SOME RECENT BOOKS


Professor Pomeroy is well known for her books and articles on women in the ancient world. This is the latest book. I review it for the general reader.

The book presents an interesting selection of the evidence about the status of women in the cities and countryside of Egypt from the Macedonian conquest down to the Roman takeover (Alexander to Cleopatra). During this time Egypt was ruled by a Macedonian monarchy and run by a mainly Macedonian and Greek administration and army. The principal city was Alexandria, founded by Alexander himself. It is the status of women of Greek descent, with some exceptions, that is the main focus of the work. Their condition is compared and contrasted with that of women in Athens in the Classical period.

The comparison with Classical Athens has admitted drawbacks. Athens was democratic, Egypt monarchic, even allowing for the existence of Greek city-states like Alexandria; Athens was not typical of all Greek city-states in the Classical Period either. Yet Athens is an obvious choice for comparison because of the relative wealth of documentation.

P.'s general argument is that the status of Macedonian and Greek women in Hellenistic Egypt was higher than in Classical Athens. Exceptions are admitted, and some instances of high Hellenistic status are not unprecedented in the Classical period. Moreover, women's status in the outlying areas of Egypt was different from that in the cities, especially Alexandria. It also varied from class to class. P. is aware of these variables. She is also aware of the danger of generalising from meagre evidence spread over the three centuries in question. She is nevertheless ready to make a general argument.

P. ultimately attributes the higher status of women in Egypt to the political institution of monarchy: the monarchy of the Ptolemaic dynasty which ruled Egypt in this period (pp.xvii–xix). This monarchy had powerful queens, and their higher status influenced the status of ordinary women in various ways. The phenomenon of ruler cult enhanced the traditional female participation in cult activity. Moreover, P. says, monarchy restricted the traditional participation of men in political life, and she argues here (p.xiii) and later (p.82) that this made men more "feminine" — they retreated into private life.

"The experience of rootlessness, the feeling of alienation, the lack of political power, and the interest in the personal and the private, which in an earlier age were characteristic of women, were generalised and shared by men in Ptolemaic Egypt." (p.82)
So men and women became more equal. It must be added, however, that some of this is not at all well substantiated by the evidence.

The Ptolemaic queens are the subject of the first chapter. Their command of revenue and of armies and their direction of cult is proof of their power. P. believes that the role model for these queens was the royal ladies of old Macedonia, especially the wives of Philip, among whom was Alexander's mother, Olympias. The masculine ways of some of Philip's foreign wives, P. argues, set a new fashion for the Macedonian queens of Hellenistic Egypt, and for their female subjects too. In this chapter P. also argues that women generally achieve higher status at a time of rapid change, as occurred in Macedonia in the fourth century. She is incidentally prepared to support the view that the secondary burial in the alleged tomb of Philip at Vergina is one of his warrior queens.

The general reader might prefer to liken the status of these queens in Hellenistic Egypt to the status of other eastern royal women, for instance, Artaynte, mistress of King Xerxes of Persia, to whom Xerxes offered gold, an army and cities to rule (Herodotus, 9.109.3), or Mania, the satrap of Aeolis, who ruled in her husband's place commanding revenues and army and all (Xenophon, Hell. 3.1.1ff.). More importantly, what of the role model of the Egyptian Pharaohs whom the Macedonian kings replaced? P. is well aware that in Demotic (native Egyptian) documents, some of these Macedonian queens are styled Pharaoh. Surely their role and status was not uninfluenced by the Egyptian context in which they ruled? When Alexander conquered Egypt, he took the place of the Pharaoh, complete with titles and customs. When the Ptolemies ruled Egypt, though Macedonian, they practised what they conceived to be Pharaonic customs, like sibling marriage. The role model was in Egypt, not in Macedonia. The question of role models needs more attention, though P. hints that there is insufficient documentation to give a full answer. She candidly admits to no expertise in Demotic and has resort only to translated Demotic material. This will have limited the value of the book.

The second chapter is 'Alexandrian Women'. Some of the Section headings, e.g. 'Memorable Events', are an indication of the essential patchiness of the evidence, and the difficulty of writing a coherent account of women's status from the same. P. deserves credit for the skill of her presentation. The section on the woman's perspective in Alexandrian literature is provocative. Of course, much of the literature, even that written by women, was very traditional in its view of the female, as P. freely admits. Yet Callimachus' Hecale and Apollonius' Argonautica, written by men, exhibit an interest in women. This is explained in terms of the 'feminisation' of male society in Hellenistic Egypt, due to monarchic rule (see above and p.82). I cannot accept that. I would prefer an explanation that paid more attention to the development of the literary tradition in which the new perspective emerged. Can
Euripides be so easily dismissed as a ‘maverick’ in Classical Athens?

