Kylee Sullivan

Montserrat: Math over Time

Professor Little

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“Reserve Your Right to Think”[[1]](#footnote-1): The Unorthodox Lifestyle of Hypatia of Alexandria

Ever since the beginning of time, women have been considered inferior to men. It has been believed that women are neither as intelligent nor as physically capable as men are. However, specific women throughout history have defied this belief. Hypatia of Alexandria, whose date of birth is uncertain but died in 415 CE, is one of many women who has gone against the social norms of her time and proved to the world around her that women are just as talented as men. Hypatia lived in a culture that did not commonly accept women as influential leaders in society. But Hypatia’s brilliant mind, which allowed her to be a mathematician, an astronomer, and a platonic philosopher, could not be subdued by the public. Hypatia’s acts of defying social norms created mixed feelings about her; a lot of people respected, and looked up to Hypatia while others were appalled by her tendencies to stray from the typical female lifestyle. As a result of Hypatia’s radical lifestyle, she was brutally murdered. Many factors lead to her death including her lifestyle, her friendship with Orestes, the Roman governor, or prefect, of Egypt, as well as a political and religious feud that was created by the shift of power to a more Christian-based leadership of Cyril of Alexandria.

Hypatia’s love for knowledge stemmed from her father, Theon. Theon was the last head of the Museum of Alexandria in Egypt. Growing up, Hypatia studied with her father, who was a Greek scholar and mathematician. Unlike her father, though, Hypatia developed a passion for philosophy and became less involved with mathematics. However, Hypatia was still very connected to her mathematical roots. In fact, Hypatia helped Theon write some of his works on Euclid’s Elements and edited the third book of *his Commentary on the Almagest of Ptolemy*. In addition to helping her father, Hypatia had works of her own. For example, she *wrote A Commentary on the Arithmetica of Diophantus*, *A Commentray on the Conics of Apollonious*, and *the Astronomical Canon* (Johnson Lewis). Not only was Hypatia a writer, but historians also believe she was an inventor. Many believe that she invented “the plane astrolabe, the graduated brass hydrometer, and the hydroscope” (Johnson Lewis).

Hypatia’s plethora of knowledge made her stand out from the rest of the women during her time. Hypatia considered herself a scholar and as a result dressed like one. She did not wear the traditional feminine clothes of the time that most other women wore, instead she wore what men scholars and teachers wore. Not only did she break the social dress norm for women, but she also drove her own chariot which was unheard of for women (Hypatia of Alexandria). As a result of her behavior, Hypatia is viewed as a symbol to contemporary historians. She symbolizes the diminishing classical culture with traditional, molded gender roles. Hypatia also symbolizes the beginning of people’s freedom to inquiry and gender freedom.

Even though Hypatia was radically unlike the normal female of her time, she was still respected by people. Many men awed at her intellectual abilities and commended her for her achievements. Unfortunately, there were also people who despised her. Many religious people, mostly Christians, did not agree with her teachings and pro-science pagan beliefs. The Christian Church was threatened by Hypatia because she strongly supported scientific theories over religious ones. While some admired Hypatia and others despised her, she was envied by the rest. Many other powerful people of Alexandria were jealous of her success and the way people revered her. Still, Hypatia’s popularity helped her get a job at the Neo-Platonist School of Philosophy in 400 CE (Hypatia of Alexandria). She taught both Christians and foreigners the works of Plato and Aristotle.

If students were lucky enough to be taught by Hypatia, they greatly admired her. She was well-received my many and it is claimed that she was beautiful. Students respected Hypatia because she overcame social boundaries and proved she was capable of living in a way that most people thought was impossible for women; a life of intellect and power. One of Hypatia’s most successful students was Synesius of Cyrene (Johnson Lewis). Synesuis was the member of a rich family and thus was able to study at the Neo-Platonist School of Philosophy. Born in 370 CE and died in 413 CE, Synesius was a Neo-Platonic philosopher, a sophist, and for a while was the Bishop of Pyolmais in the Cyrenaica. Being a Neo-Platonists, Syrensuis, as well as Hypatia, believed that there was one omnipotent God who allowed everything in the universe to co-exist together in harmony. After Syrensuis was a student of Hypatia’s he became one of her colleagues and close friends. When he moved away to his estate, leaving Alexandria, they continued to communicate through letters. In the hundreds of letters they sent to one another, Hypatia and Synesuis analyze and voice their opinions about philosophical theories (Johnson Lewis).

Through a series of events, Hypatia became involved with a political conflict in Alexandria. Cyril of Alexandria was a very religious man who became the Pope of Alexandria in 412 CE. With his new power, Cyril decided to expel all Jews from Alexandria in an attempt to make Christianity stronger in the city. One of Hypatia’s close friends, Orestes, publically showed his disagreement with Cyril’s decision. As a result, conflict and bitterness arose between the two men, and Christians around the city started showing dislike for Oresetes. Hypatia was then sucked into the problem because of her similar beliefs to and close friendship with Orestes. On one spring day during 415 CE, Hypatia was attacked in the streets of Alexandria. Allegedly, a mob of Christian men, under the command of Cyril, approached Hypatia, beat her, and then dragged her body to a church. In this church, Hypatia’s body was disfigured by sharp objects and then burned. Her remains were then scattered across the city (Hypatia of Alexandria). People believe Cyril was responsible for her death because he had many objections to the way Hypatia lived. Cyril disliked Hypatia because she taught her students about science, which was considered heretical and pagan at the time. The mere fact that she was closely associated with Orestes also influenced Cyril’s views of Hypatia, as well as the fact that she was a “woman who did not know her place in society.” (Hypatia of Alexandria).

Hypatia of Alexandria lived an unorthodox lifestyle which created numerous opportunities for her, but unfortunately also led her to her death. Growing up as a highly educated woman, Hypatia desired a more intellectually fulfilling lifestyle rather than the normal, domestic role that women usually played in society. Hypatia’s father, Theon, was responsible for introducing her to mathematics, which then led her to pursue her love for philosophy. People admired and respected Hypatia because of her seemingly limitless ability to gain knowledge pertaining to philosophy, science, and mathematics. However, during a time where Christianity was gaining more and more power, Hypatia’s life started to become endangered. Hypatia’s relationship with Orestes, a publically, self-acclaimed anti-Christian man, got her involved in a power struggle between religion and science. Religion won the battle, and Hypatia was killed by a group of Christians in an attempt to remove her as a threat to the religion. Hypatia broke the mold that society made for women when that cast was not supposed to break yet, and as a result she was brutally murdered.

**References**

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1. (Hypatia of Alexandria). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)