

# Musonius Rufus and Epictetus: The First Feminists of Their Time?

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**Abstract:** While feminism is widely believed to be a modern term and construct, over 2000 years ago, Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus had already advocated equal education for girls and boys. This paper investigates Musonius' teachings and evaluates their potential to be a feminist doctrine under consideration of the historical background of the first century A.D.

**Keywords:** stoicism, feminism, Epictetus, Musonius Rufus, Stoic philosophy.

Literacy of both women and men may be taken for granted in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, though less than 200 years ago, in 1840, not even half of the women living in the UK were literate. Less than a hundred years ago, in 1948, Cambridge – as the last institution in Britain – granted female students the right to take degrees. In comparison to this historical reality of modern times, there is one ancient figure who stands out from his predecessors as much as from his contemporaries regarding his progressive philosophical teachings; teachings that, in his own time, namely the first century A.D., could have led to his exile.<sup>1</sup>

The man in question, a proponent of equal rights for all human beings *regardless* of their sex – at least in a pedagogical context – grew up in a society substantially more misogynistic than 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Over 2000 years ago, Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus, also referred to as the 'Roman Socrates', had already advocated equal education for girls as well as boys. Why is it, then, that over 1800 years later, his voice still remained unheard – or rather *ignored*? The underlying fear of matriarchy overtaking the existing and predominantly male power relations may have been one, if not the main, reason for this. The aim of this paper, however, is not to compare female education in modern and ancient times, but rather to investigate Musonius' teachings on the topic at hand and evaluate their potential to be a feminist doctrine from an ancient perspective.

Though in principle advocating equal education for boys and girls, Musonius asserts that an educated, philosophical woman will be a better housewife and, likewise, Epictetus, a student of the former, implies that the chastity of a woman determines her degree of respectability – in the eyes of men that is. Nevertheless, they both recognise and address a significant issue of their time and as such, they attempt to change the society they were living in – even if

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<sup>1</sup> Musonius was indeed exiled by emperor Nero in 65 A.D. (Dillon 2004, 6), and one of his surviving lectures is entitled 'That exile is not an evil', which, paired with his Stoic belief system, offers sufficient explanation for his courage to address the issue at hand.

their endeavour, as we now know, remained fruitless until fairly recently. Although some scholars attribute proto-feminist thought and gender egalitarianism to the Stoics, from a 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist perspective, which entails full and complete equality of the sexes, the Stoic stance towards women cannot be seen as feminist (Nussbaum 2002, 1994; Hill 2001; Schofield 1991; Klassen 1984; Edelstein 1966). Despite the lectures discussed in this paper being *for* and *about* women, they nevertheless are exclusively addressed to a male audience, a fact that has been cause for scholarly criticism (Scott and McGill-Rutherford 2014; Nussbaum 2002). It is necessary, however, not to dismiss their doctrines as anti-feminist and misogynist – though, of course, a modern definition of feminism only permits such a verdict. Instead, the aim of this paper is to view them under consideration of the historical background of their own time, i.e. that of the first century A.D.

In the first part of this paper I shall investigate the role of women in ancient Rome as well as the pedagogic opportunities of girls of the lower and upper classes. It shall be seen that the degree and length of a girl's education largely depended on a variety of factors outside her control, all of which shall be considered in the following. Lack of sufficient evidence on female education in antiquity generally limits the scope of this section to mainly upper-class girls in Rome as there are next to no sources mentioning literacy of slave or lower-class girls. Thereafter, I shall view Musonius Rufus' lecture *Should Daughters Get the Same Education as Sons* in light of the generally accepted and socially approved subordination of females and attempt to show the inherent progressiveness of his teachings in the context of the empire and their alignment with the Stoic concept of *cosmopolitanism*. I shall then move on to show that Musonius Rufus' thoughts at least partially influenced those of Epictetus, who by emphasising the Stoic principle of accepting one's fate and one's inability to change one's personal circumstances advocates the study of philosophy for women as enabling them to more happily play their assigned role and more willingly fulfil their domestic duties.

