Silvia Ronchey: Hypatia. The True Story. English translation by Nicolò Sassi. With the collaboration of Giulia Maria Paoletti. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2021. XV, 268 p. € 82.95/£ 75.00/$ 94.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-071757-0.

The timeless tragedy and mysterious character of Hypatia of Alexandria (ca. 370–415 AD) continue to draw interest both in scholarly and popular culture. Alejandro Amenábar's 2009 film *Agora* continues to attract viewers; Edward Watts 2017 presented a fresh and accessible biography,[1] and in 2020 the popular NBC series *The Good Place* featured an extended encounter with Hypatia in the afterlife (as "Patty," played by Lisa Kudrow). Also in 2020 a collection of essays on Hypatia came to publication, edited by Dawn LaValle and the present reviewer.[2]

It is therefore very welcome to have this monograph in English from one of the world's leading authorities on Hypatia, Silvia Ronchey. The book is, according to the introduction, a revised version and translation of Ronchey's 2010 *Ipazia. La vera storia*. Ronchey has two main objectives in the book. First is to give, as the title implies, the facts and truth, as she sees them, including the political and ideological factors which shaped the construction of her memory in the era immediately following her death. The second aim of the book is to give the "first sustained investigation of the Nachleben of Hypatia in Modernity," as the back cover states. The work is impressively researched and there is much insight and value in all three parts.

The book is divided into three sections. Part 1 lays out the basic facts of Hypatia's life and death. Part 2 is focused on her modern reception, and then Part 3 aims to return freshly to the original sources sketched in Part 1 with a more conscious appreciation of the inevitable biases of the modern reader, based on the distorting looking-glass examined in Part 2.

Polemic and criticism, nonetheless, run as a constant throughout the work. A few persistent challenges face historians of Hypatia in the modern area. One example is the tendency for casual students of her life, from Denis

1 E. Watts: Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher. Oxford/New York 2017 (Women in Antiquity).

2 D. LaValle Norman/A. Petkas (eds.): Hypatia of Alexandria. Her Context and Legacy. Tübingen 2020 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 119).

Diderot to Carl Sagan, to see her as a champion of reason over the irrational forces of religion, symbolized by the Christian Church. In part 1 ("Setting out the Facts", pp. 5-64), Ronchey puts this erroneous tendency to rest by emphasizing her interests in the occult mysteries of paganism. (Ronchey on the whole is very sensitive to anachronism, to which Hypatia, being popular symbol, has been frequently subject).

A continuous point of debate both in scholarly and popular discourse about Hypatia is the extent to which the bishop Cyril of Alexandria played a role in her death. Hypatia was murdered in 415 by a mob of quasi-monastic Christian tough guys, the *parabalani* (originally 'bath workers'), whom the bishop was accustomed to employ in various odd jobs. Did he call the hit? The Church did eventually pronounce Cyril a saint because of his later contributions to the doctrine of the nature of Christ, and thus Christians have had a reason to try to exculpate him from direct responsibility for her death. There are considerations besides sacred piety to conclude that Cyril, a very savvy operator, did not will or command the act: the deed was widely condemned by respectable society, Christian and otherwise, and there were political repercussions from the imperial authorities. It is difficult to imagine Cyril not foreseeing this somehow. Watts, for example, sees the event as an unfortunate result of an escalation between bishop and governor, in which Cyril created the tension and emotional circumstances for, but did not command, this fluke mob lynching. Ronchey criticizes this position forcefully. She prefers to see Hypatia's death as the result of a methodical campaign by Cyril, motivated by envy (φθόνος). Hypatia, by her friendship with the governor and the Alexandrian upper classes, stood in the way of Cyril's ambitions to extend his influence over even the more secular domains over the city, including the lucrative government contracts for grain shipments to Constantinople.

Political 'envy' is a factor mentioned explicitly by Socrates Scholasticus and is a common cause of civic disturbance in classical Greek historiography (such as Plutarch's lives). Ronchey's account also follows Damascius closely, who concurs in many details with Socrates. Watts's account presented a very politically active Hypatia, but one who only incidentally and intermittently got involved in civic issues, who began holding crisis meetings at her home as the quarrel between the prefect Orestes and Cyril escalated. For Ronchey, Hypatia is even more prominent a patron in the Alexandrian elite, and the meetings at her house mentioned by Damascius were a more regularly

occurring salon – Ronchey points to the use of the imperfect tense as indication of their frequency.

Ronchey's picture, on the whole, is appealing, though there are some weaknesses. She criticizes Watts's "oddly irenic" (p. 27) view of the relationship between the Egyptian Church and Alexandrian elites in the late fourth and early fifth century. But there is a great deal of daylight – an entire generation in fact – between the destruction of the Serapeum by an imperially condoned Christian mob (around 392) and the death of Hypatia in 415, which are the two primary examples of civic violence Ronchey draws on to present her more agonistic model. The letters of Hypatia's Christian student, Synesius of Cyrene, bear witness to an extensive network of Christians connected to her school – for example, Olympius, Euoptius, Athanasius, probably Herculian, and Hesychius. Ronchey sees Hypatia's students, and her social circle, as an ancient pagan elite, close to the imperial government, who, despite occasionally professing nominal Christianity, were bound by their "implicit common adhesion to paganism like a Freemasonry ante litteram" (p. 43). But Synesius and the governor Orestes seem to have taken their Christianity quite seriously – the first confronting major controversies both civic and ecclesiastical as bishop, the second proudly proclaiming his baptism by the patriarch of Constantinople in front of a violent mob who ended up throwing rocks at him. A useful comparison to Hypatia's Christian friends is the story of the Christian civic leader further up the Nile named Gesius in his quarrels with the wily abbot Shenoute of Atripe.[3] To call such a man as Gesius a crypto-pagan is to buy into the highly tendentious polemics of his hardliner opponent in this intra-Christian power struggle.

