THE STATUS OF WOMEN AMONG THE GUARDIAN CLASS: FEMINISM IN RELATION TO PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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> Do we think that the wives of our guardian watchdogs should guard what the males guard, hunt with them, and do everything else in common with them? Or should we keep the women at home, as incapable of doing this, since they must bear and rear the puppies, while the males work and have the entire care of the flock? (451d)

Having established his argument that the guardians were to own everything in common, Socrates is challenged by Adeimantus, Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, and Glaucon to account for how communal ownership would affect the concept of family in the ideal state. Socrates is also being challenged by the four interlocutors to explicate the status of women and children among the guardian class. Socrates begins the discussion toward this account and explication with the two questions quoted at the beginning of this essay. By raising these two questions, Socrates implicitly calls attention to the larger question of equality between the sexes. While this larger question emerges more overtly in Book V, the question takes root in previous books of Plato's *Republic*. The larger question of gender equity also remains conspicuously central in the subsequent chapters. Whether or not Plato is making a case for the equality of women has been a subject of debate among scholars, as have been the motivations behind his representations of gender. Sarah Pomeroy reports that Francis Cornford "titles the section from 445B-457B 'The Equality of Women'" (33), a title Pomeroy views as misleading. In a direct response to Pomeroy's article, W.W. Fortenbaugh claims Pomeroy is "more than a bit unfair to Plato" (1). H.P. Rickman likewise proclaims that Plato "proposed the equal education and equal opportunities for women" and refers to Plato's considerations as "emancipation" (30). Julie Annas is comparatively more dour in her assessment: "I shall maintain what may surprise some: that it is quite wrong to think of Plato as 'the first feminist.' His arguments are unacceptable to

a feminist, and the proposals made in Republic V are irrelevant to contemporary debate" (307). A look at some of the central passages from the *Republic* will reveal some of the issues that have fueled scholarly debate.

The challenge raised by Adeimantus, Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, and Glaucon at the beginning of Book V is a direct response to Socrates's explicit but undeveloped call for communal ownership in Book IV:

> These orders we give [the guardians], Adeimantus, are neither as numerous nor as important as one might think. Indeed, they are all insignificant, provided, as the saying goes, that they guard the one great thing, though I'd rather call it sufficient than great.
>
> What's that?
>
> Their education and upbringing, for if by being well educated they become reasonable men, they will easily see these things for themselves, as well as all the other things we are omitting, for example, that marriage, the having of wives, and the procreation of children must be governed as far as possible by the old proverb: Friends possess everything in common. (423d-424a)

This passage, wedged between a discussion of the definitional parameters of the proper "city" and subsequent discussions of artistic control and the division of the tripartite soul, functions as more than a passing remark, and it is the centrality of this passage that motivates the recollection of Socrates's interlocutors at the beginning of Book V. However, while this passage assigns priority to his rules of order and pushes toward dogmatism in the form of a concise proverb, Plato here neglects to flesh out the potential implications and consequences of his communal ownership.

Perhaps it is Plato's awareness of this neglect that compels him to clarify his rule as "sufficient" rather than "great," an awareness that is evident when Socrates later claims he "saw the swarm and passed the topic by in order to save us a lot of trouble" (450b). The qualification and rationale employed by Plato, however, do not discourage scholars from calling attention to and taking issue with what is *not* said in the passage. Arlene Saxonhouse notes that Plato's reference to the female gender does not allow for "their participation in the affairs of the city, much less equal participation" (198). Similarly, Helen Pringle does not view the passage as an allusion toward proposed equity between citizens but merely as a "safeguard against the generation of private goods or possessions" (145). Pringle further suggests that the passage may be more of an allusion to proposed inequity, that the proverb constructs a hierarchical power structure that regulates "the proper uses of women's bodies" (145). While the passage

from Book IV may read ambiguous, particularly when read without reference to the more lengthy discussion of gender in Book V, other passages during the first four books more directly offer depreciative representations of the female gender.