## **I. Treatment and Education of Girls and Women in Ancient Rome**

Living conditions in ancient Rome were rough to begin with and even more so for women, who were subject to a man – first their father, later their husband – throughout their whole lives. The *paterfamilias* was the head of the family, and as such he controlled his wife, children, and slaves as well as his married daughters and the families of his married sons up until his death (Gardner 2009, 4). Once the *pater* had died, his children ceased to be *alieni iuris* ('subject to another's control') and became *sui iuris* ('independent'), leading to his son now becoming a *paterfamilias* himself (Gardner 2009, 4). The *potestas*, power or authority, of a father was almost beyond limits as he had the right to not only dispose of

unwanted children, but also to punish his children, with death as the highest penalty (Gardner 2009, 5).<sup>2</sup>

Augustus' *Leges Iuliae* may have officially prevented a husband from killing his wife, but violence against women was still a quotidian reality, especially for non-citizens and slaves (Witzke 2016, 259).<sup>3</sup> Given the constant threat of violence and rape slave girls were faced with, it is safe to infer that lack of education was the least of their problems – it is unlikely they even considered it as such. The helplessness of slaves, on the one hand, is emphasised by the fact that legally, their violation was not considered as 'rape', and if violated by anyone other than their master, it was merely seen as a mis-use of another citizen's property (Witzke 2016, 261).<sup>4</sup> Upper-class women, in contrast, were relatively safe from such violence given that they were limited to the confines of their home, and as they were still under the protection of their father once married, domestic abuse of a high-ranked woman would have resulted in divorce and in her family regaining possession of her dowry (Witzke 2016, 259).

Indubitably, the level of education of a Roman woman to a great extent depended on her social status (citizen, non-citizen, slave, sex labourer etc.), which was naturally determined by the reputation and rank of her family. Social status has been widely acknowledged to be "[t]he single most important determining factor in any woman's life in the ancient world" (Witzke 2016, 270).<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that in ancient times, cultural capital was highly dependent on economic capital, whereas today, one can have high economic capital, but low cultural capital or vice versa.<sup>6</sup> As the primary role of a woman was that of future wife and mother, evidence of the extent to which Roman girls were educated is limited and inconsistent to say the least. Women of all classes were taught how to weave since weaving as an exclusively female activity was associated with moral goodness and chastity in women (Dixon 2001, 117).<sup>7</sup> Apart from being educated in domestic tasks, education for Roman girls was primarily limited to the basics of

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<sup>2</sup> As child exposure was only made illegal after A.D. 374 and the death penalty was abolished under Valentinian and Valens (Gardner 1987, 5), they were still practiced in Musonius' and Epictetus' time. Up until the late republic, it was socially acceptable for a husband to kill his wife for a 'crime' as little as drinking wine (Witzke 2016, 255).

<sup>3</sup> For the treatment of women and slaves in Greco-Roman culture see Joshel and Murnaghan (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, "slave maids could also be tortured by their households (or by neighboring households) for testimony, for the suspicion of theft, or for being too beautiful" (Witzke 2016, 264).

<sup>5</sup> This claim is still valid in the 21st century – though generally less extreme than in antiquity – since even in 2019, in a partly nomadic tribe on the Israel-Palestine border, girls are forced to marry at the age of 11 or 12 and get sold off for 50 sheep to a much older husband. Ivan Vdovin made a documentary about young Bedouin girl Zakura from that tribe.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading on economic and cultural capital see Bourdieu, P. 1986 "The forms of capital".

