

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION

Women's History Month 2006

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2005 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2005 or Spring 2006 to be eligible. (Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Jane Pederson _____ Dept. History _____

Course Number and Name History 489-Research Seminar _____ Semester completed Spring 05 _____

Title of Nominated Work: Rational Goddess/Pagan Witch: History and Hypatia from the Fourth Century AD Through Modernity _____

Pick one-

CATEGORY:

Sampson:

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(The judges retain the right to reassign categories for all nominated works.)

STUDENT INFORMATION:

Name Jaclyn De Medicci _____

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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To: Women's Studies Awards Committee.

From: Jane Pederson

Subject: Women's Studies Awards

Jaclyn de Medicci's paper, "Rational Goddess/Pagan Witch," offers a compelling analysis of the history of Hypatia (b.355, d.415) and the contested meanings of her life and brutal death. As Jaclyn research indicates, Hypatia's intellectual achievements and political power created controversy in her own time that have continued across time. As Jaclyn suggests the debates about Hypatia are sensitive barometers of unstable gender systems and a volatile, violent, and oppressive religious climate. The murder of Hypatia exposes the uncompromising brutality of early Christian leaders in the face of women's intellectual, political, and personal autonomy. Her death marked a harsh beginning to the long debate about Hypatia's significance, and a long history of oppression for women.

Jaclyn has skillfully mined the secondary literature on Hypatia, but she is most creative in identifying and interrogating primary sources. Jaclyn demonstrated notable initiative in identifying sources. She located works published and unpublished in translation from the fifth century and then tracked commentators from the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century. In doing so she has expanded our knowledge of how narrowly constricted gender constructions were created and contested over time.

Excellence. Our measure, our motto, our goal.

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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

RATIONAL GODDESS/PAGAN WITCH:
HISTORY AND HYPATIA FROM THE FOURTH CENTURY AD THROUGH MODERNITY



BY
JACLYN DE MEDICCI

EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN
MARCH 1, 2005

**To Gina and Noah
may you accomplish all you set out to do**

**And Hypatia
355-415 AD**

**History will be kind to me
for I intend to write it**

-Sir Winston Churchill

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Michael Deakins, University of Australia, for his generosity and time spent providing me with his wealth of ancient sources in translated form. Without his courtesy this paper would not have been possible. I also thank Professor Waters for encouraging my interests in the ancient and classical worlds and for being a very tough grader.

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Hypatia is a woman who lived a life of great fame and suffered a death of greater tragedy. It is the details of her accomplishments and murder that cause her to be the subject of much debate in the historical narrative, and the victim of conflicting points of view. Comparison and analysis of both ancient and modern academic works reveal underlying themes of dissension based on gender and the use of Hypatia's story to propagate greater historical themes. Through all this, history must remember that she was a real woman who suffered a horrendous death.

PREFACE

Sixteen centuries ago a woman named Hypatia lived a life of high regard and suffered a death of great infamy, her body torn to shreds by Christian followers. What makes this singular woman, out of the entire timeless flow of humanity, so significant to the historical perspective is the dichotomous views of academics on what her life and death truly signify. Across centuries, from the Classical era to the European Enlightenment to the modern age, and through cultures, be they Greek, French, British, or American, a debate has raged as academics attempt to define this woman named Hypatia. Equally interesting to this debate are the underlying perspectives motivating the positive or negative slant that Hypatia's story is given.

Hypatia is a contentious historical figure due to many factors not usually present in the male-centered world of traditional History. Until modern academia women were generally omitted from the historical consciousness; and the fact that Hypatia warranted as much discussion in her own time as well as through the ages holds significance. A highly educated woman with true political power and a wide sphere of influence, Hypatia lived an unusual life, as the majority of women in classical Alexandria lived as submissive wives and mothers. The particulars of her life stimulate such academic debate, and cause historians to discuss and portray her from different perspectives, and lead to the major conflicting dynamics of her significance to the historical narrative.

To understand the Hypatia debate, one must begin with the story of Hypatia's life. Normally a straightforward biographical matter, primary (and, by extension, secondary) sources reinforce the thesis with conflicting assertions for the details of her life. What follows are the undisputed truths of her biography.

Hypatia, born in approximately 355 AD, grew under the tutelage of her father Theon, a celebrated mathematician and astronomer in Alexandria. She studied at the Alexandrian schools and had access to the remaining books in the great Alexandrian Library. Hypatia published several academic works on such diverse subjects as Ptolemy's mathematical principles, astronomy, and Neoplatonism. As word of her teachings spread, Hypatia earned the respect of many men in Alexandria. She taught classes that expanded on Neoplatonist philosophy and influenced the ruling class of the city. All treatments of Hypatia include an anecdote in which she throws a bloody menstrual napkin at an enamored student, an interesting story in its own right. In 415 AD followers of the emerging Christian power in Alexandria attacked her, tore her body to shreds, and burned her remains.

The details of Hypatia's biography are where the story diverges both in content and meaning. Academics discuss aspects of her life which contradict the Hypatia biographies written by other intellectuals. Some studies celebrate Hypatia, portraying her in favorable ways and lamenting the death she suffered at the hands of the church. Other works decry her audacity for living outside the proscribed spheres of wife and motherhood, for influencing male followers and assuming a public persona; her death a necessity of her deeds. The greater historical significance of Hypatia's death also remains in debate, as her murder holds a deeper meaning than just the end of her life. For many academics Hypatia's demise embodied a turning point in history; exactly what turning point is another source of dissension.

Through study and comparison of sources from ancient times leading into modernity the debate over Hypatia continues. Dissenting sources can be compared against contemporary works or against academic works produced at different points in time. Dividing her life, death, and

historical significance into consumptive pieces for study reveals a clear theme that transcends the academic debate. Hypatia's gender emerges as a major contributing factor to both the contradictory details of her life and in the positive or negative slant in which academics portray her.

