelligentsia's theses been able to mobilize the masses to such a degree. Never before had those abstract propositions compelled tumultuous crowds out onto the streets because of one word, however full of significance, as when in Constantinople Nestorius, Cyril's adversary, changed the appellative of the Virgin Mary from *Theotókos* into *Christotókos*.

For twenty more years Cyril continued to defend with the same aggressiveness the anti-Nestorian Christological doctrine later named Monophysitism. This doctrine seemed to be accompanied everywhere by a wake of violence, perhaps because the *parabalani* always seemed to accompany their bishop. The controversy with Nestorius began in 430 A.D., and in the next year, during the first session of the Council of Ephesus, the Alexandrians, under the guide of Shenoute, a turbulent ascetic, intimidated and prevailed over the gathered fathers. Eighteen years later the same situation was repeated with the new patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, in opposition with Dioscorus, Cyril's successor. The first

two Councils of Ephesus, the one held in 431, with its street demonstrations punctuating the sessions, and the second in 449 A.D., not by chance nicknamed the "Council of Brigands" (*latrocinium*), imposed a negative mark on the political strategies and the Christological doctrine of the bishop of Alexandria. In 451 the canons of the Council of Chalcedon fully disavowed them both.

At the beginning of the century the attitude of the Church and a precise imperial order had protected the bishop of Alexandria. The Alexandrian clergy was not yet in the least suspected of heresy; on the contrary, Athanasius, the champion of Nicean orthodoxy against Arianism, was Alexandrian. Moreover, Pulcheria Augusta was a personal supporter of the Alexandrian Christianity and of Bishop Cyril. The Roman prefect Orestes in his confrontation with the bishop was opposing the most authoritative representative of the Church. Eventually, the Council of Chalcedon reversed the situation and condemned Monophysitism, if not Cyril's doctrine, perhaps only because he had died ten years before.

The orthodox Byzantine Church proclaimed the troublesome bishop of Alexandria saint, but the Monophysite Coptic Church rejected as heretical the Chalcedonian canons and went so far as to choose Cyril of Alexandria as their father and master, calling him "the judge of the ecumenical world," "Cyril the Pharaoh." They remained faithful, almost as if it were a banner, to his definition of the unique and only nature of God-Logos made flesh (*mìa physis tòu theòu lògou sesarkoméne*), fully approving the acts of violence of 415, as we have already seen in John of Nikiû. This is another reason why Cyril, although remaining within the orthodoxy and consequently present in the theological tradition and in the work of the compilers of patristic *catenae*, actually was under much discussion or at least uneasily dealt with by the official Church, in a moment when the latter was in the process of dismissing its more extremist factions, and oddly enough more tainted with Platonism.

The Monophysites saw in him the scholar par excellence, the undisputed master to follow and obey in everything. The Nestorians, conversely, could never curse him enough. The Church sometimes held a rather difficult position between these two heresies, especially bearing in mind that the bishop of Alexandria had been appointed by Pope Celestine to proceed with the deposition and examination of Nestorius, and that he had presided at the Council of Ephesus in the name of the Pope. (Bardy)

The predominant Byzantine culture's hatred of Monophysitism is after all a sign of anti-Egyptian resentment. The condemnation of 451

A.D. brought about the extinction of Hellenism in Egypt, as the Council's sanction was followed by the decline of the Greek language and by the consequent adoption of Coptic in the liturgy. Virtually defeated at the middle of the fifth century A.D., the heretical branches of the Nestorian and Monophysite doctrine survived for centuries in the area of the empire: under different ways and different names they thrived and were disseminated from Armenia to Tibet throughout the Middle Ages. If considering them the causes of the scant resistance offered by Egypt against the Arab invasion is simply a commonplace, in any case it is evident that the doctrinal separation was the symptom of a cultural and political dissent from Byzantium. The Nestorian and Monophysite Churches settled in the Islamized territories. Their reciprocal contacts and conflicts with Constantinople's culture marked the second iconoclasm and the first Fatimid era, at the dawn of Byzantine encyclopedism. Its most typical exponent is the very Suidas who narrates Hypatia's story at length. Hence, perhaps, the survival and the revitalization of the ancient sources, even in their literary styles, where Christian and pagan perspectives converge to accuse Cyril.