The first discussion of gender in the *Republic* begins with a question: "How are you as far as sex goes, Sophocles? Can you still make love with a woman?" (329bc). The poet's answer initiates the construction of a tone that may help inform the interpretation of the more-ambiguous passages that appear later in the *Republic*. Specifically, Sophocles answers, "I am very glad to have escaped from all that, like a slave who has escaped from a savage and tyrannical master" (329c). While readers must allow for the possibility of different word choices in alternative translations, the word "that" suggests a disdain for the most mature form of relationship between the genders. The terms "slave," "savage," and "tyrannical master" do not reflect a value of mutual consent. In Book II, when Glaucon argues that it is more beneficial to oneself to be unjust, Socrates refutes Glaucon in part by drawing upon negative associations with the female gender. Portraying Glaucon's "luxurious city" as "a city with a fever" (372e), Socrates suggests the unhealthy city caters to the weakness of ascribed female taste by providing "devices… needed for the adornment of women" (373b). Socrates further suggests the unhealthy city welcomes "wet nurses" and "nannies" (373c), two supposedly nonessential roles typically associated with women. The women represented in Socrates's unhealthy city are, as explained by Saxonhouse, "in opposition to the process of abstraction from body that characterizes the founding of the just city" (197). Thus far, Plato has constructed an unequal identity between the genders.

In Book III, the inferiority of women is depicted in terms of activity. Relegating concern for personal tragedy to the level of insignificance, Socrates suggests that the "cowardly" act of "lamentations" should be left to women (387e-388a). The representation of women as inferior is even more overt when Socrates reduces women to the status of children and slaves as unable to control their desires and moderate their reactions to pleasures and pains (431bc). Again, Socrates and his interlocutors are not very complimentary in their description of female behavior. The critical views expressed by the characters may preclude sympathetic readings of Plato's Book V, the book typically of primary interest to feminist scholars.

In Book V, ambiguity pervades the discussion immediately following the challenge of Socrates by his interlocutors to explicate the status of women (451d). In the passage immediately following the challenge, Socrates suggests "that the females are weaker and the

males stronger" but in turn suggests that women and men "must also be taught the same things" (451e). How do we account for this differentiation between ascribed skill and prescribed responsibility? Annas suggests that the quality of weakness may be represented as a quality of inconsequence and thus reasons women "are otherwise the same, and so should be given the same upbringing and tasks as men" (308). Plato himself appears aware of his contrast and may be deliberately constructing the sequence to make the discussion of the status of women palpable to the context of its time, cued by Socrates's acknowledgement of the impending discussion as a "swarm of arguments" (450a) and that the proposed equitable education of women "would incite ridicule if [it] were carried out in practice" (452a).

Socrates's discussion of nude activity may help substantiate Annas's claim while at the same time illustrating Plato's maneuvering around the mores of his time. Certainly, it is not flattering for naked women, particularly the "young women," to be compared with "wrinkled old men" (452ab). Still, Socrates later removes the issue of nudity from importance when he suggests that men who laugh at naked women are cognitively immature, "plucking the unripe fruit" (457ab). Then again, the misogyny hinted by Socrates in his comparison of women with wrinkled old men, a misogyny also perceived by Pomeroy (34), may be facilitated more by the decision of modern translators than by Plato's original composition. In a direct response to Pomeroy, Fortenbaugh argues, "the Greek text does not compare *all* unclothed women to wrinkled old men. Only a prejudiced reading of 452b 1-2 will construe *hosper* in such a way that it does more than relate old men and old women" (2). Hence, the difficulty of pursuing 2000-year-old positions manifests itself in our attempts to apply those positions to contemporary discussions.

Between the aforementioned discussions of female nudity in Book V is another seeming contradiction. On one hand, Plato appears to pose a case for equality: "there is no way of life concerned with the management of the city that belongs to a woman because she's a woman or to a man because he's a man" (455d). On the other hand, he has Socrates insist that "in every way of life … women are weaker than men" (455e). The contrast continues even more concisely in the next passage: "Therefore, men and women are by nature the same with respect to guarding the city, except to the extent that one is weaker and the other stronger" (456a). The contradictory statements may again reflect an intent to relegate the quality of weakness to the level of insignificance, or as Burns suggests, Socrates "is trying to establish that there is nothing about women *qua* women which espe-

cially qualifies or disqualifies them for particular jobs in the city" (136). Perhaps Socrates is rendering more concrete his representation of degree of weakness as inconsequential when he analogizes that the consequences of the difference between "bald and long-haired men" are just as insignificant (454c). As Susan Moller Okin explains in response to Socrates's literal and metaphorical representations of difference, "there are many ways in which human beings can differ, and we do not regard all of them as relevant in assigning different functions to different persons" (357).