CHAPTER ONE THE WOMAN HYPATIA

Hypatia, born in 355 AD, lived and taught in Alexandria, Egypt until her death in 415. Alexandria, a major Classical cultural center with its great libraries and museums, is estimated to have had a population anywhere from 180,000 to 600,000 in 400 AD.¹ Alexandria had a cosmopolitan mix of Jews, Christians, and pagans. The intellectual elite came from all ethnic and religious backgrounds while the city itself experienced strife and battling amongst the different peoples. While the city had always maintained a diversity of culture, the rising power of Christianity threatened to encroach upon the long-time Jewish and pagan Greco-Roman residents.²

Hypatia flourished due to the teachings of her famous father, Theon of Alexandria. Under his tutelage Hypatia became a much learned woman. Highly regarded for his works in mathematics and astronomy, Theon included a dedication to Hypatia in his *Commentary on Ptolemy's Almagest*: "Theon of Alexandria's commentary on the third [book] of the Mathematical Syntaxis of Ptolemy, the edition having been prepared by the philosopher, my

¹Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 46-7. Haas bases his estimate on a Syrian document which dates from a Greek original of the 4th century AD. The document lists a total of Alexandrian private homes and apartments. Haas multiplied the housing total by the household average from papyri derived from comparable cities such as Karanis and Oxyrhynchus. Mangasar Magurditch Mangasarian, *The Martyrdom of Hypatia: or, The Death of the Classical World* (Chicago: Independent Religiousa Society of Chicago, 1915), 1.

²Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History: Book VII, Chapter XIII* (Translated by Michael Deakin, MOnash: University Press, 1995; Constantinople, c. 380-450 AD), sec. A.

daughter Hypatia.”³ Despite Theon’s acknowledgment of his daughter’s intellectual prowess, some later historians such as Elbert Hubbard blame Hypatia for overshadowing her father’s rightful place in history: “The father of Hypatia was Theon, a noted mathematician and astronomer of Alexandria. He would have been regarded as a very great man had he not been cast into the shadow by his daughter. Let male parents beware.”⁴ This point is noteworthy, for when a son attains higher achievement than the father, the father is usually bestowed great honor for producing such a successful offspring. For a daughter to outshine the father, especially in the realm of intellectual pursuits, can apparently be upsetting for some traditionalists. Hubbard made this point in England in 1928, which is surprising given the centuries-old disdain he feels for Hypatia. Ironically, what Hubbard failed to realize as he made that statement is that he himself did not intellectually pursue the life of Theon. Hypatia, the overshadowing daughter, remained the subject of his study.

Many historians chose to include the physical attributes of Hypatia. While ancient sources make very little reference to her appearance, writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries give her physical beauty as much importance as her mind. Since descriptions of her appearance were largely omitted from the works of those who knew her, inclusions of an idealized Hypatia seem to be a creation of relative modernity. Thomas Lewis, a British writer in 1721, proclaimed her: “A Lady most Vertuous, most Learned, and every way accomplished, of singular Beauty, Modesty, and Wisdom; the Historians that speak of her, I confess, bestow great

³ Theon’s Inscription, *Commentary on Ptolemy’s Almagest Book III* (Translated by Micheal Deakin, Monash: University Press, 1995; Alexandria, c. late 4th century AD), preface.

⁴ Elbert Hubbard, *Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great, Vol. X, Great Teachers* (New York: Roycrofters at their shops, 1928), 271.

Encomiums upon the Learning and Accomplishments of this Woman.”⁵ Lewis included this description despite the fact that his treatise attempted to rebut positive historical treatments of Hypatia. Apparently, Lewis felt that feminine beauty could be an acceptable truth for Hypatia, if not her intellectualism.

Leconte de Lisle, a French poet and playwright, gave heavy credence to the myth of Hypatia’s beauty. Although not technically an academic work his play *Hypatie et Cyrille*, written in 1857, relied on the historical narrative. Hypatia’s alleged mythical beauty gave lyrical weight to his portrayal of her and the timelessness of her story: “She alone survives, immutable, eternal; Death can scatter the trembling universes but Beauty still dazzles with her fire, and all is reborn in her, And the worlds are still prostrate beneath her white feet.” “Her features, arms, and hands were of the severest and grandest type of old Greek beauty...we should have only recognized the marked resemblance to the ideal portraits of Athene.”⁶

Charles Kingsley, an American historian of the late nineteenth century, wrote what is considered by many academics the seminal history of Hypatia in his book *Hypatia: New Foe with an Old Face*. Kingsley did discuss her appearance but placed her intellectualism in higher esteem:

“Judging by the chronicles of the times, it appears that her beauty, which would have made even a Cleopatra jealous, was as great as her modesty, and both were matched by her eloquence, and all

⁵Thomas Lewis, *The History of Hypatia, A Most Impudent School-Mistress of Alexandria: Murder’d and Torn to Pieces by the Populace et. al.* (London: Crown in Pater-Noster Row, 1721) , 2.

⁶ Leconte de Lisle, in Maria Dzielska’s *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) , 5.

three surpassed by her learning.”⁷ It should be noted that Kingsley cited the “chronicles of the times” as his basis for inclusion of Hypatia’s beauty, but surviving ancient texts make no such allusion to her appearance.

Accordingly, while Hypatia’s contemporaries saw fit to describe her in terms of her accomplishments and deeds, later historians insisted on a physical perfection as well as mental. As the embodiment of Greco-Roman intellectual and philosophical ideals, these historians claimed she must have physical idealism as well. These academics clearly wrote during an age of romanticism. Creating an aura of physical perfection around Hypatia may be seen as a harmless inclusion, but it does slightly color the story of her life. The merits of studying Hypatia’s life and death remain strong based on her intellectual powers, and, also ironically, as a Neoplatonist Hypatia would have abhorred any attention or importance placed on her appearance.

One area of Hypatia’s life that historians cannot agree on is whether she had a husband or remained single her entire life. Struggling between their descriptions of her as a paragon of modesty and virtue and her relationship with her student Isidore, historians have still not come to a consensus. This is largely due to the fact that the ancient sources contradict each other, and sometimes themselves within their own writings. Damascius, a contemporary of her student and alleged husband Isidorus, wrote “She was honest and chaste and throughout her life remained a virgin,” and later in the text includes the line “Hypatia, wife of philosopher Isidorus.”⁸ Heyschius, who included Hypatia in two of his histories written shortly after her death, contradicted himself

⁷Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia: New Foe with an Old Face* (New York: T. Y. Crowe Publishing, 1897) , 13.

