

Feminist Epistemologies for Greece and Rome

A simple truth well-recognized in the field of feminist epistemology is the idea that the epistemic realm is not immune to systems of power. In fact, the central tenet of all feminist epistemologies is that social identities – gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, citizenship, nationality, language, religion, age, ability, and so forth – matter to knowledge formation and the study of epistemic concepts. This view runs counter to a long philosophical and scholarly tradition of taking such concepts, especially standards like knowledge, justification, and truth, to occupy an impartial realm separate from prejudice and other social distortions. Feminist epistemologists have demonstrated that this is not so; knowledge, justification, truth, evidence, rationality, objectivity, authority, expertise, opinion, perception and so forth – are routinely shaped by social and political injustices. What someone knows or is perceived as knowing, who the authorities on a subject are, how credible an account is, what evidence seems pertinent, and what conclusions are most rational are all sensitive to systems of domination and oppression.

This panel proposes to employ feminist epistemological frameworks to analyze how concepts like knowledge, belief, rationality, objectivity, testimony, and evidence were constructed in Greece and Rome. By using an intersectional approach to demonstrate how epistemic systems exclude and pathologize the experiences of ancient women and other historically oppressed groups, these papers promise to aid in the recovery of non-dominant narratives and to shed light on issues of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identities, religion, and class in both the ancient and modern world. As a result, the panel will contribute to a more inclusive and equitable study of classical antiquity and build powerful transhistorical connections capable of exposing similar injustices in our own time.

The five papers treat a variety of genres and time periods, including Roman satire, stoic philosophy, early christian writing, reception, and disciplinary studies. Panelist 1 employs feminist standpoint theory to excavate marginalized voices of non-citizen women from the Petronius's inset

narrative, *The Widow of Ephesus*. Panelist 2 explores the relationship between embodied and analytic knowledge in the writing of Vibia Perpetua. Panelist 3 asks whether the Stoic philosophy of Seneca, Cicero, and others is compatible with the main ideas and traditions within contemporary feminist epistemology. Panelist 4 explores contemporary feminist retellings of ancient mythology through the lens of feminist epistemology and argues that modern authors that center embodied female experience open up new ways of reading ancient texts and of getting beyond some the commonly touted well-established interpretations of these stories. Panelist 5 discusses a number of objections that are often deployed against using contemporary theories (like feminist epistemology) to analyze classical sources, especially worries about anachronism and authorial intention, and argues that these objections perpetuate systems of mass ignorances historically maintained by the patriarchy.

The panelists include ancient philosophers and classicists and range from junior to more established scholars. Our respondent is a recognized expert of Gender and Women's studies. Each paper will last 15 minutes, with five minutes for questions, leaving time for discussion conducted by the respondent, who will present brief remarks.

Panelist 1: Women's Knowledge in Eumolpus' *Widow of Ephesus*

In Petronius' *Satyrica*, Eumolpus tells the *Widow of Ephesus* (*Sat.* 111-112), a Milesian Tale about womanly fickleness (*muliebrem levitatem*, *Sat.* 110.6), to entertain his fellow travelers. As the story goes, a *matrona* excessively mourns the death of her husband by fasting with her *ancilla* until she is seduced by a Roman soldier and uses the corpse of her husband to save her new lover. The tale appears to be based on a well-known fable and reinforces misogynistic stereotypes about promiscuous women, yet Eumolpus uniquely Romanizes the story by localizing it in the province of Asia (Bowie 2013, 249-50). The women in the story, consequently, embody other marginalized identities since one is Ephesian (Slater 2018, 245) and the other is enslaved, details that go largely unremarked in the episode itself and in Petronian scholarship. This paper attempts to counteract Eumolpus' chauvinist narrative and this scholarly oversight by enlisting feminist standpoint theory to account for the marginalized perspectives of the widow and her *ancilla* who are non-citizen women living in a provincial town under Roman rule.

Feminist standpoint theory accepts that knowledge is socially situated and posits that marginalized groups have an epistemic advantage over their dominant counterparts for identifying biases in dominant narratives (Hartsock 1987, Collins 1990, and Intemann 2016). The application of standpoint theory to the *Widow of Ephesus*, a literal narrative that represents the viewpoint of the dominant (Roman and male) group, reveals that the non-Roman women see an important lacuna largely overlooked by Eumolpus who tells the story from a dominant viewpoint: legal and social tensions exist between the local populace and provincial Roman government in Ephesus. This perspective adds a new dimension for understanding the matron's sexual relationship with the soldier, for while she is presented as a consenting partner, the power dynamic between the Roman soldier and Ephesian matron can be understood to be a coercive one. This interpretation gains traction in light of the enslaved woman's double citation of Vergil's Anna (*Aen.* 4.34, 4.38) when persuading her mistress first to end

