

[R E V I E W]

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The Illusions of Biography. Women in Classical Scholarship. Review of Barbara McManus, *The Drunken Duchess of Vassar. Grace Harriet Macurdy. Pioneering Feminist Classical Scholar* (Columbus: Ohio University Press 2017), pp. xxii, 182. ISBN: 9780814213278, \$99,95; Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall (eds), *Women Classical Scholars. Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014) (= Classical Presences), pp. 496, 28 illustrations. ISBN: 9780198725206, £88 (hb); Paul Allen Miller, *Diotima at the Barricades. French Feminists Read Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015) (= Classics in Theory), pp. 336. ISBN: 9780199640201, £73 (hb),
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The Illusions of Biography

WHEN I was a first year PhD candidate I had the opportunity to be a visiting student at a German university. My academic (male) host asked me who my doctoral supervisor was. When I said the name of my (female) professor, the reaction was: "So, your supervisor is a woman." I never understood what precisely he meant by that, but this brief interaction brought a couple of interesting things to my attention. Firstly, during my years as a student in Italy I had many female professors, and not only in Classics; I never thought it peculiar or worthy of comment that my supervisor was a woman. Secondly, when I related this encounter to a German (female) PhD student, she pointed out that even then in German universities – it was 1996 – only two women were professors of Latin literature in the entire country, and no woman at all had a chair in Greek. When I now think back to that episode, it seems to me almost impossible that that conversation took place. Since then, many female professors have been hired at German universities in Classics, both Latin and Greek, and although in every job advertisement women are still explicitly invited to apply, the underrepresentation of women in prominent positions at German universities now seems less extreme than it was in the nineties, and is arguably now less urgent an issue than the near total absence of foreigners from professorial positions in Germany – not only in Classics but more generally in the humanities. But that complex matter would require another discussion.

Two of the three books discussed in this review respond to the problem of both the rarity and the lack of visibility of women in the discipline of Classics in the past centuries, by narrating women's careers and scholarly activity and drawing attention to their disproportionate rarity. In both books, a central position is given to the reconstruction of these women's lives and careers.

The Drunken Duchess of Vassar is Barbara McManus' compelling biography of Grace Harriet Macurdy (1866-1946), a Hellenist who spent 44 years of her career at Vassar College, serving as chair of the Department of Greek for seventeen of them. The second book is a co-edited volume by Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall, bearing the title *Women Classical Scholars. Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly* and containing 20 chapters, plus an Introduction and Afterword, on the life and work of numerous women who made important contributions to the study of ancient Greek and Latin literature but whose existence has largely been ignored within the discipline.

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While these two books render a well-deserved homage to those almost heroic scholars and their fascinating lives, they do not attempt to address certain questions that the subject matter invites: How does the life and work of these classicists fit into the overall history of the discipline? Why are their biographies (as opposed to the study of their activities as teachers and scholars) so important? And there is another question which both torments me as a (male) reviewer and arguably goes to the heart of the problem: How was the gender of these scholars relevant to what they wrote about and, perhaps more importantly, how is it now relevant to our interpretation of their activity as teachers, scholars, professionals? In other words, is it simply the biographies of these admirable women which deserve attention (as both volumes seem in the end to imply), or is there also something interesting to be said about their work as researchers and teachers – whether in the broader context of the history of teaching and scholarship in Classics or, a more complex and controversial point, precisely as the work of women who were active in a male-dominated discipline? Are there, for example, any interesting or meaningful patterns to be found in the texts and topics explored by these scholars and teachers, or in their argumentative style or overall approach, which might arguably be different in interesting ways from the scholarship produced by their male contemporaries? If not, that fact alone would be worth exploring. (This last question is raised by Paul Allen Miller's volume which I discuss below).

