

The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 B.C.–A.D. 1250, Prudence Allen, R.S.M. (Montreal-London: Eden Press, 1985), viii + 577 pp. \$42.00

Considering that we often think that the inclusion of the concept of woman in our philosophical writings is of recent vintage—a vague attempt at equality achieved by adding ‘or she’ every time we use ‘he’—it may be surprising to come upon a vast volume of well over 500 dense pages devoted to ‘the concept of woman’ that takes us only to 1250 A.D. But this is what Sister Prudence Allen has produced, filling her work with almost every philosopher (male and female) of the Western world who wrote before 1250 to discover where they stood on questions of, as she puts it, sex neutrality, sex unity, sex complementarity, and sex polarity. We travel from the earliest works of Hesiod (sex polarity) through pre-Socratic philosophers (Anaximander: sex complementarity) to Plato (sex unity) and Aristotle (of whom more below) to obscure women philosophers of antiquity to Jewish philosophers (sex polarity), medieval nuns, Abelard, and on through Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. And there are others, far too numerous to mention, scattered in between, who all become part of the author’s grand scheme to categorise philosophers of all different backgrounds and theoretical perspectives—Greek, Roman, Christian, Jewish and Islam—according to how they handled the concept of woman.

The basic thesis of the work centers around a so-called Aristotelian revolution. An extended analysis of the vast Aristotelian corpus yields two somewhat contradictory principles regarding ‘the concept of woman’. On the basis of the political and biological works, Aristotle appears to be a proponent of sex polarity, a theory that asserts the difference between men and women and the superiority of the male; on the basis of the works on logic Aristotle appears a proponent of sex neutrality, a theory that asserts that men and women do not differ significantly. These perspectives see-saw back and forth with theories of complementarity and unity over the next 700 years until the foundation of the university system, in particular the University of Paris. While women participated in philosophic discourse previously, the Universities which took over the activity of philosophy also excluded women. It is in the Universities within the four faculties (arts, medicine, law, theology) and within the writings of Thomas Aquinas that Aristotle becomes king, edging out any other philosophic system. He and the Universities thus bequeath to the West only these sex polarity and sex neutrality. We had to wait six or seven centuries for theories of sex unity or sex complementarity to find their way back into the philosophic texts.

Sister Prudence Allen has a penchant for tables, for lists, for categories that are sprinkled throughout the volume in bold type. The discussion of Roman Stoicism, for instance, begins with a listing, found in many of the sections of the book, of ‘Opposites, Generation, Wisdom, Virtue’. The author then places each of the seven philosophers subsequently considered in this section under one or more of the categories with a notation to indicate which of the four categories (sex polarity, etc.) they illustrate. Musonius Rufus, for example, appear to espouse sex complementarity for generation, but sex unity for wisdom. So strong is the penchant for tables that we even find a table for all Hildegard’s of Bingen works; they are listed in tabular form according to their Latin, German and English titles.

Though these tables may be helpful for organising the vast number of authors considered here, it also suggests that the analyses are often straight-jacketed and lack much subtlety. Lucretius’ invocation to Athene is quickly passed over to turn our attention to Lucretius’ preference for ‘reason over religion’ (p. 135). There is no reflection on how this invocation in the first lines of the poem may undercut or transform the ‘rational’ arguments. We do often find here the proverbial sacrifice of depth for breadth of coverage.

Further Sister Prudence Allen often searches in the material she discusses for views that will fit easily into her prescribed categories. Sometimes she simply does not find it and will state, for example, after a lengthy quote from a letter by Theano II: 'Nothing about sex identity can be concluded from this letter' (p. 156); or another lengthy quote, this time from Cicero, is followed by: 'It is not possible to conclude anything about his concept of woman from this example' (p. 166). Why then bother with the quotes? In part, I suspect because there really are two goals to this work: (1) The development of the thesis concerning the Aristotelian revolution, a goal that could have been much more succinctly accomplished without leading the reader through much extraneous material; and (2) An encyclopaedia of everything that relates to women and women philosophers before 1250. The latter goal is impeded by the desire to categorise every author, every text rather than allowing the texts to speak for themselves and to raise the perspectives and the questions that the authors may have found significant. As presented, the vast variety presented is formalised so harshly, along such crude categories that it becomes impossible to capture what is really interesting about each of the philosophers. Further, the encyclopaedic goals lead sometimes to an uncritical acceptance of questionable argument. Sister Prudence Allen treats Aspasia as a 'philosopher' who founded 'institutional educational structures for women' (p. 29). All we really know about her is that she was Pericles' concubine. Or to go from Socrates to Hypatia with a casual reference to 'the tradition of killing a philosophers' (p. 212) seems to ignore all the philosophers who were not killed.

The volume could have used a good editor to eliminate some egregious misspellings [e.g. Chronos (which she then translates as 'Time'), for Cronos, the father of Zeus] and to restructure the convoluted sentences that add duration but not clarity to the text.

Nevertheless, this is a formidable work, often introducing us to obscure philosophers, especially female philosophers, and illustrating the prevalence of the female in the thought of philosophers well before the modern era. Whether we can blame the Aristotelian revolution for the delay of sex complementarity and/or sex unity is questionable, but in the process of trying to lead us to this view, Sister Prudence Allen tells us much about philosophers writing before 1250 A.D. and a bit about the history of education as well.

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Consent, Coercion, and Limit: The Medieval Origins of Parliamentary Democracy, Arthur P. Monahan (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1987), xxi + 345 pp., \$51.25.

This is the first complete study of the political concepts of consent, coercion and limit as used in the Middle Ages. Although these terms are crucial in understanding parliamentary democracy, the book is not limited to them alone. In fact, Arthur Monahan's work is a survey of medieval political theory in which the three themes are somewhat obscured by other details until the strands are brought together in the Conclusion. The Introduction contains a clear discussion of methodological problems together with an excellent summary of the research done in medieval thought during recent decades. This research shows 'threads of continuity and development that link the Middle Ages much more precisely both to what went before and to more recent, modern attitudes' (p. 7).

In Part One, the early medieval period, the author is concerned with 'how medieval Christians perceived the polity and political thought of early Christians... rather than how the early Christians themselves saw these things' (p. 17). Although the writings of early Christianity did not express an interest in consent, the features of coercion and limit could be found in the Old Testament. The Jewish monarchy was identified as the model