It is to this redoubled perspective that we owe the posthumous transfiguration of the figure of Hypatia. If we take into account, one by one, the traits conferred on this personage by the sources, we would realize rather clearly that they are mostly imaginary. From episodes like the *aischrourgìa*, for instance, reported in Suidas's article and rightly compared to Ipparchia's *Kynogamia*, and other characteristics of her behavior, such as "to appear without false modesty among male audiences" or her "freedom of speech," *parrhesia*, which all may now wrongly appear obvious, emerges a commonplace Stoic-Cynic connotation of Hypatia, in contrast with the true elements in our possession.

In fact, the sources themselves testify that Hypatia was no longer young; moreover, both Suidas and Socrates reckoned the year of her birth to be 370 A.D.: in that era a woman of forty-five was already considered old, *palaià*. This datum is also confirmed by Malalas, who like Socrates recognizes Cyril not as the direct instigator of the murder, but as the one morally responsible. "Having received carte blanche from their bishop, the Alexandrians assaulted Hypatia and burnt her on a pyre of brushwood. She was a famous philosopher, enjoyed a great reputation, and was an old woman."

Probably the same can be said about the physical appearance of the daughter of Theon, who according to Suidas was "extraordinarily beautiful and handsome" (*sphodrà kalé te ouasa kài eueidés*). If the "perfec-

tion" and the "purity" that Palladas bestowed on her are to be understood as an astral allusion, the haughty beauty attributed to her by the fifth-century pagans had much less to do with the romantic imagery of nineteenth-century historians than with class superiority and the gift of aristocratic discretion, which together with the natural sense of social duty and of political commitment characterized the upper classes in antiquity.

Much debate has centered upon the meaning of the adverb *demosia* used in Suidas's account, which was probably drawn from that of Damascius, to describe Hypatia's role as a teacher. Somebody translated it as "officially in charge," suggesting that Hypatia held her lectures, like her father Theon, at the Museum, or that she held in any case a teaching position subsidized either by the revenue office or directly by the local treasury. But on the basis of both classical and Byzantine usage, that meaning of the word is not necessarily apparent, and we could more correctly translate it as "publicly," in a "public" and "frequented place," that is, in the streets. This is the interpretation of the passage by all the ancient writers. Yet we can rule out that in those days an exponent of the Greek aristocracy in Alexandria would go around on foot preaching Plato: stones were flying in the air even against the prefect of Egypt into his own carriage. Hypatia's must have been tightly sealed on the way from Orestes' palace to her family residence, so much envied by the Christian bishop.

Following Praechter at the beginning of this century, some scholars have manifested a legitimate scepticism towards Suidas's information. On the basis of both the heterodox and pagan traditions, it appears that the Byzantine lexicon and its sources had purposely gathered data to discredit Cyril and to substantiate an image of Hypatia that was as close to Christianity as possible. For instance, Suidas or his sources are not concerned with describing reality as much as freeing the philosophical teaching from its aristocratic imprint and making it similar to "popular" preaching of the Cynic type. (But a dedicated pupil of hers, Synesius, asks himself: "What can ordinary people and philosophy have in common?") Suidas says she used to wear the *tribon*, not an ordinary cape as some translate it, but the uniform, as we said before, of the street philosopher. Now, during the religious persecution of pagan Hellenism, the model of Cynic philosopher was the one most easily tolerated by the Church, the last to disappear from a Christianized world, fading into the model of the Christian "holy man." The image of Hypatia given by both Suidas and his sources is actually an already hagiographical image,

in accordance with the figure of a "public" saint or "civic consultant" evoked by Brown.

Synesius, Hypatia, and "Philosophia"

"Isidore was very different from Hypatia not only in the ways a man can be different from a woman, but as much as a true philosopher can be different from a woman well versed in geometry." In writing the biography of his teacher Isidore, Damascius is a well-informed witness from pagan circles and belonging moreover to the Platonic guild. Certainly the statement in the *Life of Isidore* might not convince us that Hypatia's teaching was limited to scientific initiation, which for the Platonists was the prelude to any philosophy. It might very well have been that the exponents of the metaphysical Athenian wing of Neoplatonism, rival of the Alexandrian one, fostered hostility, underestimation, or incomprehension for the members of the latter. But it is the work itself of Theon and Hypatia, or at least whatever has been preserved by direct or indirect tradition, to suggest that father and daughter did not teach the theory of Platonism but rather its technical mathematical, geometrical, and astronomical preliminaries.

