

HOW TO LIVE



Helen
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Notes on the unsilent woman

Hipparchia of Maroneia c. 350–c. 280 BC

1. Hipparchia: hip-park-ee-ah (and Crates: krah-tease).
2. Perhaps the first thing you need to know is that women in ancient Athens didn't get out much. No dinner parties, no debate, no public life. Unless you were already ruined. Or unless you were Hipparchia.
3. 'When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practise.' Mary Beard, *Women and Power*. What is a woman? What is culture? What is silence?
4. Silence isn't always not speaking. Silence is sometimes an erasure. We don't know much about her, but we know she spoke. Sometimes, like today, I don't want to leave the house. I don't want to speak. I don't want to write. I don't feel like saying anything – so much, too much, has already been said. We all know what someone who speaks looks like, someone who should be taken seriously.
5. But I do have something to say. I want to say that she lived. I want to say that she lived, and she spoke and she was not silent.
6. It seems to me that poetry usually begins with the self and works its way outwards; and the essay, perhaps, starts outwards and works its way in towards the self.

7. They were both rich kids who gave it away. Him before he met her, she for him – though I suspect it was really for philosophy: love of wisdom. He left everything back in Thebes, to his sons, to the poor, or he threw it all into the sea, depending on the version.

8. I found her when I went looking for the philosophers who were also women. Where were they? You find them as soon as you look. Perhaps not many – few had the opportunity, the education, the space, and of the few, fewer are remembered. History has that way of erasing women – women are so forgettable – and of the few who are remembered, many are called something else: prophetess, wise woman, mystic, witch. Writer. We all know what a philosopher looks like: he has a beard, a robe, and carries a staff. We all know what a philosopher looks like: he has a serious look and two-day stubble above his turtleneck sweater.

9. I am constantly astonished at the number of exceptional women there have been. Enheduanna. Mary Wollstonecraft. Christine de Pisan. Jael. Murasaki Shikibu. Hypatia. Te Aokapurangi. Mary Shelley. Boudica. Sacagawea. Pope Joan. Joan of Arc. Jane Austen. Sositra. Harriet Martineau.

10. What might look like waiting is often watching. Sometimes I think I am dead, but that's what lying fallow looks like. At first. Before the weeds grow.

11. There was already one philosopher in her family. Metrocles (meh-trock-klees), first born, first son, had claimed the title first. There was no two-day stubble above

his turtleneck toga – that sort of thing wouldn't go down well at the Academy, where he hung with the popular kids. That's why the whole family picked up sticks from Maroneia, schlepping south for the sake of higher learning. But, one day, while rehearsing a speech, Metrocles farted. They say you never die of shame, but he was so embarrassed that it seemed like a good option. He locked himself in his room and refused to eat. Someone thought to fetch Crates, the most famous philosopher in Athens. Crates wandered on over, made himself at home and started cooking a bean stew. 'What you gotta understand, M', he said, 'is that it's perfectly natural', and then farted himself. Once they've laughed, they're halfway saved. And so that's probably how she met him, as he mooched around her brother's room, saving his life. Perhaps she was grateful. Perhaps that was how she fell.

12. Perhaps I should ban 'perhaps'. It is a shrinking word. An ensmallening word, when I feel that it is probably my feminist duty to use big, bold words. To be definite. 'Probably' is probably another of those words.

13. Silence can be the worst weapon. What's wrong? Nothing.

14. My childhood experiences of beans tended towards the negative. The hairy, stringy runner beans my parents grew on the tall wire fence at the far end of the vegetable garden, just before the ground fell away to a bush-filled abyss. The grey rubbery broad beans, of which, in an attempt to broaden our tastes, we had to eat at least one. I can feel again that slightly choking sensation as I swallowed it

whole to avoid its flavour. Perhaps Pythagoras had some similar formative experiences that prompted him to take against beans in a serious way. Perhaps they upset his stomach. Perhaps he opposed flatulence. Perhaps they reminded him too much of the souls of his ancestors. Beans may have been an ancient symbol of death, but Crates didn't care. He was a cynic philosopher.

15. 'It saddens me, and tends to make me silent, when men strongly believe that argument is a battle in which one person wins and the other loses.' Cecile T. Tougas, *Presenting Women Philosophers*.

16. Why are the words of a woman so terrifying?

17. 'But Crates with only his wallet and tattered cloak laughed out his life jocosely, as if he had been always at a festival.' Plutarch, *Moralia*. I imagine Crates as a bit like my friend B. B likes to take credit for other people's relationships and talks about how he got them together, or how he helped them sort it out when they broke up that time. Some of this is true. Crates would wander into other people's houses during times of discord, which often coincided with dinner time. And by the time he left, rifts would have been healed, wives talking again to husbands, fathers to sons, brother to brother, brother to sister.