⁸ Damscius, *Life of Isidorus* (Translated by Michael Deakin and Monty Wilkinson, Monash: University Press, 1995; Athens, c. 480-550 AD), 2.

between texts: “Wife of the philosopher Isidorus...she remained unwed.”⁹ Later historians do attempt to address this confusion, such as Kingsley and Edward Gibbon.¹⁰ Kingsley even supplied a “quote” from Hypatia on why she would never be married: “Would it save my cheeks from blushes every time I recollected that I bore the hateful and degrading name of wife? The property, the puppet of a man?”¹¹

This attention to whether or not Hypatia married is an example of various academics’ attempts to understand and define a woman already singular for her intellectualism. Normally women in Hypatia’s time married, but Hypatia already lived so outside proscribed gender lines that historians cannot agree if she lived attached to a man or unwed. The underlying question seems to be, would she have been able to succeed and teach as she did if she had been encumbered by the responsibilities of a wife? Anecdotal evidence suggests that Hypatia favored learning and philosophy over love and marriage, specifically in the “bloody napkin” story.

Repeated in at least two ancient sources, the tale of the bloody napkin immortalized Hypatia nearly as much as her death did. A male student fell in love with her. Despite learning Neoplatonist ideas of elevating one’s self above physical love, he eventually made his feelings known to her, which Hypatia did not take well. Furious, “producing a bloodstained menstrual napkin, she pointed to this evidence of the unclean nature of procreation and said, ‘In truth, this is

⁹ Hesychius, *Onomatologus* (Translated by Michael Deakin, Monash: University Press, 1995; Constantinople, c. 5th century AD), 1. Heyschius and Damscius, *Suda* (Translated by Winifred Frost, Constantinople, c. 5th century AD), 1.

¹⁰Kingsley, xv. “The tradition that Hypatia was the wife of Isidore, the philosopher, I reject, with Gibbon, as a palpable anachronism of at least fifty years.” Cites evidence that Isidore’s master Proclus wasn’t born until a year before Hypatia’s death.

¹¹Kingsley, 40.

the focus of your yearning, young man, but it is nothing beautiful.”¹² Suitably disgusted, it is said the man returned to a life of chastity. This story suggests that Hypatia had in fact remained unmarried, but it has other ramifications as well.

Writing in 1995, Maria Dzielska included this story in her work on Hypatia, but used it in the context of Hypatia’s Neoplatonist theory. This included the idea that wisdom is not enough to achieve a perfect union with the divine, but one must also achieve peace within one’s self, have personal harmony, and live free of worldly and bodily distractions. If one is elevated above the physical beauty of nature then one is level with the gods. Dzielska posited that the “bloody napkin” story reveals Hypatia’s true character both as a philosopher and a woman, that is to say, she found the physical body disgusting and vulgar, and so reacted to the smitten young man in a “cold and unsympathetic” manner. Hypatia reacted as she did out of frustration with her students inability to grasp this fundamental truth of Neoplatonism.¹³ It must be said that Hypatia’s belief in these ideals, and her daring to break a female taboo by so publicly displaying her menstrual napkin, are all part of her offences against the church and played a role in the threat the Christian establishment felt from Hypatia.

This story of thrown menstrual napkins also illustrates how unconventional a woman Hypatia was. Not only did she hold a position of relative power and learning but she would reject a man’s advances in so personal and shocking way. The ancient sources’ choice to include this one story is interesting in itself. Both versions relay a gleeful tone in Hypatia’s actions, and portray her favorably as an example of perfect modesty and virtue. A later historian, however, did

¹²Damascius, para. 3, and Heyschius and Damascius, para. 3.

¹³Dzielska, 50-51.

not agree with this perspective.

Writing during the early eighteenth century, Thomas Lewis took great umbrage to Hypatia's response. He felt so offended that a woman would make this very visual argument he did not want to repeat the details in his own paper: "It is so gross an Argument, and a Conviction so Obscene and Odious, that I shall leave it in the same Language I found it, and not stain my Paper or offend the Reader with the Translation."¹⁴ For a female to use such a normally private and discreet example of womanhood in this manner offends the sensibilities of some men not used to such public displays of menstrual evidence. It is an argument and act that few women would feel comfortable making, even in modern times.

The story of the bloody napkin is a good example of how differently Hypatia lived and thought, and how her unconventional ways could both draw people to her or merit their disapproval.

¹⁴Lewis, 4.

CHAPTER TWO

EDUCATION, WORKS, AND TEACHINGS

Hypatia studied under her father Theon, from whom she learned mathematical theory and astronomy. She also had access to the libraries of Alexandria, which included the works of Greco-Roman academics in the fields of astronomy, math, occult sciences, philosophy, and mystery cults. One historian, Mangasarian, claims she studied at the University in Athens, where she earned the laurel wreath, a great honor. She wore the wreath all the time upon her return to Alexandria.¹⁵ This claim adds credence to Hypatia's level of education, but is suspect as it is only found in one secondary source.

Hypatia's areas of expertise were many. She studied and expanded upon the works of Apollonius of Perge, Diophantus, and Ptolemy, the latter for whom she published edited versions of *Almagest* and *Handy Tables*. Hypatia taught at the Alexandrian Library, where she had a large intellectual circle that earned her popularity and a major following. She taught such diverse subjects as Neoplatonism, Iamblichian mystical traditions, Chaldean oracles, Hermeticism, and occult sciences, including divine astronomy.¹⁶

Hypatia acted as a patroness to her more wealthy students and enjoyed a very active public

¹⁵Mangasarian, 5.

¹⁶Haas, 309., Heyschius and Damascius, para. 2. Hypatia wrote commentaries on the *Conics* of Apollonius and Diophantus' *Canon of Astronomy*.

life. She had a close relationship with the city's highest civil authority, the prefect, which gave her major influence in Alexandria. Hypatia frequently spoke at the Agora, the city town square. She earned many civil honors, and enjoyed such high esteem that newly elected magistrates sought her out for her acknowledgment and to pay their courtesies.¹⁷ Some historians hold her in great regard for these accomplishments, such as her contemporary Socrates Scholasticus: "There was a woman at Alexandria named Hypatia, who made such attainments in literature and science as to surpass all the philosophers of her own time."¹⁸ Hypatia's students also wrote well of her: "We have seen with our eyes, we have heard with our ears the lady [Hypatia] who legitimately presides over the mysteries of philosophy."¹⁹ Synesius of Cyrene, a personal friend of Hypatia's with whom she corresponded regularly, also praised her thus: "She was not only eloquent and educated, but also practically sensible and inspired with public spirit (politiken). She wrapped herself in the philosopher's robe and went out into the midst of the city."²⁰

Not all were so admiring of Hypatia. In his *Chronicle*, written during the same period as Scholasticus and Synesius of the early fifth century, John of Nikiu wrote:

And in those days there appeared in Alexandria a female philosopher, a pagan named Hypatia, and she was devoted at all times to magic...and she beguiled many people through [her] satanic wiles. And the governor of the city honoured her exceedingly; for she had

¹⁷Haas, 311.