At the end of chapter 10 of her monograph, entitled "Redefining the Classical Scholar as a Women", McManus raises the question when discussing a comment made by the famous Oxford Hellenist Gilbert Murray, a life-long friend and academic supporter of Macurdy's, on the occasion of her retirement. Murphy praised his American colleague especially for her ability to combine the more philological and erudite approach of German scholarship with the "habitual familiarity" and appreciation of Greek poetry and philosophy typical of "traditional culture in England" (224). Although Macurdy, as McManus reports, was herself happy with the compliment, McManus notes that "Murray's tribute (...) reveals no sense that he understood Grace's *effort to redefine the classical scholar as a woman*" (224, emphasis added). This statement raises a few interesting questions. Firstly, after having read with interest and passion the entire biography of this admirable scholar, whose socially humble origins and severe deafness did not prevent her from an astonishing level of activity both as a scholar and as a teacher, I found in McManus' treatment only a partial discussion of

Macurdy's "effort to redefine the classical scholar as a woman." The fact that she produced some important scholarship on women in antiquity, including her famous *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt* (1932), does not per se illustrate such an effort. Although McManus argues that while Macurdy was working on her book, she "recognized the need to move beyond the confine of traditional, text-based scholarship" (192), especially because that textual evidence was produced by men, and that Macurdy also included material evidence such as coins and inscriptions, the question remains how this scholarly approach, in itself of course highly valuable, is distinctive characteristic of "the classical scholar as a woman."

More intriguing is that Macurdy succeeded in recovering and documenting "the lives of individual Greek women whose names are part of recorded history", i.e. to go against the tendency, largely shared among scholars until then, to treat women "as a special problem, a category to be considered in isolation from history" (187). But does this aspect of Macurdy's scholarship, which was no doubt innovative, represent a radical methodological move? Rather, the unavoidable implication of Macurdy's study is to assimilate women's history to men's history by fully adopting conventional principles and methodology. The question is of course more general: does the history of women require a different kind of scholarship, methodologies, or models, or even a different concept of history?

I do not want to diminish Macurdy's important and innovative contribution to the field; it would be unfair to judge her work outside of the immediate historical context in which she operated. But it is interesting to understand what was at stake at that point for the history of women as a discipline. Macurdy, like many other scholars, had to make a choice between two possibilities: either assimilating women's history to (men's) official history, or emphasizing the exceptionality of women's role in history and thus from a certain perspective considering them not assimilable to men's history. Macurdy's work takes the first option.

To be sure, one implication of McManus' allusion to Macurdy's effort in "redefining the classical scholar as a woman" (which is the title not only of Chapter 10 of her monograph, but also of Chapter 10 of the co-edited volume by Wyles and Hall), seems to be a sort of identification between Macurdy's own engagement in her career and certain powerful women of

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the past. Indeed, McManus writes that Macurdy's scholarly interest represented "an important educational resource for modern women, one that demonstrated (...) that some ancient women did play a significant role in government and politics despite the tremendous odds against them" (188).

To return to Gilbert Murray's comment, there is something in it which deserves further discussion: precisely the fact to which McManus draws attention, namely that he makes no comment on the gender of the scholar he aims to praise. Why might that be? It is hard to believe that Macurdy's gender could simply pass unnoticed at a time when women classicists were so few in number, and their work was probably inevitably marked by a certain aura of the exceptional. One possibility is to see in Murray's comments an elegant reticence: by not referring directly to her gender, Murray might have been aiming at "objectivity" or "fairness" in judging Macurdy's work according to the same parameters he would have adopted for male-authored scholarship. In its historical context, a comment by a male scholar drawing attention to the fact that Macurdy was a woman could have been interpreted as implicitly qualifying the merit of her scholarship and/or as patronizing. On the other hand, it could be argued that, precisely in that historical context, failing to mention the fact that a certain scholar was a woman also constituted a kind of injustice, precisely because it neutralized any specificity of intellectual achievements in the name of a scholarship which was dominated by male scholars and poorly masked as gender-neutral. In short, when describing and evaluating the work of a female scholar, even now I, especially as a male scholar, feel caught between a rock and a hard place on the question of how that scholar's biography, and above all her gender, is relevant. And there is another layer of complexity to this already complex question. Both in her Foreword and in her Postscript to McManus' book, Judith Hallett emphasizes some parallels between the personal and professional lives of Macurdy and her biographer McManus, thus inviting the question of whether we can productively look for – and whether we even should look for – some points of identification between the author of this biography and her subject.

