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### **Porphyry's *Letter to Marcella*: A Literary Attack on Christian Appropriation of (Neo)Pythagorean Moral Wisdom?**

The most noticeable feature of Porphyry's *Letter to Marcella* is the use of *sententiae*, or maxims, the majority of which goes back to a Pythagorean source. Porphyry's maxims contain a large number of close parallels with the second century (c. 180-210) Christian collection of the *Sentences of Sextus*. It has been shown that, more probably, both Sextus (that is, the compiler of the Christian collection) and Porphyry drew independently upon a prior collection of Pythagorean maxims (Chadwick 1959). Furthermore, it has been shown that the *Letter to Marcella* was intended for public circulation and should be read in association with Porphyry's anti-Christian polemic (Whittaker 2001). In this paper, I shall argue that the *Letter to Marcella* is presented as an exemplum of the proper Pagan-Pythagorean way of philosophical life to those readers who were in danger of being attracted to Christianity (or who had already been attracted to Christianity) through the influence exercised by the *Sentences of Sextus*, which, according to Origen (*Cels. VIII*, 30; *On Matthew XV*, 3), were widely and appreciatively studied in Christian *milieux*. I submit that, although Porphyry's intended readership was female as well as male, the *Letter* is addressed to his wife, Marcella, not only because a personalized message was more compelling but also because the particular appeal of Christianity to women was a commonplace. An even more subtle implication is possible: by masking his intended readership behind a woman who quests for philosophical enlightenment like a man, Porphyry could be playing upon the old Pythagorean association of female with darkness and matter (33), to imply (and to warn against) the darkness and excessive attachment to the body threatening souls in quest of spiritual perfection in Christianity. The use of the letter form as a vehicle of disseminating philosophical ideas in a less technical style can be traced back to Plato. On my suggested reading of the *Letter to Marcella*, by resituating the Pythagorean moral sentences in their traditional Pagan context, Porphyry intended to avert (Neo)Pythagorean moral wisdom from passing to Christian circles and, consecutively, from being used by Christians, in order to attract followers among readers initially prejudiced against Christianity, which was probably one of the purposes the Pythagorean-influenced compilation of Sextus was intended to. It seems however that Porphyry lost this 'battle': Sextus' 'Christianised Pythagoreanism' came to exercise an indirect influence upon the spirituality of Christendom and, especially, upon the Greek Byzantine monastic tradition.

#### Bibliography:

Irini Fotini Viltanioti holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy and a D. E. A. from the University of Brussels (Université Libre de Bruxelles). Her doctoral dissertation focused on the harmony of the Sirens in ancient Pythagoreanism and in Plato. Irini has also worked on the interaction between Platonic philosophy and ancient religious thought. She has published in a variety of areas on ancient thought. During her graduate studies, she was the recipient of two scholarships of the A. S. Onassis Foundation (2005-2006 and 2006-2010). In 2010, Irini received the Van Buuren award; in 2011 she received a Wiener-Anspach Foundation scholarship, and a FRS-FNRS fellowship (Chargée de Recherches). Since October 2011, she has taken up a post-doctoral position at the

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