According to Suidas, Hypatia wrote commentaries on classics, not on Plato or the Neoplatonists, but rather on Apollonius of Perga's *Conics* and Diophantus's *Algebra*. Hypatia's name is associated with an essay called *Astronomical Canon* by the sources (probably a commentary on the *Easy Tables* by Ptolemy). Hers is probably the "revision" (*paragnosis*) or, according to the recent hypothesis by Alan Cameron, the editing of the text of the third book of Ptolemy's *Almagest* within Theon's commentary itself. One can in fact read, in the title passed on by the main witness of the manuscript tradition: "Edition revised by my daughter Hypatia, the philosopher." If we look closer at those pages, we can convince ourselves that Hypatia must truly have been a "master of geometry," as Damascius writes. She must have invented machines built by her disciples: a flat astrolabe, a hydroscope, and an aerometer, according to Synesius himself.

The supposed mystery of Hypatia's works and the hypothesis that other essays might have disappeared have moreover fascinated the scholars. Such a historian of sciences as Tannery has suggested "the possibility that such works still exist in a more or less cut version or under a false attribution." From various contemporary doctrines and contemporary Alexandrian philosophers it has been possible to draw the highly

hypothetic conclusion that "Hypatia followed a primitive form of Neoplatonism, closer to Porphyry's than to Iamblichus's system" (Evrard in accordance with Lacombrade). On the basis of Synesius's proper type of Platonism, it has been concluded that in the Alexandrian school, "there was a neat division between the orientalizing form of Neoplatonism and its Athenian aspect: both were opposed, the former in the name of some sort of rationalism, the latter in the name of a certain neutrality towards Christianity" (Garzya). Origen's Christian Neoplatonism has also been taken into account, in as much as he, as a pupil of Ammonius, was direct witness of the middle-Platonic and non-Plotinian tradition of Alexandria. It has also been proposed that she followed the doctrine of Heraclius (Rist), to whom Christian pupils have been attributed, as they were later on to Aeneas of Gaza or John Philoponus, and eventually even to Hypatia.

But not even this is sufficient proof, as has been suggested, to speak of a "religious neutrality" (Marrou, Bregman) of the Alexandrian School. After all, if its teaching really was not straying into the realm where metaphysics and therefore religion interfere with each other, why was there so much Christian ill will (*phthònos*) for Hypatia's "astronomical knowledge," as Damascius states?

What a marvelous subject for a poem, our journey together! It has given us the opportunity to witness what fame by itself could not prove: we have seen, we have heard the woman who is the real initiator into the mysteries and the orgies of philosophy.

So Synesius wrote, on the way back to Constantinople, after meeting Hypatia, to a scholar friend who had remained in Alexandria. The scion of an ancient family of landowners from Cyrenaica, Platonist, polygraph, politician, and eventually a Christian bishop, Synesius represents to the full the vitality, the tolerance, and at the same time the transformism characterizing the educated aristocracy in late antiquity. Trained at Hypatia's school, he left a long literary trail to posterity, unlike his teacher.

In his very many letters, almost an autobiography, connecting him to his milieu, both pagan and Christian, Synesius is the key witness of our inquiry, first as an intimate friend but second as a midway point between the protagonists of the conflict of which Hypatia remained victim. Pagan by birth, like his contemporary Augustine, converted to Christianity through the good offices of the patriarch Theophilus, the destroyer of the Serapeum, Synesius married a Christian and became a novice in that religion. As he himself said, he wanted to be initiated "into all myster-

ies," and Christianity was one of them. His election as bishop of Cyrene can be considered by his own admission as something of an incident, since the second canon of the Nicean Council prohibited the appointment of novices as bishops. But history later celebrated with its verdict this election, whose origin he owed to his political activism in the Pentapolis.