¹⁸Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History: Book VII, Chapter XIII* (Translated by Michael Deakin, Monash: University Press, 1995, Constantinople, c. 380-450 AD.).

¹⁹Synesius of Cyrene, *Letters: Chapters XIV, XV. Part K. To Herculean* (Translated by Michael Deakin, Monash: University Press, 1995, Alexandria, c. 370-414 AD.).

²⁰Damascius, para.4.

beguiled him through her magic.²¹

Thomas Lewis, writing during the Enlightenment further rebuts the praise of Hypatia: "If the Learning of this Madam had been of the same size with her Modesty, she would scarce, in my opinion, have come recommended in such Pomp to Posterity; not even by those Historians who conspir'd to Sacrifice the Memory of an Arch-Bishop, on purpose to give her a Character."²²

Obviously, not all were so impressed with Hypatia and her accomplishments. The excerpt from John of Nikiu accused her of using witchcraft and "satanic wiles" to attain her position of power and influence in the city; one could postulate that this assertion is based on her gender. Many educated women with spheres of influence have been accused of witchcraft and killed for it through the ages, and especially during the rise of Christianity.²³ Lewis defended the church centuries later, and alluded to a twisting of historical truth by those who wish to defame Christianity.

Whether or not academics approved of Hypatia, she did enjoy a wide sphere of influence in her own time, mostly due to her philosophical teachings above anything else. Despite the growing power of Christian doctrine within Alexandria, the politicians, some Christians themselves, still adhered to the philosophies of old: "For if the practice of philosophy had declined, still its reputation was seen to be revered and respected by those managing the most important affairs of

²¹John of Nikiu, *Chronicle* (Translated by Michael Deakin, Monash: University Press, 1995, Constantinople, c. 5th century AD), ch. LXXXIV.

²²Lewis, 3.

²³John W. Donohue, "Holy Terrors," *America* 17 (1975) : 10. Shira L. Lander, "Constructing Selves and Reconstructing Others: The Making of Christian Martyrs," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (1999) : 188. Ursule Molinaro, "A Christian Martyr in Reverse: Hypatia 370-415 C.E.," *Hypatia* 1 (1989) : 6. Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

the state.”²⁴ To understand the story of Hypatia, a description of exactly what her Neoplatonist teachings encompassed is necessary.

Neoplatonists believe in the use of Rationalism and introspection to achieve unity with the gods. A Neoplatonist will comprehend the beauty of the physical world not in the physical aspects of an object itself, but in the *physicality* of that object; that is, the Divine Ratio that creates the object. The study of higher math and astronomy is intertwined with this principle. The study of metaphysical principles, as defined through mathematical theory, is called divine geometry. Divine geometry contains “holy principles,” i.e., the Divine Ratio.

The Divine Ratio is based on the equation $AB/CB = CB/AC = 1.618$, with line A-B containing point C one-third of the way between point A and point B. This principle had been first discovered by the Greek sculptor Phidias (500-432 BC), and subsequently found to be in every object, from the movement of light and atoms, to the spirals of the galaxies, the structure of the chambered nautilus, the proportions of the human face, and endless other things. The Greeks used this principle in their architecture, the Parthenon being a prime example, but many other cultures used it also. Ancient Egyptians used the Divine Ratio in the construction of their pyramids and the design of their hieroglyphics. Half a world away and independent of each other, the Olmecs and Mayans of ancient Mesoamerica used the Ratio to construct their Sun pyramid at Teotihuacan. Many other instances of both nature and man using the Divine Ratio in the construct of objects exist, and it can be overwhelming to learn of all the evidence of this Ratio’s presence in all that exists. For Neoplatonists and others studying the Divine Ratio, it is proof of a

²⁴Heyschius and Damascius, para. 4.

Divine Creator, and the Ratio is the beauty and structure that holds the universe together.²⁵

Hypatia explains Neoplatonist thought in her own words:

Neoplatonism is a progressive philosophy, and does not expect to state final conditions to men whose minds are finite. Life is an unfoldment, and the further we travel the more truth we can comprehend. To understand the things that are at our door is the best preparation for understanding those that lie beyond.²⁶

Neoplatonism does encompass other doctrines for understanding life and the divine, but it did not differ greatly from Christian thought. This is an important point to make, because many blame Hypatia's demise on her teachings that were supposedly contrary to Christianity. Extensive academic works have been published comparing the two philosophies; this work using Dominic J. O'Meara's *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* and Charles Bigg's *Christian Platonists of Alexandria*. They present an analysis of collections of philosophical and Christian works, from ancient to modern times. These include documents from the Late Greek/Byzantine era, the Medieval Latin Renaissance, and the modern era, among others. All documents show an intermingling of Neoplatonist and Christian thought, and how both schools seem to be derived from original Hebrew Old Testament ideas.²⁷

It must be mentioned, however, that both of these monographs, which discuss the greatest thinkers in both schools of thought, completely omit any mention of Hypatia despite the fact that

²⁵Dzielska, 53-55. Charles Bigg, *Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913). Bart D. Ehrman, *Christianity in Late Antiquity: 300-450 C.E.* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003). Charles Kingsley, *Alexandria and Her Schools* (Boulder: Project Gutenberg Netlibrary, 1895). Dominic J. O'Meara, *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

²⁶ Hypatia in Hubbard, 270.

²⁷Refer to footnote 22 for sources of further study.

she is usually considered one of the foremost Neoplatonist philosopher. What is more interesting is that they do include her lesser-known student (and possible husband, depending on the sources used) Isidorus. Hypatia's omission could be viewed as another example of her gender precluding fair and balanced treatment by academics. Either the authors of Neoplatonist studies chose to ignore Hypatia, as a woman, or she remained absent from the sources they used.