The inconsequential nature of some differences also appears to be drawn from a concession of superior traits attributable to the female gender. Indeed, it should be noted that, immediately before Socrates's comments that political leadership lends itself neither to man or woman in general, he concedes that women are superior at weaving and cooking (455cd). Taken another way, the passages are not rendering differences inconsequential but rather reinforcing a hierarchical societal structure privileging men. Annas takes this interpretive position through both a classical and modernist lens:

> Anyone acquainted with the modern literature will realize at once that someone objecting to the idea that men and women should share all roles is not very worried about whether there are some jobs that only women are suited for. The reason for this is obvious enough: jobs that women usually do are badly paid and lack status, and men are generally not interested in doing them. (309)

In reference to the guardian class, the debate regarding the equality of women continues. As some men are naturally equipped to serve as guardians while others are not, some women are naturally equipped to serve as guardians while others are not; within this context, it would seem some women are therefore more qualified to serve as guardians than some men (456a). Nevertheless, Socrates is prompt with a subsequent qualifier, that women are generally weaker while the men are stronger (456a). This recurring meme allows Plato to fulfill a dual purpose. According to Fortenbaugh, Socrates has established the "spirited" and "philosophical" qualities possessed by women and therefore provides justification for their equal access to the education "demanded of guardians" (3). At the same time, the qualification allows the justification to be discreetly negotiated with the culture of Plato's readership.

Some readers may interpret the call for "common dwellings and meals" (458cd) as a clear move toward a culture of equality. It should be observed, however, that a definite hierarchy prefaces this call as lawgivers "will select women" for guardianship "and hand them over to the men" (458c). Fortenbaugh, in her read, does not perceive this

hierarchy. Believing the activity of "handing over" is more of a referent to the chronology of men having been selected first, Fortenbaugh goes as far as to say, "Certainly, it should not be interpreted as suggesting 'the fate of Briseis, Chryseis, and all captive women'" (2). Perhaps this declaration reflects an interpretation that accounts for the lack of the obvious but falls short of allowing for subtlety.

Chryseis and Briseis in ***The Anger of Achilles.***
Painting by Jacques-Louis David (1819).

Passage 460 in Book V is one of the most controversial passages in the *Republic* and is a lightning rod of contention among feminist scholars. Saxonhouse believes the passage begins a pattern whereby females become, at times, simply "forgotten" (195). She substantiates this claim by pointing to the omission of women when it is suggested that the rulers will "keep the number of males as stable as they can" (460a); that younger people will not physically strike older people for "fear that the others would come to the aid of the victim, some as his sons, some as his brothers, and some as his fathers (465ab); and that the children's "fathers won't be ignorant … about which campaigns are dangerous and which are not (467c). A focus on these passages suggests an "ideal state" that privileges men. This tone of privilege is reinforced when women are propositioned as "rewards" for "young men who are good in war" (460ab). Conversely, Okin responds to the posing of women as prizes by proclaiming, "The annihilation of

traditional sex roles among the guardians is total" (358), pointing to Socrates's suggestion that newborn children will be taken over "by the officials appointed for the purpose, who may be either men or women or both" (460b). Fortenbaugh likewise points to 460b in suggesting that Plato is representing women as "co-rulers" who "participate in the control of intercourse" (2). Perhaps relying on the popular modern connotations of the word "nurse," Annas responds more critically to 460b. Specifically, Annas suggests women are being kept in "a traditionally 'feminine' role" (311) when Plato comments "they'll take the children of good parents to the nurse in charge" (460b). Saxonhouse similarly takes issue with the idea of "making it very easy for the wives of the guardians to have children" (460d), arguing that the "minimizing of the female's reproductive role is what makes women in Socrates's city not only weaker but ultimately also inferior to men" (199). The range of these disputed interpretations underscores the difficulty of determining not only Plato's intent but also the intent of any text that survives the lifetime in which it is written.