<sup>7</sup> Moralists believed housewives being occupied with weaving would stay out of trouble and as such be easier to control (D'Ambra 2007, 59).

reading and writing, though some elite girls were educated beyond this elementary level of literacy solely to make them “better companions for their husbands, who were about eight to ten years older and practiced law or held offices” (D’Ambra 2007, 62). Generally, as girls “according to tradition were brought up solely for marriage and motherhood” there was no need to provide them with the same education as their male counterparts (Hemelrijk 2015, 293). Jobs of lower-class women neither required them to learn about poetry or rhetoric, nor to read at all as they mainly involved manual labour. Our evidence for this is taken from inscriptions and veristic reliefs picturing women workers (Dixon 2001, 125).<sup>8</sup>

Those women that were educated, *matronae doctae*<sup>9</sup>, were mainly upper-class women marrying at the age of 18 or even later (e.g. Agrippina Maior) instead of in their mid-teens, giving them the advantage of a full education, which girls marrying at a young age did not receive (Hemelrijk 1999, 29). To answer the question of what such a ‘full’ education may have entailed, we need to take a look at the education of Roman boys, which generally consisted of three stages: first an elementary level of reading and writing, then the study of literature, and lastly the study of rhetoric, which would ultimately prepare them for a public career (Hemelrijk 1999, 18-20). Since Roman upper-class girls were obliged to marry by their mid-teens, it is safe to assume that marriage marked the end of their education even though some women were permitted to continue studying throughout their marriage (Hemelrijk 1999, 21).<sup>10</sup> Pliny the Younger, for instance, describes his wife as educated and wanting to continue with her studies out of her love for him:

summum est acumen summa frugalitas; amat me, quod castitatis indicium est. accedit his studium litterarum, quod ex mei caritate concepit. meos libellos habet lectitat ediscit etiam. (*Ep.* 4.19)

She is highly intelligent and a careful housewife, and her devotion to me is a sure indication of her virtue. In addition, this love has given her an interest in literature: she keeps copies of my works to read again and again and even learn by heart. (Loeb, *Ep.* 4.19)

The reliability of such a claim is debatable given that Pliny is the one making the inference *about* Calpurnia. Men talk about women; the women themselves are portrayed as not having a voice despite their ‘*studium litterarum*’ and the level of literacy resulting from it. But how many women had been educated in ancient Rome?

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<sup>8</sup> For iconographic and literary evidence of women’s jobs see Dixon (2001, 113-132).

<sup>9</sup> Descriptions of *matronae doctae* can be found in Plutarch *Pomp.* 55 (Cornelia) and Sallust *Cat.* 25 (Sempronia).

<sup>10</sup> Pliny applauds his friend Pompeius Saturnius for having educated his wife so well after marriage in *Ep.* 1.16.6 and in another letter, he praises himself for having taught his own wife, Calpurnia, *Ep.* 4.19.

William Harris' estimate of literate women in ancient Rome arrives at the low number of merely ten percent in the late republic and high empire (Hemelrijk 2015, 293). This number includes all upper-class women of this period as well as a small number of well-to-do, urban families, though it can be said that lower-class women working in the manufacturing and crafts sector may have had a very limited and entirely functional literacy (ibid.). From this we can infer that the level and length of a girl's education generally depended on a variety of factors outside her control: her birth (including the rank of her family), wealth, age of marriage, the availability of schools and teachers, her family's attitude towards female education, and the era during which she lived. Hemelrijk (1999, 29) hence points out that it is impossible to

speaking of *the* education of *the* upper-class girls in Rome and Italy, as if they formed a homogenous and unchanging group, nor may we assume that the changes in Roman education [...] affected girls in the same way as boys of their class.

As such, we can draw the conclusion that while the education of boys was more or less compulsory, the education of girls very much depended on external factors.<sup>11</sup>

From this, one may have the impression that the universal subordination of women may have meant that they had no power at all, but this was not the case with the highly educated imperial women who, attempting to influence the decisions of the *paterfamilias*, were thought to be threatening to the male force controlling the state (Fischler 1994, 122). Though the traditional role of elite women involved overseeing household activities and her subjects, i.e. slaves owned by the family, Fischler argues that the stories told by Tacitus allow us to assume that elite "women were in a position to control imperial appointments" (Fischler 1994, 124). In addition to that, husbands of this time even feared the loss of their male dominance over their wife as a result of her having embarrassed him through inappropriate behaviour in public (Centlivre Challet 2013, 93). Thus, it can be said that "[w]hile men and women [could] act in a similar fashion in private, they [were] to behave differently in public, in order to ensure the official dominant position of men" (Centlivre Challet 2013, 151). Educated women hence may have constituted a potential threat to patriarchy, and it shall now be shown that Musonius' teachings may have constituted a similar threat.

