

*Sara Ebenreck*

---

## Introduction to Part I

The recovery and appreciation of women's philosophical voices requires skills from multiple disciplines: historical skills in locating forgotten texts, literary skills in textual analysis, and philosophical skills in analyzing the insights that are rediscovered. Accordingly, this volume begins with an essay by a feminist historian who has reflected on both the reasons for the loss of women's voices and the importance of recovering them. This broad analysis is followed by an essay from a literary scholar whose evaluation of the historic importance of the work of one early twentieth-century black American feminist provides a powerful instance of the treasures to be regained in the recovery of work by past women thinkers.

With concise directness, historian Gerda Lerner states a central reason for the loss of women's voices in the patriarchal tradition of the European-American West: those with the power to include or to exclude women's voices marginalized women, both within their time and in the studies of history that mark important voices for the attention of later generations. Bereft of the history of women's work and teachings, women thinkers over and over again had to reinvent and defend the most basic of theoretical structures: an argument for their authority to think, speak, and write. When they did write, it was almost always in dialogue with male thinkers of their time rather than by engaging and taking further the insights of previous women thinkers. But today, Lerner writes, we live in a Renaissance time for women, a time when women who experience the painful difference between their life experiences and the values transmitted by patriarchal culture are challenging that culture. As the lengthy list of important earlier women thinkers mentioned in her essay indicates, we must do that challenging, not in a historical vacuum, but rather with conscious awareness of the work of previously unrecognized women who have preceded us.

When race as well as gender contribute to the silencing of a woman's voice, the exclusion is magnified. Mary Helen Washington's commentary on the thought of American black feminist Anna Julia Cooper provides witness to the courageous ways in which one woman surmounted the powerful cultural and institutional obstacles raised against an intellectual who was both female and black. Washington sketches

the nature of Cooper's black feminism, including her critique of white feminists who exclude the voices of black women from their considerations. She details the way in which Cooper's education and work as a teacher were made precarious both by the cultural framework in which it took place and by her own nonconformist choices. Yet, as Washington also notes, Cooper herself, to be heard in the larger intellectual world, had to identify herself with "true womanhood" in ways that a contemporary critique may identify as not sufficiently feminist. Washington's evaluation allows us to see the complex facets of Cooper's feminism; in it the reader may recognize the very real difficulties of expressing women's thoughts in a language and intellectual culture so long dominated by men.

# 1      Why Have There Been So Few Women Philosophers?

My participation in this volume as an outsider to the field of philosophy represents the recognition that feminist scholarship must of necessity be interdisciplinary. I am also very much an insider, not as a philosopher in the narrow sense, but as one engaged in what I take to be our common enterprise: the feminist critique of the foundations of Western civilization, of its leading metaphors, its unspoken patriarchal assumptions, its myths of origin.

As the feminist challenge of traditional interpretations developed, the fields most resistant to the new scholarship have been the sciences, intellectual history, philosophy, and classics. These are the fields within which, from the Middle Ages onward, the educational canon has been defined. Science, the youngest of these fields, has been central to the body of knowledge and tradition only since the end of the nineteenth century, yet from its inception in the academy and outside of it, it has been a predominantly male field. Religion, one of the oldest academic fields, is an interesting exception. Possibly because of the larger numbers of women in the field and because of many reform and renewal movements outside the academy in this century, it has been more receptive to feminist ideas than the other fields. I would suggest that openness to new ideas and structures is generally in reverse ratio to the field's relationship to the core of tradition. The professions can stand reforms, some opening up, some loss of their exclusiveness; but when it comes to challenges to the traditional values by which the field is organized, the defenses go up.

The current, so-called "cultural war" promoted by right wing conservatives has focused predominantly on a defense of the supposedly eternal values represented by the classical canon of academic knowledge. The great philosophers, the great male thinkers, the great classical works represent, according to these defenders of Western civilization, the very essence of its meaning and values. The canon itself has become a metaphor for the intellectual product of Western civilization, which functions like the metaphor of the flag to nationalism—it is supposed to rally us around it, inspire

us to battle in its defense and lead us, in unquestioning obedience, to holy war. Academic philosophy, defined in the traditional way, is central to this core metaphor. It is no wonder, then, that feminist philosophers face great resistance on the part of traditionalists.