This brief overview of Neoplatonism is included because her philosophy is a major justification given for her death, including by the man who ordered her murder. Christianity had declared all pagan forms and ideas as "evil," and church figures used Hypatia's pagan rhetoric as evidence of her unholiness. Neoplatonism is not so different from the teachings of the Bible, and certainly does not teach against the Bible. Influences of Neoplatonism can still be found in the Bible and some Christian doctrine.

CHAPTER THREE

ST. CYRIL AND THE MURDER OF HYPATIA

To understand the context of the times in which Hypatia died, a broad overview of the religious climate in Alexandria is necessary. A generation before Hypatia's time, Theodosius, the Christian ruler of the empire, ordered the Arch-Bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, to destroy the gods and symbols of paganism. This included the highly important temple of Serapis and the Alexandrian Library full of Greek and Roman works. The temple suffered complete destruction, and actually the church where Hypatia's body later burned had been built on its site. The Library took heavy damage but some works managed to survive. Cyril, the nephew and successor to Theodosius, decided to go after the "living" monuments of paganism, i.e. its teachers and practitioners.²⁸

Cyril felt threatened by the Jewish and pagan presence to a much larger degree than his predecessors. To secure his power (at the time he was Bishop) he transferred the relics of John and Cyrus to the new shrine Canopus which had been built on the site of the destroyed temple for Isis Medica and published festal letters attacking paganism, such as his *Contra Iulianum*. Hypatia, as the most vocal and "famous" pagan leader in Alexandria, earned Cyril's attention as

²⁸Mangasarian, 5.

his biggest threat in the struggle to assert his authority over both the church and the city.²⁹

Cyril had reason to be worried over Hypatia and her influence. She maintained a close friendship with Orestes, the prefect of Alexandria. Orestes had originally been Christian, but he realized the value of maintaining an intellectual alliance with the pagans and Jews of the city, if only to keep the peace and fight the Christian power that encroached the city. Orestes had further angered Cyril by organizing disenchanted Christians against the patriarchy by making it clear to the citizens of Alexandria that to gain his (Orestes) favor and patronage, they must work through the philosophy of Hypatia and not the patriarchs of the church. Orestes openly welcomed all non-Christians into his city and succeeded in creating an alliance against the Christian church with Hypatia positioned squarely in the middle.³⁰

During this time, clearly the Old World had reached a standoff with the New Christianity, yet historians offer differing theories on why Cyril chose to order Hypatia's death as opposed to other Christian dissenters. Some academics claim Cyril's jealousy over her influence of Orestes turned to anger when Orestes refused Cyril's advances of friendship and a return to the church.³¹ Others cited Cyril's desperation to secure Christianity as the Alexandrian religion and thereby assure his place of power, and Hypatia presented the easiest target. Still others, such as Mangasarian, cited Hypatia's femaleness and ability to think outside the constraints of Christian doctrine that sent Cyril into a murderous rage: "He hated her because she, a frail woman, dared to be free and to think for herself. He argued in his mind that she was competing with

²⁹Haas, 309.

³⁰Haas, 312-313.

³¹Socrates Scholasticus, ch. XV.

Christianity...she was robbing God of his rights, and she must fall; for He is a jealous God.”³²

Whatever Cyril lay his motives on, gender, philosophy, or political power, his decision to order Hypatia’s death clearly constituted a power move. He needed to unite the imperial Roman authority with the doctrines of his church. Christianity may have been the religion of Rome and its empire, but as the example of Orestes proves, rulers and magistrates still favored the old pagan ways. Ancient sources largely cited the jealousy Cyril felt for Hypatia’s influence and his anger for her unconventional ways. Later sources discussed this more in-depth. In the mid-19th century poem “Hypatie et Cyrille” a religious discourse between the Hypatia and the Bishop takes place shortly before her murder that shows the broader struggle between Christianity and the Classical world:

“Cyril-‘Your gods are reduced to dust, at the feet of the victorious Christ.’
Hypatia-‘You’re mistaken, Cyril. They live in my heart. Not as you see them- clad in transient forms, Worshipped by the rabble and worthy of scorn- But as sublime minds have seen them In the starry expanse that has no dwellings; Forces of the universe, interior virtues, Harmonious union of earth and heaven that delights the mind and the ear and the eye, That offers an Attainable ideal to all wise men and a visible splendor to the beauty of the soul, Such are my gods!’”³³

The story of Hypatia’s death begins in such a way as to suggest Cyril did not know her prior to the day he ordered her murder. This is quite contrary to the aforementioned reasons why Cyril would have had a motive to kill her, but as stated previously, the history of Hypatia is full of glaring contradictions. Cyril, passing by Hypatia’s house one day, is surprised by all the “confusion of men and horses, of people coming and going, and others standing about.”³⁴ He asks

³²Mangasarian, 7.

³³Dzielska, 6.

³⁴Heyschius and Damascius, para. 5.

his attendants whose house it is, and is told it is the home of Hypatia, the famous lady philosopher and teacher. Enraged at this affront to his attempts to nullify paganism in Alexandria, he immediately orders her death, “the most unholy of all deaths....[For] bringing on their land this most extreme shame and disgrace.”³⁵ At this point, again, the details conflict with each other.

The basic grisly details remain the same, but who exactly carried out Cyril’s orders is debatable. Some ancient and secondary sources cite a local magistrate named Peter as the ringleader who organized the mob that took Hypatia on behalf of the upper-class Alexandrians who acted as powerful patrons of the church.³⁶ Others say it was the people of Alexandria, given free reign by their Bishop Cyril, who took her to her death,³⁷ or a mob of five hundred monks.³⁸ The Parabalani, clerics who worked in Alexandrian hospitals on behalf of the church, are also cited because they were under the direct authority of the patriarch and due to the fact that within one year after Hypatia’s death, specific edicts outlawing Parabalani gatherings in public areas were issued supposedly due to their outbursts of violence.³⁹

Whoever held direct responsibility for Hypatia’s murder, responsibility lies with the man

³⁵Ibid., 5.

³⁶Socrates Scholasticus, ch. XV. Haas, 53, 313.