Before turning to the second book under review here, I would like to briefly present some critical thoughts about the use of biography in the history of scholarship. My fundamental skepticism concerns two points above all. Firstly, the consideration of the life of a scholar can arguably help to understand the personal and historical circumstances in which he or she

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became interested in certain topics, and perhaps why; but it tells us little or nothing about the work itself (the issue is the same, one could argue, for our interpretation of literary texts) or for its contemporary or later reception. The second point is that an intellectual biography runs the risk of (and perhaps cannot avoid) sounding like a judgement from an ex post perspective, when *les jeux sont faits*, and precisely what did not need an explanation when the person was alive is now the main object of inquiry: his or her personal life, seen and perceived as a coherent and well-connected sequence of events belonging to a unitary story. That story cannot, of course, correspond to the lived realities of a person, always more complex, fragmented, and marked by sometimes illogical choices and gaps. It may not be a coincidence that precisely biography and autobiography are literary genres to which feminist scholars, particularly attentive to the logic of certain discourses and literary genres which are never neutral, have paid a great deal of attention, since life writing always unavoidably reveals an illusion more than any other form of writing. Among others, the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero has devoted to life-writing an important monograph with a suggestive title, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (rather prosaically translated in English as *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*) in which she discusses (auto)biography as a complex discourse that tends to put a life within pre-fixed narrative patterns in order to control it. On the problematic role of biography used to interpret scholarly production a great deal can be said, but a simple question might be asked in order to render evident the obstacles inherent in such an approach: Who among us would like to see their scholarship explained as a mere effect of the events of their life? I also wonder: is it not an implication of this approach that, for every piece of scholarship we read, we would need to know everything relevant (potentially everything we can) about its author's life in order to fully grasp its meaning? I do not think so.

Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall, the editors of *Women Classical Scholars. Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly*, are eager to rediscover and bring to the light the contribution of many women to the discipline of Classics. But they also must “depressingly” realize “that there has been no simple, linear narrative of progression towards the unsealing of that fountain at some moment in the late nineteenth century” (2). It is true, sometimes history is not like a novel with a clear beginning, middle, and end; whether or not that is “depressing” is another matter. The editors also express the hope that, “by investigating the history of earlier

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women's engagement with ancient Greek and Latin Classics," this volume "will encourage men and women to enjoy the study of these inspirational texts." Their intention is "to come to a clearer understanding of the difficulties women have faced over the past five hundred years in acquiring right of entry to these Classics (...), and of the strategies by which a few of the most able and indefatigable women have succeeded in surmounting them" (3). As is hopefully now becoming clear, this collection of essays basically aims at investigating the lives of these female scholars more than their writings.

In terms of organization and scope, a project of this kind cannot of course be comprehensive. What, then, are the criteria for which women scholars are included? The editors' central criterion is purely chronological: "The women discussed were all born before the outbreak of World War I, and are all dead" (13). Some of the many women classicists who fit these criteria, but are missing from the volume, are named in the Appendix to the Introduction, but the editors give no explanation of why they chose this criterion in the first place. Personally, I would have liked to know why, for instance, living scholars are not included. In my opinion, the inclusion of these women would have changed the critical tenor of the volume, not least by rendering it less panegyric. Another limitation on the scope of this volume is that it considers only philologists, "meaning scholars whose training and main focus addressed the languages and literatures of the ancient 'classical' Greeks and Romans" (13). This too could be called an arbitrary choice, although a justification is offered: women, the editors write, were typically more active in the field of archaeology, whereas the study of the ancient languages, though often women's first point of contact with Classics, was more difficult "in terms of establishing a career" (13). But then, surprisingly, the French philosopher Simone Weil is the subject of Chapter 19 (Barbara K. Gold, "Simone Weil. Receiving the Iliad") on the argument that, although Weil was not a classicist proper, she produced a highly influential essay on war in the Iliad which Gold describes as reflecting "Weil's identity as a woman author who is writing about war" (359, Gold's emphasis).

