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Women Philosophers: A Bio-Critical Source Book, review

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Ethel M. Kersey, *Women Philosophers: A Bio-Critical Source Book* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

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An old maxim says that the beard does not make the philosopher (*Barba philosophum non facit*). Nevertheless, the stereotype of the bearded philosopher is pervasive and has probably contributed to the impression that philosophy is predominantly, if not exclusively, a male activity. Standard reference sources in philosophy reinforce the male bias by devoting numerous articles and chapters to exceedingly obscure male philosophers while routinely overlooking the contributions of women. One occasionally finds a reference to Hypatia, although it is her dramatic murder at the hands of Nitrian monks rather than her importance to philosophy that usually commands [486] attention. The other women mentioned now and then are the wives (like Xanthippe, Pythias, Taylor) and lovers (like Héloïse and Beauvoir) of famous philosophers. The fact that some of these women, like Héloïse, Taylor, and Beauvoir, were themselves philosophers is rarely considered.

Ethel Kersey, an associate librarian at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, has written a splendid book that will help rectify this one-sided presentation of the history of philosophy. Her book is part of a small but growing body of literature designed to rescue the names of female philosophers from oblivion and to showcase the contributions of women to philosophy. Kersey's work nicely supplements, and sometimes relies upon Gilles Ménage's *History of Women Philosophers* (originally published in 1690, translated by Beatrice Zedler, 1984) and Mary Ellen Waithe's *A History of Women Philosophers* (volume 1, 1987; volume II, 1989). The 158 women in Kersey's volume are listed alphabetically. Each entry includes, where available, a brief biography of the philosopher, an account of her importance to philosophy, and a list of works by and about her. Delightful anecdotes and interesting facts are sprinkled throughout the book. One learns how Axiothea of Philesia dressed as a man to attend Plato's lectures and that Elena Cornaro Piscopia was the first woman to receive a doctorate in philosophy. Kersey's lucid introduction orients readers to the history of western philosophy, taking into account the contributions of women. This section could easily be incorporated into introductory courses in philosophy to balance the perspective provided by most textbooks that women rarely philosophized. There are no illustrations, and this may disappoint some—although pictures would doubtless have added considerably to the cost. An appendix provides an overview of the women listed in the volume, the period and country in which they lived, and their philosophical orientations. Kersey thoughtfully includes a name index and thus insures not only that the book will be useful, but that it can be easily used.

The criteria for who would be classed as a philosopher were liberal, although the scope of the book is limited to western philosophy (thus, someone like Murasaki Shikibu is not included). Any woman who had “seriously thought or written in the traditional fields of philosophy, including metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and logic” was considered a philosopher (p. x). With a couple of exceptions, women born after 1920 are excluded. This is not a defect in the book; however, the omission of Mary Midgley (b. 1919) is an unfortunate oversight. Kersey also excludes women like Mary Wollstonecraft whose primary focus was the philosophy of women. Since Kersey [487] argues that these women were philosophers, it is puzzling why they are not included. The exclusion is not justified by the disclaimer that their work has been “adequately dealt with in other sources” (p. x). The problem is that these women have been ignored by the *philosophical* establishment. For instance, the standard reference sources in philosophy tell of Rousseau’s theories of human nature and education but say *nothing* about Wollstonecraft’s insightful critiques of these theories. Kersey should not conspire in the silence about women like Wollstonecraft if she wishes to address the problem of the absence of women in the philosophical canon.

Kersey’s intention not to be narrow in the selection of candidates is laudable, although it leads to some questionable entries, and it is not always clear that she consistently applies her criteria. For example, the only claim that some of the women—Barbapiccola, Carter, Martineau, and Dacier—have to being philosophers is that they translated the work of a well-known philosopher. According to this standard George Eliot, who translated Feuerbach, should have been included. One also wonders whether reading Plato as a child (Jane Dudley), or being a historian with a passing familiarity with philosophic ideas (Anna Comnena), or being the subject of apocryphal tales praising one’s dialectical skills (Catherine of Alexandria) are sufficient to be grouped among philosophers. By far the most dubious entries are Elizabeth Forester-Nietzsche and Madalyn O’Hair. Kersey admits that Forester-Nietzsche was “no philosopher” (pages 16 and 105), but she influenced German philosophy in the early part of this century by tirelessly promoting—and, it seems, misrepresenting—her brother’s work. Mention of these facts should have been confined to the introductory essay. The inclusion of O’Hair is also debatable. Her significance as a social activist and popularizer of atheism cannot be doubted. But she has not “seriously thought or written in traditional fields of philosophy,” and her contributions to discussion in the philosophy of religion are nonexistent.

Criticism of Kersey’s work should be tempered by the observation that it is in “the vanguard of a new field of research” (p. ix). Hence, squabbles about who is and is not included should take a back seat to an appreciation of Kersey’s achievement in encouraging philosophers to remove their sexist blinders and giving them a tool that will make the job easier.