³⁷Byzantina Australiensia, *The Chronicle of John Malalas Book 14* (Translated by E. Jeffreys, Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986. Antioch, c. 491-578 AD), 12. The exact quote is “At that time, the Alexandrians, given free rein by their bishop, seized and burnt on a pyre of brushwood Hypatia the famous philosopher, who had a great reputation and *who was an old woman*.” This is the only source to refer to Hypatia’s age at the time of her death. Italics author’s insertion.

³⁸Mangasarian, 8.

³⁹Haas, 314.

who ordered it, as it ended in an especially horrific way to die. Hypatia had been dragged from her chariot by a mob of people, taken to the Great Church of Caesarion, stripped naked at the altar, and had her flesh peeled from her body using oyster shells. “And while she was still feebly twitching, they beat her eyes out.”⁴⁰ The altar and church covered in the spray of her blood, the murderers then took her mangled parts, dragged them through the streets to Cimaron, and burned her remains on a pyre.⁴¹ While most historians tell this story in a sympathetic manner for so horrendous a death, at least one author, John of Nikiu, portrayed the murder as a victory for Christianity:

...and found her seated on a [lofty] chair; and having made her descend they dragged her along till they brought her to the great church Caesarion. And they tore off her clothing and dragged Her [till they brought her] through the streets of the city till she died. And they carried her to a Place named Cimaron, and they burned her body with fire. And all the people surrounded the patriarch Cyril and named him ‘the new Theophilus’ for he had destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the city.⁴²

Hypatia had her share of historical detractors, such as John of Nikiu who wrote from a pro-Christian agenda, and Thomas Lewis, whose title *The History of Hypatia, A Most Impudent School-Mistress of Alexandria: Murder’d and Torn to Pieces by the Populace, In Defence of Saint Cyril and the Alexandrian Clergy* is self-explanatory. Yet a large number of historians chose to condemn her death, including those academics mentioned herein, no matter what they believed were the motives behind it.

⁴⁰Scholasticus, para. 7.

⁴¹Socrates Scholasticus, ch. XIV. Damascius, para. 5.

⁴²John of Nikiu, ch. LXXXIV.

CHAPTER FOUR REACTIONS AND RAMIFICATIONS

Before discussion of historical reactions begins, a few final details of the days after Hypatia's death must be mentioned. Hypatia's death culminated as the final end to a series of violent acts in Alexandria between the church and the Jews and pagans of Alexandria. The violence started mainly due to Cyril's confrontations with the Jews and pagan symbols, and reached its pinnacle with the murder of Hypatia. Shortly after Hypatia's death Cyril violently forced the Jews out of Alexandria. Hypatia's student Isidorus took her place, continuing her teachings on a more secretive level, but nevertheless gaining much notoriety for himself. Despite teaching exactly the same philosophical doctrine as Hypatia, the church left Isidorus alone and he lived to old age. Cyril continued his rise to power and authority within the church and after his death the church canonized him as St. Cyril. Christianity and its practitioners ruled Alexandria.

Each of the historians that follow lament Hypatia's death and blame Christianity for it. What is interesting is that all have their own perspective on why the church sanctioned her murder, and what ramifications that had on both the church itself and the intellectual world. The following perspectives are discussed in chronological order, beginning from Hypatia's own era. The first is from Socrates Scholasticus: "The affair brought not the least [i.e., considerable] opprobrium, not

only on Cyril, but also on the whole Alexandrian church...nothing can be further from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort.”⁴³ His contemporary Damascius agreed:

As a result they laid upon the city the heaviest blood-guilt and the greatest disgrace and the emperor would have been angry about it [...*and surely would have punished the perpetrators severely*....] had not Aidesius been bribed. He thus to be sure allowed the murder to go unpunished, but in doing so assumed the guilt upon himself and on his descendants to come and his descendants had to pay the price....⁴⁴

The former written less than a hundred years after her death and the latter written sometime very shortly afterwards, both of these excerpts reveal that the ancient authors felt a sense of the momentousness embodied by Hypatia’s murder. Both understood it as a singular event worthy of being preserved, despite the many tragedies and momentous histories occurring at this time. Damascius even clarified that the ramifications of her murder would be felt for generations to come, and he proved correct. Not until the European Enlightenment, however, when academics enjoyed a resurgence in intellectualism and philosophy, did Hypatia again join the historical narrative.

Hypatia appears in 1720 when a staunch Protestant named John Toland wrote *Hypatia: or, The History of a Most Beautiful, Most Vertuous, Most Learned, and Every Way Accomplish’d Lady; Who Was Torn to Pieces by the Clergy of Alexandria to Gratify the Pride, Emulation, and Cruelty of Their Archbishop, Commonly but Undeservedly Styled St. Cyril*. Thomas Lewis’ equally long-titled work, discussed previously, voiced the Church’s rebuttal to Toland’s obvious

⁴³ Socrates Scholasticus, ch. XV.

⁴⁴ Damascius, para. 7.

championing of Hypatia and damning of the church.⁴⁵ Voltaire continued Toland's study and pro-Hypatianism in his 1736 work *Examen important de Milord Bolingbrooke ou le tombeau du fanatisme*: "a bestial murder perpetrated by Cyril's tonsured hounds, with a fanatical gang at their heels."⁴⁶ Voltaire concluded Hypatia murder occurred because she believed in Rational and free thought, and the religious zeal of the church sought to silence higher thinking and suppress the individual spirit.

Edward Gibbon, in his epic *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* series published during the latter years of the eighteenth century, used Hypatia as the defining example of the rise of Christianity causing the inverse downfall of the Roman Empire, or the "reason and spiritual culture (Hypatia) vs. dogmatism and barbaric absence of restraint (Cyril and Christianity)" argument.⁴⁷ Gibbon asserted that Hypatia died because she stood in the way of Cyril's ambition, and that his religious and political zealotry demanded "The sacrifice of a virgin, who professed the religion of the Greeks and cultivated the friendship of Orestes."⁴⁸ The sacrificial virgin imagery is striking, as indeed a naked Hypatia died (offered) on the altar of the Christian church.

The curious aspect of men such as Voltaire and Gibbon, writing during the early eighteenth century, is that they were praising a woman known for her education, teaching, and

⁴⁵John Toland, *Hypatia: or, The History of a Most Beautiful, Most Vertuous, Most Learned, and Every Way Accomplish'd Lady; Who Was Torn to Pieces by the Clergy of Alexandria to Gratify the Pride, Emulation, and Cruelty of Their Archbishop, Commonly but Undeservedly Styled St. Cyril* (London: 1720).