## II. Musonius Rufus' Equal Education

Musonius is regarded as one of the most influential philosophers of his time, though it should be noted that he himself never composed any treatises.<sup>12</sup> The little we know of his thoughts is drawn from the lecture notes of one of his

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<sup>11</sup> On women's intellectual abilities and achievements see Centlivre Challet (2013, 51-57) and for male views of emancipated women see Cantarella (1987, 143-150).

<sup>12</sup> Inwood (2017, 255) goes so far as to claim that "Musonius can be regarded as a cardinal figure, one of the key philosophers in the first century CE".

students, Lucius, which are preserved in Stobaeus (Inwood 2017, 265).<sup>13</sup> In these he is *inter alia* described as having a discussion about whether sons and daughters should be educated in the same way (4.1). In *Should Daughters Get the Same Education as Sons*, Musonius advocates equal education for girls and boys, which in light of the historical context delineated in the above appears to be a progressive demand. He avows for women’s rights as he recognised their potential to be virtuous like men. Hence, Engel is right to argue that “Musonius Rufus was probably more concerned with the well being of women than any other ancient philosopher” (Engel 2000, 378). But did his concern go so far as to earn him the title of ancient ‘feminist’ philosopher? In the following, I shall analyse his arguments in order to answer this question.

In response to the matter at hand he relies on observations of human treatment of animals: humans train female and male dogs (and horses) in the same way, and, likewise, there should be no difference in the *paideia*, education, of human beings (4.1). He claims that both men and women have the same capacity for virtue – a key Stoic belief – and as such, they must have good sense (*phronein*) and not be *aphronos* (without good sense). Moreover, both must be *dikaïos* (just) as they can only fulfil their respective duties if they act justly:

ἀλλ' ὁ τε ἀνὴρ οὐκ ἂν εἴη πολίτης ἀγαθὸς ἄδικος ὢν, ἢ τε γυνή οὐκ ἂν οἰκονομοίη χρηστῶς, εἰ μὴ δικαίος

A man would not be a good citizen if he is unjust, and a woman would not manage her household well if she does not do it with justice. (4.2)

Musonius, though advocating equal education for all, still links a woman’s virtue with household duties, and in doing so, he adopts the conservative view of his time. Following this, he states that a woman with no justice “will act unjustly towards her husband” like Eriphyle, who accepted bribes and as a result of her lack of integrity and loyalty towards her husband was responsible for his death (4.2). As he addresses the fathers and husbands of girls, the logical structure of his reasoning and his provided example, serving as a reminder that a virtuous wife is preferable, is, for the most part, persuasive. By using an example from myth, he stresses the importance of the philosophical education of girls – who are future wives – for men to avoid the fate of Eriphyle’s husband. His argument, in short, is as follows:

- I. It is necessary for women to study philosophy.
- II. Philosophy will enable them to cultivate virtue.
- III. Virtue allows them to differentiate between justice and injustice.
- IV. A philosophical woman will not act like Eriphyle.
- V. A philosophical woman will be a virtuous wife.

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<sup>13</sup> All translations refer to King 2010. The Greek quotations refer to Hense 1905.

His cleverly thought out argument also shows that women have influence over their husbands, just like Eriphyle did, and it is conducive to his overall aim as stated above. Having established the importance of *phronesis* (practical wisdom or good sense) for the cultivation of the cardinal virtues and the key role of *dikaiosune* (justice) in a marital context, he establishes the significance of the other virtues. Self-control, *sophrosune*, is equally important since the legal penalty for adultery is the same for both sexes and the giving in to one's desires, a sign of a weak and non-philosophical character, has the potential of bringing disgrace upon one's family (4.2). Moreover, Musonius sees it fit both for men and women to demonstrate courage in order to not be "overcome neither by pain nor by fear", and he argues that courageous "women must also be ready to put up a fight" (4.3). To underline this point he, once again, makes use of an example from the animal kingdom: a cowardly woman is inferior to a hen since hens demonstrate courage by fighting "animals much bigger than they are on behalf of their chicks" (4.3). The context in which a woman, who, as I have shown earlier, was bound to stay inside the house, would have to physically fight to protect her family remains inconceivable. He points out that women are indeed capable of fighting because Amazons are trained to fight, which leads him to the conclusion that if women lack courage, they do so merely due to lack of practice (4.3).