I have argued elsewhere for Hypatia being an important literary patron for Synesius at Alexandria. She aided him in circulating polemical texts dealing with intra-Christian debates about the value of classical παιδεία.[4] There was much collaboration and friendliness between (genuine) Christians and Pagans among the leadership of Alexandria, and an open-minded attitude toward classical culture among Christians need not coincide with coolness towards the Church. Ronchey also leaves largely aside Theophilus' violent

3 D. Frankfurter: The Private Devotions of Intellectual Hellenes. In: LaValle/Petkas (note 2), pp. 130–133.

4 A. Petkas: Hypatia and the Desert: A Late Antique Defense of Classicism. In: LaValle/Petkas (note 2), pp. 7–30.

clashes with desert ascetics in the great Origenist controversy of 400. The Christians in Alexandria were hardly a united front before Cyril succeeded Theophilus in 412. In fact, many common interests united Hypatia and Theophilus (and Synesius, whose wedding Theophilus himself attended). Unaccountable monastics were a threat to orderliness in both the Church and the city. Cyril does seem to have represented a significant break with tradition, a shift to a more aggressive policy of the Church dominating civic affairs, one which ran against decades of relative stability. In fact, what Ronchey, citing Jean Rougé, sees as the 'pagan reaction' against Cyril, might be better described as a 'bourgeois reaction' against the disruptive upstart bishop. Ronchey sees in the monks of 392 and 415 a single continuous force of foot soldiers doing the bidding of both Christian bishops: "squadrons of violent men, who travelled from city, filled with social hatred not only against the Pagans, but also against the civilised world as a whole and against the inhabitants of the metropoles." (pp. 24–25). But a more nuanced picture is possible, and probably closer to the truth.

Ronchey's account is nonetheless very reliable in its details and compendious in its citation of earlier authorities, and will surely be an authoritative starting point on the death of Hypatia for the foreseeable future. This can be said a fortiori for the book's second section on Hypatia's reception ("Betraying the Facts", pp. 67–134, which traces the reception and distortion of Hypatia throughout the subsequent European tradition in great detail. Hypatia was the subject of enlightenment polemic (Edward Gibbon), masonic opera (Roffredo Caetani, p. 88), and romantic poetry (Diodata Saluzzo Roero's Christian Hypatia, p. 98). Ronchey's research is deep and impressive. At times, these short chapters read like a series of heavily annotated book reviews, and it is sometimes difficult to see a forest for the trees. There are diverging approaches to Hypatia presented, such as the counter-reformation Catholic, pro-Cyril reading, represented by men like Cardinal Caesar Baronius (pp. 87–92), and the anti-(Anglo-)Catholic Hypatia of Charles Kingsley (pp. 104–105), which revived the position taken up by the eighteenth century rationalist pamphleteer John Toland.

The final section, 3, "Interpreting the Facts," (pp. 137–222) aims to revisit the original sources and offer a fuller picture of Hypatia the historical figure, by means of a more nuanced approach to the ancient sources and their biases. This section treats many cultural subjects relating to Hypatia at greater length, such as the content of her teaching, the nature of late antique

paganism, her political activities and actual power in Alexandria. Ronchey here reiterates her point about Cyril's intentional assassination of Hypatia. But she also makes the interesting observation that two different Christian strands of reading Hypatia seem to take hold already in the ancient sources: namely, the exculpatory approach of Catholic apologists, exemplified by the Coptic monophysite historian John of Nikiu (seventh century), and the more realist, Orthodox approach, represented by Socrates Scholasticus (fifth century). The latter, followed later by the Byzantines, saw in Cyril a flawed saint, whose doctrine was perhaps sound and salutary but whose actions were reprehensible. Liberal Christians like Toland and Kingsley are thus inheritors, in a way, of this more nuanced way of reading the Hypatia story.

Section 3 suffers from a difficulty that runs throughout the book, namely that its organization is hard to follow and its argumentation is often episodic. Most chapters run around two to five pages, each followed by an extremely detailed appendix of comparable length to the chapter, with more in-depth discussion of sources and problems. This may be a convention I am not familiar with, but I found it challenging to keep the thread at times. The English translation is occasionally awkward and might have benefitted from more proofreading (p. 13: "In 391 [...] a special law against Pagan cults had been emanated for Egypt."). It is unfortunate that this book apparently was too far along in the publication process to engage with the essays LaValle and Petkas 2020 (besides, apparently, Watts's essay therein).[5] Ronchey probably would have offered some interesting and spirited criticism of the perspectives offered there. Despite weaknesses which mostly relate to its difficulty of use, *Hypatia. The True Story* is an impressive and original work on Hypatia and will be essential reading on the subject for a long time to come.

5 See note 2 and E. Watts: Hypatia and her Eighteenth-Century Reception. In: LaValle/Petkas (note 2), pp. 206–221.

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