⁴⁶Dzielska, 2.

⁴⁷Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸Haas, 307.

political influence, when women in their own time, centuries after Hypatia, would not have been allowed to behave as Hypatia did. Women were still left largely uneducated and confined to their roles as wives and mothers, and to live outside these gender lines (as Hypatia did) would have earned them condemnation and ostracism. Hypatia for them was a romantic historical figure; the female embodiment of the Classical world that these men were reinventing for a new age.⁴⁹

In the mid nineteenth century, Leconte de Lisle wrote his version of *Hypatie* that disputed Voltaire. Rather than being the victim of a Christian “plot,” de Lisle postulated that Hypatia’s death represented a mere incident in the “ebb and flow of history and culture.” Twenty-four years later de Lisle published a second version of *Hypatie*, in which he wrote the *Christians* are to blame: “The vile Galilean struck you and cursed you; But in falling, you became even greater! And now, Alas! The spirit of Plato and the body of Aphrodite Have withdrawn forever to the fair skies of Hellas!”⁵⁰ If de Lisle had been studying the ancient literature available on Hypatia, then his confusion and change of position is understandable, and such contradiction part of the overall pattern on the history of Hypatia.

The historians of the late nineteenth century took other positions on the reasons and ramifications of Hypatia’s murder. Charles Kingsley believed it to be a bigger issue than the murder of one woman at the hands of the church; it meant the death of philosophy itself: “ Twenty years after Hypatia’s death, philosophy was flickering down to the very socket. Hypatia’s murder was it’s death blow. In language tremendous and unmistakable, the philosophers had been

⁴⁹Dzielska, 8.

⁵⁰Dzielska, 4-5.

informed that mankind had done with them.”⁵¹

J.W. Draper, a contemporary of Kingsley, presented a broader view but in a slightly different manner in his writings in the late nineteenth century. He saw Hypatia as a scientist rather than a romantic literary figure, the last Greek scholar. Draper used the friction between Cyril and Hypatia as a metaphor for the larger battle between science and superstitious religion, as Hypatia evoked Reason and free thought which the church wanted to stifle through strict interpretation of the Old and New Testaments. Draper called her death not the end of the Roman Empire or philosophy, but the moment the first Enlightened Age died and of the world’s entry into the Dark Ages: “Thus in the year 414 of our era, the position of philosophy in the intellectual world was determined; henceforth science must sink into obscurity and subordination. Its public existence will no longer be tolerated.”⁵²

Carlos Pascal, another historian from the turn of the twentieth century, wrote perhaps the first perspective that blamed her death on the misogyny and anti-feminist doctrine of the church. In his book on great historical figures, *Ipazia e le Ultime Lotte Pagane* Pascal stated: “Obviously the persecution against Hypatia stemmed to a great extent from this insolent and superstitious antifemale tendency.” Pascal believed Hypatia’s death marked the end not of the Roman Empire, philosophy, or science, but the end of a woman’s ability to engage in free thought and philosophy. Thence began the age of Christian oppression of intellectual women.⁵³

All of these nineteenth century writings have different agendas for discussing Hypatia.

⁵¹Kingsley, 381.

⁵²Dzielska, 11-12.

⁵³Ibid.

While none of them present Hypatia in a negative way, it is still remarkable that the meaning of Hypatia and her history are so open to interpretation. None of these perspectives are necessarily wrong, but they turn her life and death into an event larger than the sum of its parts, and the woman Hypatia gets lost. These historians insist she must embody a metaphor for something, some grandiose design, and lose her humanity in their attempts to explain it. Writers of the twentieth century do much the same thing.

Mangasar Mangasarian takes a very stance, as his work is subtitled *The Death of the Classical World*. He stated that Hypatia's death marked the end of all that is greatly human, the arts, literature, science, and philosophy, that the Greco-Roman Classical world was so successful in achieving. Mangasarian remained staunchly anti-Christian and blamed the "dark centuries" (defined as the time of strict Christian power, between the 5th century AD and the rediscovering of the Pagan world with the Enlightenment of the 18th century AD) on the church's complete suppression of Reason and thought:

If Greece and Rome made art, poetry, philosophy, sculpture, the drama, oratory, beauty, (and) liberty classical, (then) Christianity made for nearly 1500 years of persecution, religious wars, massacres, theological feuds and bloodshed, heresy huntings and heretic burnings, prisons, dungeons, anathemas, curses, opposition to science, hatred of liberty, spiritual bondage....The barren and lumbering theology of the Church crowded out the Muses from their earthly walks, and the world became a prison after having been the home of man.⁵⁴

For this historian, Hypatia's death pinpoints the exact moment this shift in history took place.

Ursule Molinaro brings the argument back to a feminist perspective. She agreed that Hypatia's murder marked the end of reason and free thought, but the end specifically for women to enjoy intellectual pursuits. Molinaro shifted her version of Hypatia's death slightly to fit her

⁵⁴Mangasarian, 9-10.

female-centered model. She bluntly placed Hypatia in the historical context: “The torture killing of the noted philosopher Hypatia by a mob of Christians in Alexandria in 415 AD marks the end of a time when women were still appreciated for the brain under their hair.” Molinaro described her death and burning as a signal not to every intellectualist and philosopher, but to educated women everywhere: “...and smoke signals rose from the disorderly chunks of her charring flesh, warning future centuries of reformers and healers that they must hush their knowledge if they wished to avoid burning as heretics or witches. If they wished to stay alive.”⁵⁵

There are other academic works written during the twentieth century that attempt to describe Hypatia, but they are omitted here as they take the same historical perspectives as some of those mentioned previously. The most notable twentieth century contribution to Hypatia, in terms of honoring the woman herself, was the founding of two scholarly journals. One, “Hypatia: Feminist Studies” was founded in Athens in 1984, and the other, “Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy” at Indiana University in 1986. Both serve as a platform for women of higher education to submit and exchange ideas in honor of Hypatia’s silence.

⁵⁵Molinaro, 6.