More generally, the volume takes what I would define as a moderately or, better said, proto-feminist stance and, although it is devoted to presenting the lives of a number of unconventional and courageous female intellectuals, it shows certain rather surprisingly traditional tendencies both in thought and language. Astonishingly enough, the volume seems immune to

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theory: none of the contributions ever explicitly raises any questions asked by feminist theoreticians and scholars of gender studies nor shows any awareness of the debates of the past few decades. All chapters present biographical data in such a way as if they were obviously essential in order to explain these scholars' writings. But, as I have suggested above, this is by no means an uncontroversial point; at least a brief theoretical orientation would have been helpful. A rather traditional stance also influences this volume's implicit view of Classics as a discipline. For example, after having presented the profile of nine African-American women scholars (Chapter 9: "Classical Education and the Advancement of African American Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries"), Michele Valerie Ronnick attributes to them a highly debatable conception of Classics, i.e. that "the ancient languages were not only the basis for contemporary ideas, such as democracy, but also essential to understanding what it means to be human" (193, emphasis added). This statement, which refers to an interview with Jacqueline de Romilly, seems particularly problematic when applied to women belonging to a minority group with such a long and ongoing history of marginalization in academia.

Many of the chapters insist on the conventional division between their subjects' "personal" and "professional" lives, attempting to link them even as they note contradictions between them. Exemplary in this regard is Ruth Webb's chapter on the French Hellenist Jacqueline de Romilly. While commenting on contradictory aspects "or apparent contradictions" (388, emphasis added) – first between de Romilly's earlier work, consisting of minute linguistic analysis, and her later popularizing work, and then "between her unwillingness to talk about herself and the deep personal nature of much of her work" (388), Webb's goal is to enlighten "the link between the personal and the scholarly, the psychological and the scientific." An interesting attempt to connect the *Privatleben* of a scholar with her scholarly production is represented by Chapter 5 "Anne Dacier (1681), Renée Vivien (1903), Or What Does It Mean for a Woman to Translate Sappho?" by Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, who puts at the center of her discussion these scholars' highly popular French translations of Sappho. Fabre-Serris suggests that both women, though living in very different epochs and coming from different personal backgrounds, make use of Sappho's text in order to assert their identity as women: Dacier in order to challenge men, Vivien in order to sympathize with Sappho's lesbianism. Here, Sappho's text rather than the

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scholars' lives is at the center, and for this reason I consider this chapter the best of the collection.

My last remark on the rather traditional vein of this volume is the fact that it is marked by a certain *écriture masculine*. The protagonists of the chapters are identified as “foremothers” (11, 399 and passim), which of course mirrors but does not subvert patriarchal and familial paradigms established within traditional, and arguably masculinist, scholarship. Those “foremothers” are often seen as opponents to their “male counterparts,” and are sometimes referred to as “towering” figures and “pillars” of knowledge, re-enacting not only phallic imagery but also a highly traditional language of judgmental scholarship, identifying and distinguishing between grand and lesser figures. And the editors' evidently ironic reference to men as persons “who lack Y chromosomes” (20) not only seems to cede to Western science the authority for determining the definition of sex, but rather blithely excludes the reality of many transgender, gender-queer, non-binary and other people for whom chromosomes are irrelevant to identity.

The creation of an original philosophical and scholarly language has been one of the main goals of a number of feminist theoreticians, especially, as is well known, in twentieth century France. The third book considered in this review is *Diotima at the Barricades: French Feminists Read Plato* by classicist Paul Allen Miller. While, at first glance, it could seem out of place to discuss this monograph together with the biographies of women classicists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this rather unexpected comparison ends up shedding light both on traditional biographical writing and on one of the most creative and original strands of twentieth-century theorizing. Miller, who has shown in other works a deep familiarity with French theory,¹ following the path opened up in particular by Miriam Leonard's *Athens in Paris* (2005), points to the reception of Plato as a fundamental element in the intellectual production of post-modern French theorists, who “had a determining influence on literary, theoretical, and cultural studies in the Anglo-American world” (vii). Any reader of this book will quickly see that it moves well beyond the reception of Plato, however. At the heart of Miller's inquiry is a consideration of a set of disciplinary issues: on the one

¹ See for instance his *Postmodern Spiritual Practices: The Construction of the Subject and the Reception of Plato in Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2007.