her fast and, secondly, to have sex with the soldier. The Vergilian citations reveal the precarity of the women's situation in the *Widow of Ephesus*, since Anna reminds Dido in this section of the *Aeneid* that the queen's refusal of the Gaetolian king Iarbas has put them in a perilous situation in Carthage. The *ancilla*, I argue, takes quotes from this very passage to warn the matron that they may also face danger if the Roman soldier is refused. The slave's quotation of Anna can thus be understood to be a form of hermeneutical resistance – defined as the use of epistemic resources to undermine, challenge, or form alternative meanings of established interpretive frameworks (Medina 2013 and 2017) – since she reinterprets Vergil's poetry to communicate covertly with the matron in the presence of the Roman soldier.

Rather than accepting Eumolpus' account that the matron's actions are evidence of women's wantonness, this paper proposes that feminist epistemology offers a critical framework for re-assessing the *Widow of Ephesus* from the women's de-centered standpoint in recognition of the precarity of their situation vis-à-vis their gender and non-Roman identity.

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Panelist 2: “Intelleximus passionem esse futuram”: The Sensual Epistemology of Vibia Perpetua

Vibia Perpetua (c. 182–203 ce), an African woman living in Roman Carthage, wrote a surviving prose account of the time she spent in a Roman prison that numbers among the very few extant women-authored ancient texts. In the short portion of the text generally attributed to her hand (sections 3–10), Perpetua recounts a series of ‘dream-visions’ (Gold’s terminology) she experienced in the days leading up to her martyrdom. These are full of vivid, sensual language, which communicate her heightened physical, bodily experiences (for example, ‘I saw a ladder,’ *video scalam*, 4.4; ‘I stepped on [the snake’s] head,’ *calcaui illi caput*, 4.7; ‘I chewed the bit of cheese,’ *buccellam ... manducavi*, 4.9). Feminist epistemologists like the philosopher Lorraine Code have written about stereotypical associations of women with experience and sensation. Rather than being treated as authoritative, knowledgeable and generally capable of assessing a situation objectively, women are commonly treated as able only to report what they themselves have subjectively experienced. Interestingly, however, Perpetua does not limit herself to this sensual language, a detail that remains underexplored in the scholarship. In fact, she routinely brackets her experiential and sensuous descriptions of the dream-visions with firmer claims to authority.

Building on Barbara Gold’s insights about the visual nature of Perpetua’s dream-visions and Celsiana Warwick’s claim that Perpetua is constantly negotiating the gendered expectations of emotional attachment, this paper proposes to explore how Perpetua’s sensual dream-vision language engages with and is bolstered by the analytical language of knowing Perpetua uses to mark the beginning and ending of each dream vision. Perpetua, I will argue, is giving far more than a report of her own, first-hand, subjective religious experience; she also claims authoritative, God-given knowledge with which to interpret these visions and their meanings for the past, present, and future.

In the first instance of analytical language, Perpetua agrees to ask God for a vision on the grounds that she knows she can speak with him: ‘and I, because I knew (*sciebam*) that I communicated

with God...promised him I would do so' (4.2). After describing the experience of the vision in vivid, sensual style, she marks the end of her description and the beginning of her interpretation of it with a second claim to know: 'we understood (*intelleximus*) that there was going to be a martyrdom' (4.10). In similar fashion, she marks the beginning and ending of her second vision of her late brother Dinocrates with epistemic claims, saying both that she knows (*cognovi*) she is capable of praying on the boy's behalf (7.8) and later, that she understands (*intellexi*) that her prayer-vision was successful (8.4). Finally, after recounting her third and final vision in which she becomes male and fights a gladiator amidst a throng of cheering supporters, she returns to a more sobering style, this time doubling down on her identity as a knower: 'and I understood that I was going to fight against the devil, not wild animals; but I knew that victory would be mine,' *et intellexi me non ad bestias, sed contra diabolum esse pugnaturam; sed sciebam mihi esse victoriam* (10.14). By closing her short account in this way, Perpetua correctly foresees the vast potential for future misunderstandings that martyrdom entails and works to wrest control of the narrative of her coming death through her authoritative epistemic claims.

Feminist historians of philosophy have attributed the stereotypes of male, disembodied, objective reason and female, embodied, subjective experience back to Plato and Aristotle (e.g. Lloyd 1984 and Jaggar 1989: Interestingly, however, in Perpetua's writing, we find a subtle reappropriation and inversion of these stereotypes. Her authority is not over the merely subjective or experiential domain; her visions give her access to matters of objective fact (for instance, that she will be executed and not pardoned). In this way, Perpetua reappropriates her sensuous nature as a mark of her religious authority, embracing the stereotype of the embodied female experiencer and dissolving the boundaries between so-called 'subjective' and 'objective' claims to know.