ἀρετὰς ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικός, ἀνάγκη πᾶσα καὶ τροφήν τὴν αὐτὴν προσήκειν ἀμφοῖν

As far as the virtues of a man and a woman are concerned, it is entirely appropriate for both men and women to have the same upbringing and education. (4.3)

Hence, men and women should receive the same education in order to develop the same virtues: wisdom or understanding, justice, self-control, and courage.

That said, even though he argues that women should receive the same education as men, he still believes that men, in turn, should not learn how to spin and, likewise, that women should not learn how to exercise (4.5). The latter statement also clashes with his claim that women lack fighting practice, which he treats as a pre-condition for developing a courageous character. If they, then, can only develop courage through practice, how can they practise if they are not meant to physically exercise like Musonius states? His reason for this is that "the nature of males is stronger and of females is weaker", and from this he concludes that "the most suitable tasks must be assigned to each nature, with the heavier ones being given to the stronger and the lighter ones being given to the weaker" (4.5). Thus, he sees it appropriate for women to spin and stay indoors, whereas men should exercise and work outdoors (4.5). Yet, he clarifies this statement by asserting that in some cases it may be appropriate for a man to learn 'female' tasks (e.g. spinning, weaving) and vice versa as there is no difference between the virtue of a man and the virtue of a woman:

ὄσα μέντοι τὴν ἀναφορὰν ἔχει εἰς ἀρετὴν, ταῦτα φαίη τις ἂν ὀρθῶς ἐπ' ἴσον  
ἐκατέρᾳ προσήκειν φύσει, εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰς ἀρετὰς προσήκειν φαμέν οὐδὲν τοῖς  
ἐτέροις μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς ἐτέροις

If we say that virtues are no more appropriate for one group than the other, then  
it is correct to say that things pertaining to virtue are equally appropriate to each  
nature. (4.6)

Musonius in claiming that both sexes have the innate capacity for virtue, promotes education for women in moral, i.e. philosophical, matters. Physical education plays no role in their day-to-day lives as wives and mothers but proposing that women must be prepared to fight in order to protect their offspring does presume an extension of women's education to the physical realm.

The above teachings of Musonius Rufus, despite their partly contradictory nature, remain largely Stoic insofar as all humans are equal to the Stoics simply by sharing the divine reason, namely the *logos*. As a result of that, Hill states that the shared *logos* not only entails equality in terms of the sexes, but also in terms of race because the fact that all human beings have reason implies, at least theoretically, that they deserve equal treatment (Hill 2001, 17). Wilder explains that “the cosmopolitan theory offers particularly strong arguments in favour of equality between all humans” (Wilder 2018, 277). This theory implies that all sexes are equal as citizens of the cosmos and as ethical agents (Wilder 2018, 281). According to Stoic metaphysics, all humans are fathered by Zeus, part of one family, and share the universal rationality or the divine reason given to them by their metaphorical ‘father’ (Wilder 2018, 283). This accounts for the Stoics’, and Musonius’, view of the sexes as equal and having the same worth and capacity for virtue.