18. Laura Bassi. Maria Gaetana Agnesi. Catherine of Siena. Queen Victoria. Queen Christina. Héloïse. Sappho. Aphra Behn. Emmeline Pankhurst. Margaret of Anjou. Damaris Cudworth Masham. Triệu Thị Trinh. Harriet Taylor Mill.

19. Silence might not be not speaking. It might be listening. It can be hard to tell the difference.

20. 'Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.' Proverbs 17:28.

21. I must apologise – we're so far in, and she is not even yet the protagonist in her own story. Hold on, let me fix that.

22. Hipparchia did the choosing. The other boys bored her, though she could have had her pick. Crates, she decided, was the man for her. Despite his age (older). Despite his clothes (manky). Despite his likely lack of personal hygiene. Her parents tried to change her mind, but – melodrama running in the family – she said if she couldn't marry him, she would kill herself. Crates, keen to avoid familial discord, said he'd try to dissuade her: he stood before her, put down his staff, took off his cloak. Naked, he said, 'Here is your bridegroom, here are his possessions.' Choose him, choose his life. 'I'm in!' she said. She had been waiting for an excuse to slough off her chiton, snuggle into her own man's cloak, swap her house for the streets. 'So long, Expected Life, I can't say I'll be missing you.'

23. I have no truck with the decluttering fad – it seems to me to be another way to make women feel guilty – but when I returned to my house after several weeks of living out of a carry-on suitcase, I found I had a yearning to rid myself of my many possessions. *Oh heavy burdens!*

24. A conversation requires both voice and silence. Listening and speaking. Listening to the voice, and listening to the silence. Speaking and being heard. Listening and hearing.

25. A monologue is a simpler thing.

26. What we have left of what Hipparchia wrote:
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27. I love the way thought will leap across a space, across a silence. We sometimes won't even perceive a gap. Sometimes we will fill it.

28. George Eliot. Eleanor of Aquitaine. Judith. Anne Conway. Marie Curie. Sofonisba Anguissola. Artemisia Gentileschi. Wu Zetian. The Queen of Sheba. Catherine the

Great. Hinematiaro. Harriet Beecher Stowe. Helen Keller.
Hildegard von Bingen. Diotima.

29. 'If a woman speaks out of turn her teeth will be
smashed with a burnt brick.' Sumerian law, c. 2400 BC.

30. Cynic simply meant dog-like. Diogenes 'the dog' lived
happily in a wine jar. Cynosure: the pole star, the guiding
light.

31. They lived as equals. The whole city was their
playground and they romped like young pups, like wild
dogs. They slept between the columns, fucked in the open
air: if it's good enough for private, it's good enough for
public. They were *anaideia*, shameless, without shame.

32. Every year, H told me, she chooses a motto, a theme:
just one word. I have forgotten all the rest, but one year it
was 'Shameless'. Shameless hussy. You should be ashamed
of yourself. What a shame.

33. '[A] woman should as modestly guard against exposing
her voice to outsiders as she would guard against stripping
off her clothes.' Plutarch, *Moralia*.

34. Barbara Bodichon. Kate Sheppard. Meri Te Tai
Mangakāhia. Sophie Scholl. Nur Jahan. Nefertiti. Queen
Elizabeth I. Ban Zhao. Empress Matilda. Margaret Cavendish.
Elena Cornaro Piscopia. Phillis Wheatley. Hatshepsut.

35. But. I am a believer in silence. The value of silence.
The power of silence. The space that isn't an absence but

a presence. A pause that is bigger than the noise that surrounds it. A gap that is a mirror. A gulf that is a bridge. The emptiness that is rejuvenating. The space that is full of more than it could ever contain.

36. Maybe my favourite part of this story is when Hipparchia went with Crates to a dinner party. There she meets her nemesis: Theodorus the atheist. 'Who is the woman who has left behind the shuttles of the loom?' he asked, affronted. Anti-Penelope. Unnatural monster. She replied, 'I, Theodorus, am that person. Does it seem wrong to you that I devote my time to philosophy rather than the loom?' And maybe that same night, or perhaps another, she said, 'Whatever you do cannot be said to be wrong, and so if I do it, it can't be wrong either. For example, if you hit yourself, it wouldn't be wrong, so if I hit you, it wouldn't be wrong either.' I guess he lacked a decent comeback: he grabbed her cloak and tried to pull it off. Exposing her body. She stood her ground. Shameless. I see her triumphant, one woman in a room of men.

37. 'Hipparchia is a genus of butterflies within the family Nymphalidae.' 'Hipparchia (genus)', *Wikipedia*.

38. Women who speak have always been monstrous. That twisty sphinx, those tempting sirens; better plug your ears with wax, boys.