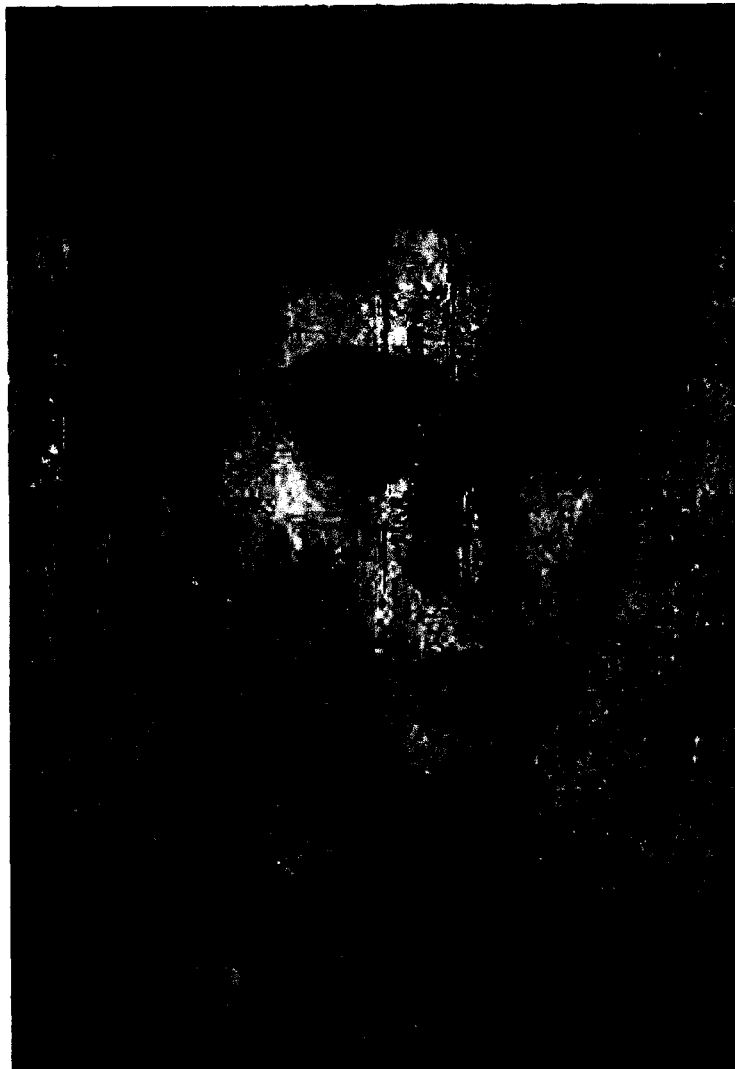
CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

There is no doubt of history's continuing interest in Hypatia. There are few women of the ancient world whose stories survived the annals of time, who continue to be included in the historical narrative even into post modernity. It is unfortunate that Hypatia is lesser-known, as she is on a par with Cleopatra, Hatshepsut, Aspasia, and Sapphos. Hypatia stands out because her life and death have been continually debated, her person transformed to encompass a more pleasing physical perfection (something she would have abhorred, as a Neoplatonist), her tragic death used as an occurrence larger than life and with great repercussions to humanity.

History wonders if Hypatia suffered such a death due to her gender or pagan philosophies. After comparison and analysis of her histories throughout the centuries, perhaps a more appropriate question would be why history cannot agree on a linear narrative. It is because of her gender that her accomplishments and fame existed, that her death ordered and carried out in such a symbolically tortuous way, and it is because she was a woman historians cannot agree on the details of her life nor the significance of her death. Hers is a history unique unto itself.

Such was
such the Virtue of
a lady who is for ever
Glory of her own Sex
of ours. -Lewis

She won the
denied her sex, and
of her age and the
wonder of
Mangasarian

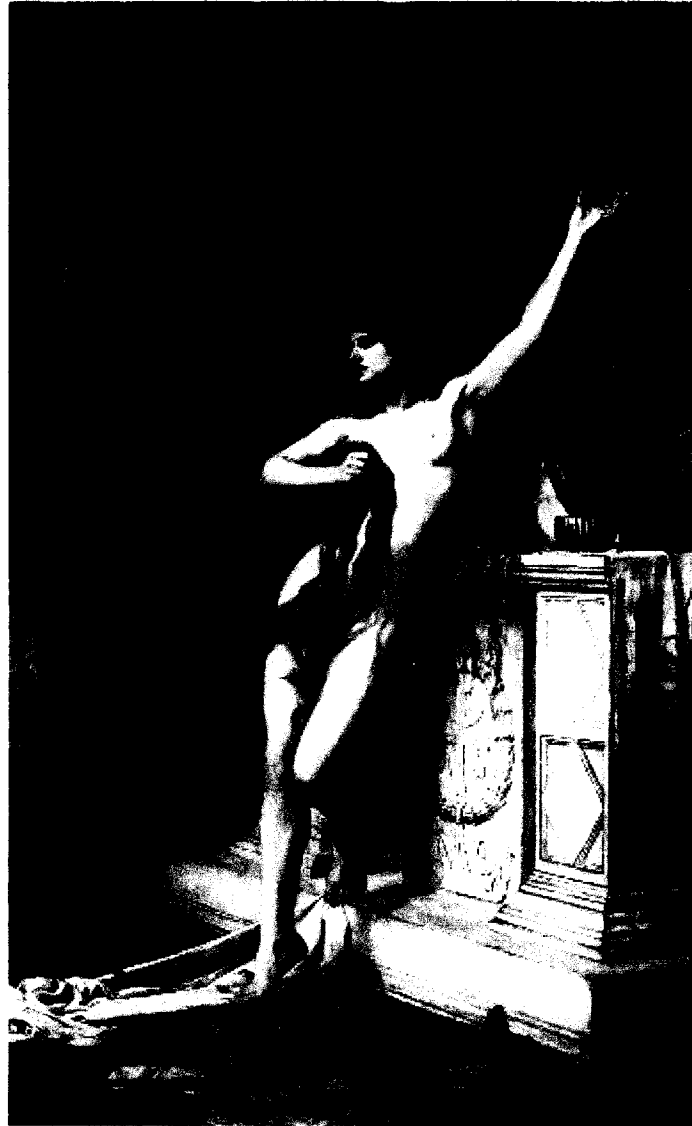


the Modesty,
Madam Hypatia,
to continue the
and the Disgrace

prize which was
became the glory

ours. -

Doxiadis 'Hypatia' 1995



Charles William Mitchell 'Hypatia' 1885



Elbert Hubbard 'Hypatia' 1928

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