Synesius anyway journeyed to Egypt much earlier than these events, probably in 393 A.D., one year after Theodosius's edict and the destruction of the Serapeum. Paganism was persecuted, and Platonism was not only looked down upon by the Christians, but was also subdivided into factions, *sectae*, in competition with one another. "Today it is Egypt that keeps the seeds of wisdom alive, which it receives from Hypatia. Conversely, once the seat of wise men, Athens is now honored only by beekeepers: it is not by chance that the couple of sophists, Plutarch's students, who have remained there, draw the young to their school not with fame, not with eloquence, but with jars of Hymettos honey," writes Synesius in a letter. Hypatia is the "most venerated philosopher, cherished by God." The other pupils of the Alexandrian school are "a blessed group listening to the admirable voice" of the woman who will remain for ever "adored teacher," "benefactress," "mother, sister, teacher, patroness," "supreme judge," "blessed lady" with a "most celestial soul." Years later, in his eighty-first letter, Synesius wrote to her: "Believe me, you are the only treasure that, together with virtue, cannot be taken away from me."

Teacher and pupil are of the same age, and they were only twenty-three at the time of their first encounter. Strangely coupled in their destiny, they shall die in different places but almost at the same time. Synesius will not know about her death but shortly before it, paraphrasing the Homeric *Nostoi*, he sent her a distich that has the power of an epitaph:

If the dead in Hades are doomed to forgetfulness
Even down there I will remember my beloved Hypatia.

In his last letter, prostrate after the death of his young children ("Synesius should have lived only before knowing the evil of life"), he wrote these words to her: "If you do care at all about my affairs, well enough; otherwise, I do not care either."

Some activities considered "more subterranean" still within Platonism were attributed to the nearly two years of their relationship in Alexandria. Synesius might be identified with the *anèr physikòs*, inventor of a new model of alembic and the author of a contemporary treatise on

alchemy bearing on the title page the dedication "to a priest of the great Serapeum." In his epistles Synesius twice repeats that "geometry is a sacred matter"; elsewhere he speaks about the virtues of *tetraktys*, symbol of Iamblichus's Neoplatonic-Pythagorean numerology. If the hints at the initiation secret in the *Epistle to Herculianus* can be evidence of some sort of esoteric teaching, in *Dion*, dedicated to Hypatia, there are certainly hidden "inviolable doctrines" (*abèbela dògmata*):

Like those Athenian artists who in their statues had Aphrodite and the Charites embraced by Sileni and Satyrs, he who is not unable to grasp the traits of the divine even if veiled by a base aspect will not miss that my book reveals more than a few inviolable doctrines, which remain concealed to the profane thanks to my ability to dissimulate and to the great ease with which they have been placed into my speech, so that it appears as if they have been naturally fit in.

The treatise *On Dreams* "was written," Synesius writes, "all in one night, yet in that final part of the night which brought that dream that compelled me to write it, and sometimes, twice or three times, it seemed to me that I was a third person, the listener to myself." Besides Porphyry, Synesius very often quotes the Chaldean *lògia*:

Do not tilt toward the world the Black Light
Beneath which lies the unformed treacherous Abyss,
Dark all round, vomiting Filth,
Full of Images, void of Intellect.

A few years after the destruction of the Serapeum, the Chaldean oracles were put on the blacklist of the prohibited books. Anyone possessing them was liable to be charged with practicing magic and could incur the fearful sanctions issued after Constantine's edict and preceding that of Theodosius: Constantius's laws against "sorcerers and fortune tellers" and those of Theodosius himself against "haruspices" and "magicians." "Mathematics might in turbulent times be a dangerous science" (Rist). In those days the union of Neoplatonism with theurgic occultism could have been ruinous.

In all late antiquity it was very difficult to separate "positive" scientific interest from the irrational. Astronomy was inseparable from astrology. Theon, the last known member of the Mouseion in Alexandria, had published an essay on the birth of Sirius and another "on omens, the observation of birds, and the song of crows"; a third one, according to Malalas,

concerned the writings of Hermes Trismegistus and of Orpheus. Hypatia, as Philostorgius tells us, “surpassed her father, especially in the art of studying the stars.” Among others, Lacombrade—Synesius’s main biographer—considered it evident that Hypatia had delivered to her acolytes “an esoteric doctrine at the margins of the official programs”; that the “technical astronomic teaching of Hypatia was simply a cover for the teaching of an esoteric revelation, one that was truly original.”