39. 'I'm sick of "liberal" men whose mask slips every time a woman displeases them, who reach immediately for crude and humiliating words associated with femaleness, act like old-school misogynists and then preen themselves

as though they've been brave. When you do this, Mr Liberal Cool Guy, you ally yourself, wittingly or not, with the men who send women violent pornographic images and rape threats, who try by every means possible to intimidate women out of politics and public spaces, both real and digital. "Cunt", "whore" and, naturally, rape. We're too ugly to rape, or we need raping, or we need raping and killing. Every woman I know who has dared express an opinion publicly has endured this kind of abuse at least once, rooted in an apparent determination to humiliate or intimidate her on the basis that she is female.' J. K. Rowling, Twitter, 9 June 2017.

40. But probably she didn't feel so triumphant – one woman in a room of men. Maybe she feared. For her life. Maybe she went home – wherever that was – and cried. Maybe Crates said, 'Don't worry, things like that happen to me all the time.' But they didn't.

41. 'Why should she live, to fill the world with words?' William Shakespeare, *Henry VI Pt 3*.

42. Some things we tell because we don't want them to have power over us. Some things we never tell because we don't want them to have power over us.

43. There are things we didn't think we could tell.

44. There are things we didn't think we needed to tell. 'Why didn't you tell anyone?' Let's pretend that everyone didn't already know.

45. I didn't want that to be what you think of when you look at me.

46. Embarrassed is another of those ensmallening words. *You're* the one who should be embarrassed.

47. 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve.' St Paul, 1 Timothy 2:11–13.

48. P and I are talking about Mary Beard. 'Are we allowed to like her?' P asks. 'Didn't she write that thing?' I say I don't know, I haven't read much by her, but what I've read I've liked. But we're thinking of Germaine Greer, of Lena Dunham, of even Margaret Atwood, who said that thing that time. If you can't say anything nice, then don't say anything at all. Be seen and not heard. I would rather people just said nice things. I like women to be nice. I like men to be nice too. But I assume women will be nicer.

49. I would like to be able to say that it was the patriarchy that stopped me talking on social media, but it wasn't, not directly.

50. Since I began writing this poem, women have begun to speak. No. Women have begun to be heard. I don't understand what happened, but suddenly things that we all knew – all women at least – became big news. Suddenly women's words had the power to take down a Hollywood mogul, and who will be next? Suddenly the Law Society

is shocked. 'Why didn't you say anything before?' Why weren't you listening?

51. We all know what a prime minister looks like: he is a white man with a dark suit. Sometimes the speed of change astounds me.

52. C tells me he's the third most talkative (i.e. dominating) person in his book club. First and second are both also men. Number one is aware of his tendency to dominate, and so makes an effort to hand on the conversation; but he usually hands it on to another man. C says this is very typical behaviour; he wrote something about it as a psych honours student. B says that, having once been made aware of this, he now always tries to hand the conversation over to a woman. That's very admirable, I think, though I cannot remember many instances of him handing over a conversation to anyone at all.

53. Hipparchia wrote treatises such as *Philosophical Hypotheses*, *Epichiremas* and *Questions to Theodorus*. Letters, jokes, philosophical refutations. All are lost. (Crates wrote *Knapsack* and *Praise of the Lentil*.)

54. L is talking about how she always felt she needed to be small, to shrink down, not take up any space, but now when dealing with him, the man who is trying to make her feel small, she imagines herself expanding, filling up the room like a gas.

55. Manuela Sáenz. Mary Astell. Anna Maria von Schurman. Margaret Fuller. Nzinga. Tomoe Gozen. Kimpa

Vita. Cleopatra. Anna Julia Cooper. Hortensia. Sojourner Truth. Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Zenobia. How many does it take before they are no longer exceptional?

56. H tells us she is writing long poems now as a feminist act. No more I'm sorry for taking up space. No more tiny apologetic little pieces of embroidery. No more thank you for the small scrap of attention. No more whispering.

57. 'In the greatest art, one is always aware of the things that cannot be said . . . of the contradiction between expression and the presence of the inexpressible – stylistic devices are also techniques of avoidance. The most potent elements in a work of art are, often, its silences.' Susan Sontag, 'On Style'.

58. Oh, but I still wish I knew what you said, Lady Butterfly. I wish I could hear your words.

'Women who speak have always been monstrous.
That twisty sphinx, those tempting sirens;
better plug your ears with wax, boys.'

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Helen Rickerby is a writer, editor and publisher. She has published three previous poetry collections, most recently *Cinema* (Mākarō Press, 2014), and her work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Essential New Zealand Poems: Facing the Empty Page* (Godwit, 2012). Rickerby was co-managing editor of literary journal *JAAM* from 2005–15 and single-handedly runs Seraph Press, a boutique but increasingly significant publisher of New Zealand poetry.

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