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## Beyond the doubt

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### Citation

Celkyte, A. (2021). Beyond the doubt. *Tijdschrift Voor Geschiedenis*, 134(4), 664-665.  
doi:10.5117/TVG2021.4.009.CELK

Version: Publisher's Version  
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3480290>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Dorota Dutsch, *Pythagorean Women Philosophers. Between Belief and Suspicion* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2020) 320 p., £ 80 ISBN 9780198859031

### Beyond the doubt

It would be hardly an exaggeration to say that the last few years were marked by a remarkable rise of scholarly interest in women intellectuals in the ancient Greek and Roman world. Dorota Dutsch's *Pythagorean Women Philosophers. Between Belief and Suspicion* is one of the most recent substantial contributions to this blossoming area of scholarship, and it is certainly a noteworthy one. Dutsch's work offers an innovative and sophisticated reading of the extant evidence, presented in an engaging and witty writing style, making it a very enjoyable read.

When it comes to the texts ascribed to Pythagorean women philosophers, the first concern is oftentimes the authorship, but Dutsch develops a compelling argument that this might be not the most productive way of approaching the texts. At the beginning of her book, she notes that when Johannes of Stobi composed a collection of the most valuable passages in Greek literature, he included the texts attributed to Theano, Phintys and Perictione. This shows that the wisdom of the Pythagorean women was considered to be a part of proper education in Stobaeus' time. These texts were also translated and transmitted in Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. It was only in the twentieth century that scholars adopted a strictly sceptical attitude toward the texts, banishing them to the margins of scholarship. The recent revival of interest in women philosophers came with a determination to counter this excessive scepticism, although there is no consensus regarding the kind of methodology that would be the most appropriate and productive at the same time.

While some of the recent scholarship adopts a fairly restrictive sceptical attitude towards the evidence, others opt for complete acceptance (most notably, S. Pomeroy's *Pythagorean Women. Their History and Writings* (2013)). Both of these options, Dutsch argues, are not satisfactory. As an alternative to these extremes, she presents her own reading which – as the title of the book suggests – oscillates between belief and suspicion. More specifically, the methodology adopted in this work is grounded in Paul Ricoeur's understanding of hermeneutics as an exercise in suspicion and trust at the same time. Acknowledging that the mere existence of these texts is no evidence for the historicity of the specific women philosophers and their thought, Dutsch notes that the study of these texts can nonetheless lead to a better understanding of how women placed themselves and were placed in the ancient philosophical tradition. In her own words, Dutsch proposes:

...a reading that validates the heuristic potential of texts, independent of their precise referential value as historical testimonies. In this book, texts are alternately subject to critique and restorative reading. The latter process entails connecting texts to other texts. Pythagorean women function within multiple networks of texts in (restored) dialogue with Hipparchia the Cynic, Spartan women, Plato, Aristotle, medical writers, and the Stoics, and women's letters preserved on papyri. Dedications of philosophical works to female patrons connect the stories of Pythagorean lives with social practice. (p.13)

Dutsch neither rejects the evidence of these texts (as those who claim that such authorship must be a fabrication do) nor embraces the alleged authorship uncritically. Instead, she argues that these texts, some of which were likely produced by women and some of which were certainly not, all show the presence of philosophical engagement by women in the Pythagorean tradition and their participation in the life of the school. In an especially interesting case, discussed in the fourth chapter, Dutsch compares an extant historic letter sent by one sister to another with the letters attributed to the Pythagorean women and finds many key aspects in common. Dutsch's sophisticated reading shows that it is not necessary for the texts ascribed to Pythagorean women to be authored by them in order for us to read them as evidence that women were present in ancient philosophical discussions and communities.

The book consists of three parts: the first two present a reading and interpretation of the evidence, while the third part contains Dutsch's translations of the fragments from Perictione's *On Harmony*, Phytis' *On Woman's Self-Restraint*, various letters attributed to the Pythagorean women and the alleged letters of Theano preserved in *Vaticanus Graecus* 578 (fourteenth century). The two sections dedicated to interpreting

the texts are organised methodologically, moving from more remote to more direct evidence. Each section covers two chapters. The first chapter looks at a variety of texts referring to the Pythagorean women and Pythagoras' interest in women's wisdom, creating ten 'snapshots' of the Pythagorean women, in the style of Lucian's *Portraits*. The second chapter analyses the representations of a woman sage through Theano's *chreiai*. The second section starts with chapter three dedicated to pseudepigrapha, treatises that were attributed to Pythagorean women. Chapter four contains the discussion of five letters from the early imperial period, arguing that these engage with various contemporary philosophical and medical points in fascinating ways. In the epilogue, Dutsch looks at what could be called the reception of Pythagorean women's writing by analysing the letters fictitiously attributed to Theano that survived in a medieval manuscript.

The third and final section acts as an appendix, offering Dutsch's translation of the texts mentioned in the first two sections of the book. The book also contains indices of citations and names, as well as an extensive general index. The volume is very well produced, there are hardly any typographical errors.

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