Musonius, from a modern feminist's perspective, evidently cannot be seen as a feminist or even a proto-feminist given that he advocates equality only in the field of moral education. Nussbaum describes his efforts as taking “a radical Platonic (and perhaps Zenonian) idea of equal education and adopt[ing] it to Roman reality” (Nussbaum 2002, 292). It is necessary, however, to take the historical background of his teachings into account before dismissing him as an antifeminist or misogynist. Engel has gone so far as to argue that “feminism and Stoicism [are] not just contingently, but essentially incompatible” (Engel 2003, 288). It is wrong to assume that feminism and Stoicism are not *at all* compatible; one should rather ask whether feminism and the *ancient Stoics* are compatible. The Stoic theory of cosmopolitanism and their idea of gender equality clearly show that Stoic doctrine and feminist thought can be combined. That said, I agree with Hill who argues that the Stoics might be “better understood as failed proto-liberal feminists since they accept female candidates for admission to the universal state on the one hand, yet subordinate them on the other” (Hill 2001, 33). This is the case with Musonius' call for equality: He recognises the inequality present in his period and attempts, on behalf of women, to persuade men to educate their daughters and wives in philosophical matters under the pretext of



making them better housewives. The first part of his argument is certainly progressive if viewed on its own. Taking the rest of it into account, his claim that the development of virtues as a result of the study of philosophy will improve women's ability to manage household tasks is not only highly problematic but, in addition to that, misogynistic.

Viewed from a 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist perspective, his theory cannot be considered feminist whereas Musonius' contemporaries must have conceived it as quite radical for their time.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to the Augustan marriage legislations, women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. had more rights than before, but they were still far from being fully equal to men. As only roughly ten percent of women were literate, Musonius' demand for equal education for both sexes seems quite progressive. Nussbaum (2002, 298) is therefore right to assert that Musonius was

[i]n some respects, clearly, [...] in advance of Roman customs of the day, a pioneer [...] in his insistence that males and females should be treated on an equal basis with respect to education and cultivation of the innate capacities central to humanity.

Although from a modern feminist perspective Musonius' teachings are undoubtedly misogynist, I argue that his contemporaries and male audience would have viewed them as groundbreakingly new, certainly outrageous, but nonetheless 'feminist' for their time. Misogynism to them did not exist since women were simply expected to fulfil their role as daughter, wife, and mother. But did his 'progressive' thoughts also reach the teachings of his student Epictetus? In the following I shall analyse Epictetus' conception of roles as well as his personal stance towards women.

### III. Epictetus on Women and Roles

Epictetus, a student of Musonius Rufus, former slave, and influential teacher of Stoicism is commonly portrayed as "a spokesman for human dignity, autonomy, and integrity" (Long 2002, 1). Before discussing his view on women, I shall shine light upon some of his most significant Stoic tenets, which will allow me to justify his thought-process later on. At the beginning of the *Enchiridion*, he asserts that some things are up to us and others are not up to us:

ἐφ' ἡμῶν μὲν ὑπόληψις, ὁρμή, ὄρεξις, ἔκκλισις καὶ ἐνὶ λόγῳ ὅσα ἡμέτερα ἔργα: οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῶν δὲ τὸ σῶμα, ἡ κτήσις, δόξαι, ἀρχαὶ καὶ ἐνὶ λόγῳ ὅσα οὐκ ἡμέτερα ἔργα. (*Ench.* 1)

The things that are within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body,

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<sup>14</sup> In another lecture he advocates the study of philosophy for women: 'That Women Too Should Do Philosophy'.

our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing.<sup>15</sup>

This belief, also commonly referred to as the ‘dichotomy of control’, enables Stoic practitioners to accept their own limitations and focus their efforts on the things over which they truly have control rather than – often unsuccessfully – attempting to change or attain what is outside their power. According to Epictetus, life is a play and each and every one of us has been assigned a specific role, which we are bound to fulfil if we want to live in accordance with nature and achieve *eudaimonia*<sup>16</sup>, the Stoic *telos*.