In my book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, I have traced the social and economic conditions that led to the institutionalization of patriarchy in the Ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> These conditions were well established at the time philosophy and science were developed in classical Greece. Philosophy, one of the pillars of the edifice of traditional Western civilization, arose in a society in which some men were given the education, leisure and free social space in which to develop systems of ideas and explanations, while their domestic and physical needs were met by the unpaid labor of women and slaves. The educated male elite discovered the power that comes with definition, the power to manipulate symbols, to give form to experience and to offer people explanations for their condition. Because from the start the male system builders were divorced from ordinary life and from the necessities of daily reproduction, they built some conceptual errors into their systems that survive to this day. One of the most serious of these is their claim to universality, their arrogant assumption that they can and are entitled to speak for vast populations that are invisible and silenced—slaves, women, foreigners. By making the term “man” subsume “woman,” by making the generic “we” subsume those silenced, men have arrogated to themselves the representation of humanity, even though they are in actuality only half of humanity. I have called this “patriarchal fallacy” an error of vast proportions.<sup>2</sup> By taking the half for the whole, they have not only missed the essence of whatever they are describing, but they have also distorted it in such a fashion that they cannot see it correctly. As long as men believed the earth to be flat they could not understand its reality and its true relationship to other bodies in the universe. As long as men believe their experience, their viewpoint, and their ideas represent all of human thought, they are not only unable to define correctly in the abstract, but they are also unable to see reality accurately.

The fact that the patriarchal system was well established prior to the period when the great philosophical systems were first developed has led the early philosophers to incorporate unexamined and unquestioned patriarchal assumptions into their thinking in such a way as to make them for a long time invisible. Aristotle's argument in his *Politics* is a case in point. At the time this work was written, the moral rightness of slavery was still a questionable and debatable issue. Why should one man rule over another? By what right should one man be master and another slave? Aristotle reasoned, rather lamely, that some men were born to be rulers, others to be ruled. To explain, he used several analogies: the soul being superior to the body, it must rule the body; the rational mind being superior to passion, it must rule over passion. And “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”<sup>3</sup> He concluded that “It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right.”<sup>4</sup>

What is remarkable about this definition is not so much its circuitous logic, as

what is assumed and what is deemed in need of explanation. Aristotle conceded that there was some need for justifying the enslavement of people, but he saw no need whatsoever for justifying or explaining the inferiority of women. That was assumed as a given and remained undisputed. Aristotle's misogynist construction became one of the foundation stones of Western civilization, and his assumptions remained unchallenged and endlessly repeated for nearly two thousand years. Thus, from its inception, the power of philosophers to define rested on their power in society and in turn reflected and reinforced that power metaphorically.

The hegemony of patriarchal thought in Western civilization is not due to its superiority over all other thought; it rests upon the systematic silencing of other voices. Women of all classes, men of different races, ethnicities, or religions, and the vast majority of laboring people were kept out of the intellectual discourse. Patriarchal thinkers constructed their edifice the way patriarchal statesmen constructed their archaic states: by defining who was to be kept out. The definition of those to be kept out was usually not even made explicit, for to do so would have meant to acknowledge that there was a process of exclusion going on. They were simply obliterated from sight, marginalized out of existence. Religion, science, philosophy—the three great mental constructs that explain and order the world of Western civilization—were formed and developed without the participation of women. Just as the distribution and allocation of economic resources gives power to the rulers, so does the withholding of information and the denial of explanatory constructs to the oppressed give power to the system builders.

Similarly, when, in the Middle Ages, the great system of European universities made structured learning more widely accessible, the university was so defined as to exclude all women from it.<sup>5</sup> And again, when in the nineteenth century, throughout Europe and in the United States, professions redefined their purposes, restructured their organizations, licensed and upgraded their services, and enhanced their status in the societies in which they operated, this was done on the tacit assumption that women were to be excluded from these professions. It took nearly a hundred years of organized struggle for women to reverse, at least partially, the results of such exclusions. It is no wonder that in our day the defenders of the fortress of tradition see the barbarians at the gate every time we question any aspect of their tradition.

Women, far longer than any other subordinate group, have been kept from the power of definition by a combination of structural and institutional discriminations and by an ideology that denied them their full humanity. The question has plagued all of us modern feminist thinkers: Why have there not been any great women thinkers, no great philosophers, no system builders? The patriarchal answer to the question has always been, because women are mentally inferior. Since the nineteenth century this answer has sometimes been varied by "scientific" explanations as to brain size, hormones, and other biological factors. Obviously, such answers are unacceptable to women. How then can we approach the question?

Historians will start by qualifying it. There have been women philosophers and system builders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and if that is so, why have