In Synesius’s *Discourse on Gifts*, dedicated to Peonius, one may read:

Astronomy is in itself a more than worthy science, but it can serve to ascend to something higher, can be the last step, I believe, towards the mysteries of theology, a step befitting them: as the perfect body of the sky has matter beneath itself and its motion has been equated to the activity of the intellect by the most subtle philosophers. Astronomy proceeds with its demonstrations in an incontrovertible way, using geometry and arithmetic as subsidiaries; calling it the right canon of truth would not be unbecoming at all.

As proved by the contemporary blossoming of Judaic numerology and by Valens’s persecution of the mathematicians, the technical nature of both Theon’s and Hypatia’s teaching not only does not exclude but rather substantiates the interest for esoterism and occultism. After all, these were practiced in some manner not only by the school of Proclus and Damascius or by the “last degeneration of the Sabi,” but also by almost all the Neoplatonists. They remained rooted in neo-Byzantine Neoplatonism, which in turn will pass them down to our Renaissance together with the philosophy of Plato.

In seeing Hypatia outlined against the sunset of the Empire in the masculine clothes of a philosopher, almost as an Alexandrian Mlle. de Maupin, the nineteenth-century imagination was then once more mistaken, because Hypatia wore, much more likely, the robe of a priestess. The devotion and the exalted veneration expressed by Synesius in his letters, all the more peculiar as they are addressed to someone of the same age (as remarked by Rougé), can be explained only by a “sacred bond” between them, exactly as Synesius defined it, but “sacred” in its proper meaning, that is a priestly tie.

One might be surprised by the small number of true women philosophers in the history of philosophy. This circumstance has been attributed to the incapacity of female psychology to adapt to the rigors of speculation—a nineteenth-century opinion which can be confuted and which was never shared either by Pythagoreans in antiquity or by others in late

antiquity or the Middle Ages, particularly the Greek Middle Ages. The stoic Apollonius wrote a large treatise, *On the Women Who Philosophized*, as we learn from Photius's *Bibliotheca*. Philochorus Grammaticus wrote on Pythagorean women, as Suidas tells us. The life and habits of women philosophizing were given a send-up by Juvenal and conversely described by Diogenes Laertius and Athenaeus.

In the seventeenth century, as we have already seen, Gilles Menage "by himself" discovered the existence of sixty-five women philosophers; in the following century Wolf published a catalogue of them including relative fragments from ancient works. The list included Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers like Arria and Gemina, Cynics such as Hipparchia, Epicureans such as Theophila, Stoics such as Portia, Pythagoreans like Themistoclea, Theano, Myia, Arignote, Damo, Sara, Timycha, Lasthenia, Abrotelia, and Echecratia, and moreover Dialectics, Cyrenaics, Megarians, Aristotelians; or "of uncertain sect and most noble ones" like Julia Domna and Aconia Paulina, or the Byzantine Cassia and Anna Comnena. The list can continue through the centuries, up to the times of the "wise Eudocia," the wife of Constantine Palaeologus celebrated by Nicephorus Gregoras, or to Irene Panhypersebasta, daughter of Theodorus Metochites, a fourteenth-century woman philosopher under the last dynasty of the Eastern Greek Middle Ages.

However, as Lellia Cracco Ruggini has written, the wisdom and philosophy supposedly shared by so many female personalities had mainly become, especially among the last Neoplatonists and then among the Christians, knowledge of the divine. From the legendary Diotima to the Neoplatonic Sosipatra, a long succession of women alone, perhaps often gifted with extrasensory qualities, had been entrusted with the oral tradition of the secrets of Platonism, which Synesius also referred to in his *Dion*, when mentioning the relationship between Socrates and Aspasia, perhaps with a slight hint of self-reference. Women's superiority within the spiritual and supernatural realm is a legacy of the spirituality of late antiquity, received in turn by the Cabala as well as by the entire Middle Ages.