μὲνησο, ὅτι ὑποκριτῆς εἶ δράματος, οἴου ἂν θέλῃ ὁ διδάσκαλος: ἂν βραχύ, βραχέος: ἂν μακρόν, μακροῦ: ἂν πτωχὸν ὑποκρίνασθαί σε θέλῃ, ἵνα καὶ τοῦτον εὐφυῶς ὑποκρίνῃ ἂν χωλόν, ἂν ἄρχοντα, ἂν ιδιώτην. σὸν γὰρ τοῦτ’ ἔστι, τὸ δοθὲν ὑποκρίνασθαι πρόσωπον καλῶς: ἐκλέξασθαι δ’ αὐτὸ ἄλλου. (*Ench.* 17)

Remember that you’re an actor in a play, which will be as the author chooses, short if he wants it to be short, and long if he wants it to be long. If he wants you to play the part of a beggar, act even that part with all your skill; and likewise if you’re playing a cripple, an official, or a private citizen. For that is your business, to act the role that is assigned to you as well as you can; but it is another’s part to select that role.

This mirrors the ‘dichotomy of control’ as we have no power over the role we play and the situations we find ourselves in. All we can do is accept our inability to change our circumstances and willingly play our part. Fulfilling one’s assigned role to the best of one’s ability is crucial to becoming virtuous and achieving *eudaimonia*. But how does this concept of roles relate to Epictetus’ stance towards women?

Epictetus keeps his doctrine genderless, for the most part, which makes it difficult to accurately reconstruct his thoughts about women in particular. At one point in the *Dissertationes*, however, he mentions women directly and clearly states that they are part of the *cosmopolis* as their capacity for virtue is equal to that of men (*Diss.* 3.22.68). That said, he still views them as inferior since he advises men “to accomplish the work of men” and not allow themselves “to be moved and reduced to effeminacy by the weeping of poor foolish women” (*Diss.* 3.24.53). This clearly shows that Epictetus, though including women in the *cosmopolis*, subordinated them due to their inability to control their emotions – a skill, as Musonius argued, that can be learned through the exercise of virtue. In one passage, for instance, Epictetus emphasises his view that women ought to be virtuous like men:

αἱ γυναῖκες εὐθὺς ἀπὸ τεσσαρεσκαίδεκα ἐτῶν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνδρῶν κυρία καλοῦνται. τοιγαροῦν ὀρῶσαι, ὅτι ἄλλο μὲν οὐδὲν αὐταῖς πρόσεστι, μόνον δὲ συγκοιμῶνται τοῖς ἀνδράσι, ἄρχονται καλλωπίζεσθαι καὶ ἐν τούτῳ πάσας ἔχειν

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<sup>15</sup> All translations refer to Hard (2014). The Greek quotations refer to Schenkl (1916).

<sup>16</sup> Often translated as ‘happiness’, but better described as a ‘good flow of life’.

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τὰς ἐλπίδας. προσέχειν οὖν ἄξιον, ἵνα αἰσθῶνται, διότι ἐπ' οὐδενὶ ἄλλῳ τιμῶνται ἢ τῷ κόσμῳ φαίνεσθαι καὶ αἰδήμονες. (*Ench.* 40)

As soon as they reach the age of fourteen, women are called mistresses by men. And so when they see that they have no other function than to become bedfellows of men, they set to work to beautify themselves, and place all their hopes in that. It is worth our while, then, to make them aware that they're valued for nothing other than being modest and self-respecting.

This passage, addressed to an audience consisting exclusively of young men, has been interpreted as functioning on two levels: Firstly, as “an exercise in cultural criticism”, and, secondly as “a call for action” (Aikin and McGill 2014, 11).

In the first part, Epictetus “condemns the sexualizing of young women and the way they internalize this way of viewing themselves” (ibid.). At the age of 14, as shown in the first part of this paper, women were of marriageable age, and it might have been precisely the societal expectation and pressure for them to find a husband which led them to ‘beautify’ themselves, i.e. to appear more desirable to men, the controlling force of their time. In the ‘call for action’ part, Epictetus is interpreted as stating that “the men in these women’s lives must not only not participate in this activity, but call young women’s attention to it and offer them an alternative of modesty and uprightness” (ibid.). Despite the omnipresent toxic misogyny and norms of ancient Roman society, Epictetus thus recognises the dignity and self-worth of these women, who have been manipulated into neglecting their own worth as a rational human being and instead led to prioritise the search of a husband or companion. The alternative offered by Epictetus, namely that men ought to remind them of their virtue, has also been reason for criticism as it shows that a woman must be chaste and modest to be honoured and valued (ibid.). Musonius’ argument that a philosophical woman will be a virtuous wife is partly mirrored in Epictetus: While the former argues that men should educate their daughters and wives in philosophical matters to enable them to cultivate virtue, the latter holds that it is appropriate – even necessary – for men to educate women so as to remind them that they share the divine *logos* and have the right to be part of the *cosmopolis*. If men, then, were to follow Epictetus’ demand and reminded women of their self-respectability, how would they do so?