The third chapter is entitled “Some Married Women in the Papyri” and contains a series of marriage contracts as well as the family archive of Apollonia Senmonthis (a woman with both Greek and Egyptian names) and her husband, a Greek mercenary soldier, Dryton. This section has some fascinating insights into a woman’s lot in the New World. Marriage contracts became a matter of necessity in the melting pot of Egypt, where Greeks from very different backgrounds were thrown together. Agreement about the basic obligations of marriage could no longer be taken for granted, and they are here spelled out. The evidence is not new, but it is presented in lively fashion to the general reader.

Apollonia’s family archives are even more fascinating. Her ethnic identity is uncertain; her twin names suggest a hellenised Egyptian or an Egyptianised Greek. Both phenomena are known. She was Dryton’s second wife. A series of wills reveals Dryton’s preference for his son by his first wife over Apollonia and her 5(!) daughters. This would appear to be totally typical of the Classical Greek male outlook. Throughout the book P. stresses how unusual it was in Classical Greece to rear many daughters. Female infanticide was widely practised. Yet, somehow, Apollonia managed to rear her five daughters to maturity. Apollonia was a woman of independent means, leasing land and loaning money in her own right. This seems to P. more Egyptian than Greek. Her daughters were engaged in financial transactions after Dryton’s death.

The question remains how far the example of the Ptolemaic queens, or the other effects of monarchy, were responsible for the apparently improved status of women. Other factors to be considered are the individual circumstances of the woman involved, the different economic circumstances of Greeks living in Egypt, a far richer land than Greece, and the existence of Demotic law alongside Greek law, which, strictly unlike Classical Athenian law, allowed a woman to transact business without a guardian (though this whole matter is recognised as a “grey area”).

P. ends with chapters on ‘Slaves and Workers’ and ‘Women’s Role in the Economy’. Again, the evidence is fascinating. Such documents will not be found in M. M. Austin’s recent collection of documents, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest*, C.U.P., 1981, in spite of their interest.

P. constantly seeks out the woman’s perspective. Sibling-marriage, she suggest, favoured royal women, who in other types of marriage were sent away to a stranger’s house. Now they consolidated their power at home. The restriction of citizenship at Alexandria to offspring of citizen parents, she says, made citizen girls better marriage prospects and disadvantaged foreigners. Yet surely it goes too far to say that a shared life rather than reproduction was the aim
of marriage in Hellenistic Egypt (p.xviii). No evidence of this is presented as far as I can see.

V. J. Gray


This book is mainly about Proclus, which is no fault. Its chief theme is that language, for Proclus, was the revealing analogue to reality. Language was not, as some philosophers would have it, a diminution of the truth, a mere spinning out into prolïxité. It was capable of describing wholes, and indeed the whole, the All. Proclus did not deny that Being was extended, dispersed. But each level of Being was, he believed, imprinted with the All, though in its own way, and was therefore open to a description that did not isolate it from the ultimate sources of meaning in the universe. For language possessed (and this, according to the author, was Proclus’s major point) a richness that enabled it to bridge gaps, so to speak, between the different levels, ranging in modern terms from the empirical to the poetic. Language was, in other words, ambiguous, and thus preserved genuine analogies, allowing all levels of Being to be embraced within one mode of expression. Modifications of reference could be simply adverbial: good in this way, beautiful in that. Each level possessed what could be attributed to all, but οἰκείως.

Such a view of the world had epistemological consequences. Order in Being was presupposed. The extension of Being simply provided a context in which order became observable. The qualities of divinity present at each level operated within the same space, so to speak, as the factors that controlled human knowledge of them. To know, and to express the knowledge, called above all for what the author calls a species of imagination. Here lies a kinship to mathematics. But that is almost the only place where such kinship can be convincingly alleged. For, in spite of his famous attachment to numbers, and in spite of the central role played in his system by relations (thanks to the emphasis on analogy), Proclus did not regard the extension of divinity throughout Being as the result of anything genuinely mathematical, of any sequential logic; it was produced by specifically metaphysical powers — cosmic fertility, παρουσία. So language was still, for Proclus, descriptive. He was looking (with some success) for words that were equal to a theology already proposed, albeit a theology of relationships.

This provides a different and refreshing portrait of the philosopher. Pro-