hand, many (Anglo-American) classicists have little or no knowledge of European continental philosophy; on the other, philosophers and theorists do not generally have the linguistic and philological preparation needed to appreciate in detail the writings of Plato and ancient philosophers in general. This book is thus an attempt to bridge a disciplinary gap (ix). While previous scholarship has considered the “masculine triad” of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, Miller focusses primarily (but by no means exclusively) on another triad: Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Sarah Kofman (I did find myself wondering whether Miller chose precisely three scholars only in order to create a symmetry with the masculine triad). Miller gives a crystal-clear structure to his work, and each chapter, as is thoroughly described in the Preface, follows the same pattern: “Every chapter seeks to be not only a contribution to the study of an important French thinker, but it is also a contribution to *our* understanding of the Platonic texts; those texts in turn are used to interrogate the thought of their French interlocutors” (x, emphasis added). I emphasized “our” in the quotation because I am not sure who this refers to: the author, his readers in general, or his Anglo-American readers in particular? Miller shows great sensitivity when discussing the writings of these French feminists, emphasizing that they did not provide merely “scholarly responses to the Platonic texts, but they write novels, autobiographies, and even in their more scholarly works often deploy a kind of deliberately lyrical writing that calls into question the assumptions of a more traditionalist, normative, masculinist discourse” (x, emphasis added). Miller also brilliantly argues that post-modern thinkers see in ancient culture not a mirror in which they themselves are reflected, but rather as an “uncanny other” (xi) which accompanies and shapes our identity. Kristeva, Irigaray, and Kofman are the protagonists of the core chapters, but Miller also discusses Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Marguerite Duras and those whom we might call the usual suspects: Marx, Nietzsche, Levinas, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and others. In short, anyone interested in French theory, in particular in French feminist thinkers and their interaction with Greek philosophy, above all Plato and Aristotle, will find here a clear, well written and thoughtful guide through the complexities of that strand of European continental philosophy.

One of the major themes developed by French post-modern thinkers is of course language, and particularly in this strand of feminist thought, language and writing assume a central role. As Miller reminds us, Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, Irigaray’s *parler femme* and Duras’ style, especially in her

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late works, “represent deliberate attempts to elaborate an alternative discourse” (31) to the dominant normative masculine one. Further discussion of these and similar terms would take me too far, but I would like to observe that, despite the fact that Miller obviously understands the ways in which those concepts are related to the materiality of language, its infinite polysemy, and ultimately its fundamental resistance to meaning, as against the weight given to the symbolic by traditional masculinist ways of writing (Cixous), his book is at the end a re-assertion of the weight given to the symbolic. Consider for example these remarks in the rich, fifty-one-page Introduction:

“On the one hand, *écriture féminine* opens up the possibility of fundamentally reconceiving the world (...) On the other, it is very difficult from within that discourse to make clear and distinct pronouncements on those realities and hence to reach a moment of decision that could effect significant and responsible (i.e. answerable) change. Irigaray, Kristeva, and Kofman all accept the need for this change and strive to effect it from within the lineaments of reason, though often pushing reason to the limits of intelligibility in their own efforts to reconceive and hence remake the world” (39).

Miller’s well-structured English prose seems aimed at achieving a maximum of clarity and intelligibility, and seems to assume that “clear and distinct pronouncements” are indispensable for “reaching a moment of decision that could effect significant and responsible (i.e. answerable) change”; elsewhere Miller’s discussions implicitly re-assert certain discourses of canonical authority, for instance when he emphasizes that French feminist thinkers “write novels, autobiographies, and even in their more scholarly works often deploy a kind of deliberately lyrical writing that calls into question the assumptions of a more traditional, normative, masculinist discourse” (x, emphasis added). The words quoted above suggest a benevolent but potentially patronizing impulse to clarify *écriture féminine*, *parler femme* and related feminist concepts of language which are aimed precisely at subverting the paradigm of an arguably masculinist scholarly clarity, within which Miller, I, and the authors of the other two books discussed above are all operating.

Concluding this necessarily brief discussion of three volumes, I would like to emphasize that, despite important differences (especially between the

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first two volumes and Miller's monograph), one basic point is worth emphasizing. The kind of binarist and masculinist style of writing so vehemently criticized for instance by French feminist thinkers still seems to fundamentally characterize scholarly production in Classics. The radical and non-conformist lives of some of the women scholars who are the subjects of these volumes would have perhaps deserved an equally radical way of writing – of a kind which unfortunately has not yet been established in our discipline.

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