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Panelist 3: The Viability of Feminist Stoicism: On the Compatibility of Stoic and Feminist Epistemology

The Stoics held what some philosophers have deemed “proto-feminist” views (e.g., Hill 2001, Nussbaum 2002, Engel 2003, Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014, Hill 2020). Though certainly progressive by the standards of the ancient world, a proto-feminist reading of the Stoics is not without its conflicts. For example, they maintained that women should engage in philosophy and that they were capable of being wholly rational and virtuous agents. At the same time, they espoused views that a woman’s proper role was in the home and her value was commensurate with her modesty. Still, there is textual support indicating that Stoic value theory can be interpreted in such a way that this conflict is not irreconcilable. Consequently, some philosophers have contended that the Stoic philosophical program is compatible with (or even amenable to) contemporary feminist ethical theories, even to such an extent that we can posit a “Stoic feminism” (e.g., Hill 2001, Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2017). However, the question of whether Stoic philosophy is compatible with areas of feminist philosophy other than value theory has been given little attention.

In this paper, I address whether Stoic philosophy is compatible with some central ideas and traditions within feminist epistemology, namely, situated knowledge and standpoint theory. I argue that some of the fundamental commitments of Stoic epistemology, specifically their conception of (i) the cognitive impression (*phantasia katalēptikē*), (ii) the connection between knower and impression, and (iii) the adverse relationship between emotions (*pathē*) and knowledge, are antithetical to key components of prominent feminist epistemological theories. Additionally, I show that the Stoics’ deemphasis of the agent’s gender in her role as a knower – often interpreted as a detached and egalitarian “view from nowhere” by those who argue for feminist compatibility – instead denies the importance of the situatedness of the knower and existence of situated knowledge, concepts central to feminist epistemology. Because Stoic philosophy cannot accommodate a feminist epistemology, I

conclude that it is incompatible with a comprehensive feminist philosophical framework and that a fully satisfactory “Stoic feminism” cannot exist.

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Panelist 4: Feminist Retellings and Feminist Epistemologies

Recent years have seen an explosion of novels and other media that reimagine classical texts and stories from other perspectives, often from the perspectives of the female characters. These retellings have taken many forms—the novels alone include Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, Jennifer Saint’s *Ariadne*, Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls*, and Natalie Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships* (and, from somewhat earlier, Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Lavinia*). These novels, by centering the female characters and inviting the reader to identify with female protagonists, offer a powerful tool for building a model of reception that speaks to and draws upon recent work on feminist epistemologies. This paper will explore some of this potential while also looking toward other applications of an approach to reception informed by feminist ways of knowing. In particular, I will consider how retellings that center an embodied female experience can open up new ways to read ancient texts, ways that were always available in the text itself but may not have been recognized by readers.

This paper draws in particular on concepts like Hélène Cixous’ *écriture féminine* as well as feminist standpoint theory to analyze how works written by women (especially when those texts are also written about women) can offer a unique insight into texts that have historically been studied and interpreted by (predominantly) men. I seek to avoid gender essentializing while nonetheless suggesting that someone approaching a text from a marginalized perspective, someone whose authentic identity and experiences are not so readily seen in the text, can see things in these canonical texts that may have been missed by others or a more dominant identity. To consider this through the specific lens of gender, women have been able to craft a rich narrative around characters like Circe who are not cast in the most sympathetic light in, e.g., Homer’s *Odyssey*. We see Miller reject the idea that Circe is naturally inclined to transform men into animals and instead wonder what might cause someone to behave in that way. By writing a version of this story that meshes neatly with Homer’s *Odyssey*

(nothing in her story contradicts Homer's version—these two texts can coexist neatly in the same literary universe), Miller writes her own account *into* the world of the *Odyssey* and invites the reader to align themselves with Circe, rather than with Odysseus. For many readers, this change in their sympathies might not have occurred without a nudge from a novelist who dramatized another perspective to counter that of Homer's original. Once they have imagined Circe's perspective, however, a reader simply cannot read Homer the same way again. With an alternate narrative in mind, Odysseus' account of Circe is less authoritative and more clearly a product of his own bias. Now we are faced with the much more apparent possibility that perhaps Odysseus is lying (or, if we are feeling generous, embellishing) his account, and we need to weigh his credibility when determining how reliable his version of events is. While there were always hints that Odysseus is an unreliable narrator, many readers find no reason to question his account on a first (or even second or third) read. Particularly if they readily see themselves in Odysseus, they may not have any inclination to doubt someone who seems like them. However, an alternate narrative can provide that impetus to question the veracity of an account that might vilify women and invite readers to think about central questions of feminist epistemologies, such as why women are disbelieved and what conditions might lend women the same credibility that men are often accorded by default.