The Byzantine model of a woman philosopher is both Pythagorean and Platonic, and whereas in Psellus "the Egyptian woman" is associated with the Pythagorean *kat'exochèn* Theano, Eudocia is defined by Nicephorus Gregoras as "the new Theano and the second Hypatia." It is no coincidence that the highest frequency of women philosophers is present in this most irrational faction (*secta*), where there is an openly female monopoly on the priesthood. In many cases reported by compil-

ers, esoteric knowledge is, after all, in a close relationship, like the two sides of a coin, with an "exoteric," strictly technical competence. Hypatia belonged to the latter category: on one side, undoubtedly a mathematician; on the other, darker but no less credible side, the figure of a priestess, largely documented and apropos to her sex, caste, political and teaching roles, the *diadoché* of the school of Alexandria.

Hypatia's Martyrdom

"You have always had power": this is, at a final analysis, the *dynastéia* that Synesius's eighty-first letter attributed to Hypatia; this is what the epithets of "mother" and "patroness" used by her pupil hint at, technical epithets for those "female protectors" of mystical religious associations that frequently combined together sacred and secular offices towards the end of the Roman Empire. A closer investigation of the sources belies the stereotype of the lady philosopher: in the history of philosophy Hypatia appears as "merely another to pass on the torch" (Rist). Her charismatic figure and her political role led her to both death and fame as a posthumous means of an initially pagan and then Christian propaganda: Hypatia, the victim of Christians, owes her renown to the ancient and modern Church because it bestowed on her the status of martyr.

Hypatia's kind of philosophy must therefore be placed first in the history of the relationship between women and the sacred in both pagan and Christian contexts and then in the history of thought; while the way she died granted her another role, that of martyr, certainly not unusual for women. Martyrdom, together with the vow of chastity, another greatly stressed quality of hers, is a regular feature of the "eminent" woman in ancient religious literature. Roman religiosity had already compiled exemplary models of sacrificial virgins. As virgin and martyr, Hypatia passed from Damascius's pagan mythology directly to the Christian mythology. Hypatia's death is described in terms of real and true sacrifice already in the ancient sources. Damascius calls her murderers *hòi sphagèis*, "the immolators"; Socrates and Philostorgius use the verb *diaspàò*, the technical expression to indicate the dismemberment of the victim. The fifth century saw noble and educated female saints equally among pagans and Christians: their doctrine, especially if divulged to the public (*demosìa*), is another characteristic of the martyrs, as the trial of Socrates, alongside Christ's, is one of the two great archetypes of the Christian trial literature.

The Christian Church, the Roman government, and the Jewish com-

munity form a triangular structure underlying not only the most ancient narration of Hypatia's story, that of Socrates Scholasticus, but usually also those Christian accounts of trials called "martyrdoms," which in fact "testify" ways and modes of death sentences perceived as unjust. The roles of the accuser and of the executioner can be played by the official authorities or the masses, or by both. Literature of this kind has in fact the ultimate task of toning down, instead of enhancing, the conflict between Christianity and the Roman government. As recent scholars have pointed out, it is not by chance that the same characters keep recurring and the final verdict is always the same; that the burden of political responsibility for the murder is placed on culturally "extraneous" and religiously "impious" characters—for instance very often on the Jews—in this way avoiding having to blame the Roman authorities; and that the top representatives of the latter are usually depicted with those qualities of indecision already typical of Pilate in the Evangelic prototype. In Hypatia's case what made the stereotype of the governor-Pilate again useful was the analogous intent to lay the blame not so much or not entirely on the Jews, but on the "impious" Alexandrian clergy, the enemy of paganism on one side, and of orthodoxy itself on the other, at least for some of the Byzantine sources.

Historians have often used the term "drama" to define the contrast between Cyril and Hypatia. As has been observed, in Christian literature the genre of martyrdom is both a use of, and a sublimation into, trials of the classical dramatic genre, with preassigned roles and fixed characters: a genre that is objective and chronicle-like only in appearance, but in actual terms political and propagandistic. It is then neither improper nor casual if Hypatia's story has been written by Diodata Saluzzo or celebrated by Péguy in terms of martyrdom. As a martyr and not a philosopher, Hypatia is robbed of her leading role and of the status that the events of her life have assumed in the feminist literature, because her death and her transfiguration by the hand of historians are not an exception, but a confirmation of the fixed roles in the traditional and male perspective underlying them.