As he believes that “[a]ppropriate actions are measured on the whole by our social relationships” (*Ench.* 30) and that, as discussed above, everyone must accept the role one has been assigned to succeed in restoring women’s self-worth, one must allude to their social roles, e.g. mother/daughter/wife, and common rationality. As both sexes are rational as human beings, both can and should attain virtue – a thought more clearly expressed by Musonius than by his student. Recognising that they must necessarily fulfil their respective social role which has been assigned to them and cannot be changed (*Ench.* 17) will ultimately enable them to accept the situations they find themselves in, including their society as a whole. In the eyes of men, a respectable woman is a chaste wife and mother, which Epictetus stresses in *Ench.* 40. Chastity and modesty are linked to *sophrosune*, self-

control, as Musonius' lecture has shown, and therefore, according to Epictetus, a woman must learn how to be *sophrōn*, implying that girls should at least partly be educated in moral philosophy. As *Diss.* 3.24.53 demonstrates, women were thought to be overly emotional whilst for men, especially those holding positions of power, it was not acceptable to give in to their irrational feelings.<sup>17</sup> Nussbaum (2002, 295) asserts that "philosophy [...] leads to a modification of the passions" and hence "a philosophically trained woman will not be quarrelsome". Thus, teaching girls philosophy is a progressive step towards gender-egalitarianism.<sup>18</sup> Doing so, however, merely for the sake of men, who – in theory – will not have to deal with a 'quarrelsome' wife, still shows that Stoic doctrine corresponds with the conservative environment of the first century A.D.

Considering that Musonius' thoughts of equity did not bring about change in his time and had not done so even two millennia after his passing, the mere fact that he expressed a form of equality in a period in which the term had been virtually non-existent, deserves recognition from modern feminist thinkers – despite his doctrine not being of feminist substance. The Stoic vindication of the equality of the sexes, however, was one factor influencing "the development of Roman equity law" (Hill 2001, 20). Hence, one cannot dismiss Stoic doctrine as having had no impact on ancient society. We might not be able to call Musonius Rufus and Epictetus ancient feminist philosophers given that racial and sexual equality are key tenets of Western law, but from the perspective of the people of their own time their new teachings of equity certainly must have seemed revolutionary. Musonius' public proclamation of equal rights for women and men, at least in the pedagogic sphere, was most certainly conceived as threatening considering the inferior, domestic role adopted by females and the hierarchal dichotomy of dominant/ male and subordinated/ female etched in the minds of males of the empire. Given the historical context, it is therefore not surprising that his teachings did not appeal to the latter. If we remind ourselves of the omnipresent misogynist thoughts of the first century A.D., Musonius Rufus, more so than Epictetus, can still be treated as feminist in his time. As the Stoics themselves revised their philosophy over time, I conclude that if the *school* of Stoicism never ceased to exist and were hence still existent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, their doctrine certainly would have been revised to fit in with modern theories and advancements, as was the case in antiquity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the Stoics allow *eupatheiai*, good emotions, and thus do not preclude all emotions from their doctrine.

<sup>18</sup> Prior to Musonius' lecture, Plato in the *Republic* had already advocated equality of the sexes and included female guardians in his ideal state (c.f Annas 1976). Moreover, Zeno, the founder of the Stoa, wanted both sexes to wear the same clothing as a sign of their equality (Asmis 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Today with the modern Stoicism movement Stoic philosophy has seen a revival, and naturally, modern Stoic doctrine treats men and women as equals. For more information on this movement see: <https://modernstoicism.com/>.

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