To go a step further, by questioning the veracity of Odysseus' narrative in one particular facet, readers are also invited to think about how much else in his account might be inaccurate and what might motivate him to (consciously or unconsciously) present an erroneous version of events. The seemingly simple act of reimagining a story from a female perspective can serve to destabilize a great deal about a text and to call to the fore questions of legitimacy, credibility, and how one's standpoint influences their experience of the world.

As a final note, I suggest that it is not a coincidence that writing that aligns more with *l'écriture féminine* (fiction writing and essays that foreground the personal voice) has been such an effective

means to reorient readers to these ancient texts, as opposed to more phallogocentric forms like argumentative essays.

Panelist 5: Too Much Theory? On Authorial Intention, Anachronism, and Close Reading

Along with my two co-editors, I have spent the last year editing the volume, *Believing Ancient Women: Feminist Epistemologies for Greece and Rome*. The contributions use recent feminist epistemological frameworks – contemporary theories by sociologists, philosophers (like myself), feminist theorists, and political scientists to address the complex intersections of social identities (i.e., sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, etc.) with epistemic concepts (i.e., knowledge, belief, credibility, authority, objectivity, etc.) – to interpret classical sources and their receptions. While the feedback we have received on the project has been quite positive, we nevertheless have encountered a common rejoinder, especially upon initially describing the project: how do such contemporary ideas sit with disciplinary concerns of anachronism, authorial intention, and close reading? After all, doesn't all of this *theory* get in the way of understanding ancient texts in their original milieu?

This paper addresses this cluster of worries with three observations. These observations are intended to explain how we ultimately justified the use of a patently anachronistic critical apparatus, one that often treads against authorial intention, while maintaining a commitment to close reading and careful textual/philological argumentation.

First, I draw the distinction between the *attribution* of a critical lens to classical authors and the use of a critical lens as an *interpretive apparatus*. None of the contributions to our volume attribute feminist epistemological motives *to* ancient authors (though some consider it within the realm of possibility); instead, the vast majority deploy feminist epistemological theories as a way of analysing and problematising ancient texts.

Second, this paper builds on Alison Sharrock's helpful discussion of the different possible aims of feminist interpretations (Sharrock 2020: 35. See also Richlin 1993: 743). On her framework, a reading can be either *resisting* or *releasing*. A *resisting* reading "identifies the chauvinist, sexist, or other ideology of the text but refuses to play along with it." A *releasing* reading, by contrast, "opens up

possibilities for women's [or other marginalized groups'] voices which exist in the text, but which have traditionally been downplayed or ignored by the critical establishment." Readings can also be *optimistic* or *pessimistic* about authorial intention. A reading is *optimistic* "when the author is regarded as 'sympathetic to women [or other marginalized groups]', and/or shown to be exposing fluidity of gender [or other identities] against the rigidity of... norms, in a way that looks remarkably modern." A *pessimistic* reading, on the other hand, finds the author "more compromised to his chauvinist social milieu." I argue that these different aims (especially the possibility of a releasing/pessimistic interpretation) create space for projects that, while being firmly grounded in textual evidence, have little or nothing to do with what an author intended.

Third, and finally, this paper argues that the above worries about anachronism and authorial intention are themselves tools of the patriarchy. Interpreters must indeed be careful when making authorial attributions. However, requiring of interpretations that they make solely authorially-sanctioned claims, requiring interpreters to think in terms of what was intended by elite men who routinely excluded women, found the lives of enslaved persons beneath report, and maintained systems of mass ignorance is an edict that perpetuates and replicates such exclusions (Medina 2013). We have at our disposal conceptual resources, resources like feminist epistemology, with which to read well beyond what ancient authors intended, well beyond what they had the conceptual resources to imagine. To reject such resources as legitimate tools for scholarship is, therefore, to claim for ourselves the limited hermeneutical resources of deeply oppressive societies.

The hope is that these reflections will help to reinforce methods of classical scholarship, methods (like 'reading otherwise') that have been under construction during the last 50-plus years of feminist/critical race classical scholarship, which license interpreters to make observations, ask questions, and deploy theoretical apparatuses that ancient authors would not have thought (or, in some cases, would have thought repulsive) to make, ask, or deploy.

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*Some of this panel proposal has been adapted from the Introduction to a forthcoming volume co-edited by the panel organizers.