The opposition between Hypatia and Cyril has been traditionally understood as a conflict between religions and between contrasting "philosophies" or worldviews, as a confessional and ideological drama where the protagonist pays with her life for the freedom of speech, *parrhesia*, that is proper to pagan philosophy. A freedom that is a point of controversy with the Christian bishop, a male figure in opposition to her, the aggressive champion of a popular faith, whereas she represented aristo-

cratic Hellenism, closer to the tolerant pragmatism of the Roman government and against Christian radicalism. But this view is only in part true, as the drama is more concretely and more contingently a political one. Here Orestes, representing the power of the state, plays a role that was equal to Cyril's, and the Jews are the chorus. The elements in conflict were not so much paganism against Christianity as the ruling (both local and Roman) classes, the social classes (ancient aristocracy and the new Church "bureaucracy"), and the bellicose ethnic groups, within the climate of instability that characterized the transference of power and the installation of Christianity in the life and the city structures of the late Roman Empire.

The history of philosophy has pointed out the artificiality of the opposition between pagan and Christian Platonism: "What estranged the old aristocratic literati or at least kept them away from Christianity for a certain time was not paganism in itself as much as the religion of culture, the classical ideal of *paidéia*, the *helleniké diagogé* or Greek way of living presented in Synesius's *Dion* as the most fecund and mainly effective method for cultivating one's mind" (Marrou). The opportunity to integrate Greek *paidéia* and Christian culture had already been felt and appealed to. The Christian Church persecuted ritual paganism, but from the fourth century A.D. had maintained a relative neutrality toward intellectual paganism and the teaching of philosophy. Cyril's main aim was the direct participation of the bishops in running the imperial state both in theory and practice. The target of his policy was not an ideological confrontation with pagan intellectuals, yet rather the cultic predominance in the city and the management of social disputes. The masses and not the elite—by now partly acculturated, coopted, and concordant, as Synesius's example demonstrates—were his problem. Hence Cyril's bipolar political strategies: persecutions against the concurrent Jewish ethnic group, as previously against the rival Novazianists, and the destruction of the temples, in compliance, after all, with the imperial wishes.

We have so arrived both at the core of the problem and at the end of this trial. The relevance bestowed on the history of Hypatia by the historians of the late antiquity and hence by mediaeval and modern historians is not centered on Hypatia's importance or on the essence of her character, as much as on the stature of Cyril: Hypatia is, in this drama, the false protagonist. Once the first trial is finished, should we want to start a trial against the bishop of Alexandria, we would have on the defendants' bench the whole ruling class and Platonism itself, implicated as it was in the great Arian as well as Nestorian and Monophysite controversies.

Was Cyril guilty of Hypatia's death? As with the ancient and mediaeval texts, one should also wonder about the impartiality of the modern ones. This question, posed by many historians, has developed more pregnant meaning: could Christianity help being involved in the harshest methods of politics, in contagious violence, in fanaticism? Ecclesiastical sources have put off the answer to this question until the Reformation and the modern centuries. In the Protestant or Anglican literary manipulation of the figure of Hypatia, direct participation in the campaign against heresies, inaugurated by the Byzantines, prevailed over the poetic transformation, pre-Raphaelite and "ornate," and tinted with sadism.

On the lay side, the Damascius/Gibbon line, their judgement or prejudice or ultimately the meaning given to Hypatia's story is simply the condemnation of the Church. According to these historians, Christianity, an all-encompassing doctrine and therefore with totalitarian tendencies, would superimpose the *polis* and would oppose the tolerance typical of the lay wise man, the philosopher. To recall Brown's image, the substitution of the bishop for the philosopher led to a deterioration of life in the *polis* and to a progressive decadence of politics up to contemporary times. But this interpretation is also proved false by our own discussion.

The lesson that Hypatia's story and her long historical survival can teach us is then, only or above all, methodological. In the shifting nuances of the various interpretations of this ancient public murder and this mysterious female character, what clearly emerges is not as much the end of paganism as the metamorphosis of Christianity, how its political thought has evolved and how the historical writer's point of view on it has equally developed critically.

(translated by Massimo Carlucci)