The latter stages of Book V only further contribute to the difficulty of discerning Plato's exact position on the equality of women. Saxonhouse, Pringle, and Annas are unified in pointing to the following question asked by Socrates as one that is definitely non-feminist if not misogynistic:

> Don't you think it's slavish and money-loving to strip a corpse? Isn't it small-minded and womanish to regard the body as your enemy, when the enemy himself has flitted away, leaving behind only the instrument with which he fought? (469d)

The consensual objection to this question notwithstanding, ambiguity once again manifests itself in a subsequent passage when Glaucon allows that the guardians would be "quite unbeatable" if women "joined the campaigns" typically made up of "brothers, fathers, and sons" (471cd). One way to look at the contrast between the two passages would be to infer that Plato is implying that women are equal in skill but not in humanity, which is not a flattering implication. Still, what if we allow for Socrates's declaration, "I shall say what I have to say, even if the wave is a wave of laughter that will simply drown me in ridicule and contempt" (473c)? If we make this allowance and interpret more charitably, then we might ascribe Plato as qualifying radical proposals, proposals that include a measure of gender equity, for the society of his time.

Following the inquiry that motivates Book V, Books VI and VII appear to move toward a more discernibly positive representation of women. In Book VI, philosophy, the basis for rule in Plato's ideal city, is analogized as a woman:

> When these men, for whom philosophy is most appropriate, fall away from her, they leave her desolate and unwed, and they themselves lead lives that are inappropriate and untrue. Then others, who are unworthy of her, come to her as to an orphan deprived of the protection of kinsmen and disgrace her. These are the ones who are responsible for the reproaches that you say are cast upon philosophy by those who revile her, namely, that some of those who consort with her are useless, while the majority deserve to suffer many bad things. (495c)

Philosophy in this passage is represented as a truth, a truth that reflects poorly on those by whom it is not accepted. As philosophy in the *Republic* is founded upon the virtues of temperance, prudence, fortitude, and ultimately, justice, those who revile philosophy revile the virtues.

Four Cardinal Virtues. Photo courtesy of the Phoenixmasonry Masonic Museum and Library at <http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/>.

By feminizing philosophy, Plato in effect portrays the female gender as the embodiment of these virtues. The embodiment continues in a subsequent passage: “What about when men who are unworthy of education approach philosophy and consort with her unworthily?” (496a). This question could imply that the male gender is being employed to represent all that is bad in society. Granted, an alternative reading of these two passages may instead conclude that women are being represented as passive recipients incapable of resisting interpersonal pressure. This interpretation, however, would assume through the analogy employed that philosophy itself is passive and malleable to the most numerous or most influential societal forces.

The positive representation of women is again evident at the end of Book VII in the following exchange between Glaucon and Socrates:

> Like a sculptor, Socrates, you've produced ruling men that are completely fine.
>
> And ruling women too, Glaucon, for you mustn't think that what I've said applies any more to men than it does to women who are born with the appropriate natures. (540c)

Socrates's response is a potentially powerful and far-reaching assertion. As articulated by Okin, "It is most likely that women guardians, if allowed to compete for the highest rank of all, would have been excluded from any other office" (364). Of course, the discussion of gender in the *Republic* does not conclude with book VII.

In Book VIII, Plato again reverts to depreciative representation of women in his discussion of how a man becomes timocratic:

> When he listens, first, to his mother complaining that her husband isn't one of the rulers and that she's at a disadvantage among the other women as a result. Then she sees that he's not very concerned about money and the he doesn't fight back when he's insulted, whether in private or in public in the courts, but is indifferent to everything of that sort. She also sees him concentrating his mind on his own thoughts, neither honoring nor dishonoring her overmuch. Angered by all this, she tells her son that his father is unmanly, too easy-going, and all the other things that women repeat over and over again in such cases. (549c-e)

Considering Plato's parallel of the individual and the city, this passage in effect represents women as the instigators of regressive forms of government or, indirectly, as distractions from the virtues that constitute the ideal individual and the ideal city. The reversion of this passage is not mere aberration as women are again invoked for their presumed weakness, this time a weakness for "embroidery" that is "multicolored" (557c). In Book IX, Plato again treats the woman reductively, going as far as to say the tyrant "lives like a woman, mostly confined to his own house" (579b). To be reductive is to present subject matter in a simplified form, a form that in some cases is crude. Even for fifth-century Athens, the representation of all women as literally imprisoned reads as somewhat an exaggeration; consider the independence and influence some of the *hetaerae* were able to attain as a benefit of their more sophisticated education. The notion of home as confinement is further problematic considering that dwellings of any age often function as symbiotic systems where women are appreciated for their insight and not just their role in raising children and maintaining the hearth. In Book X, as Plato concludes his argument of why it is better to be just than unjust, we see yet one more

denigration of women, of their qualities as contrary to the virtues of the ideal individual and state. Specifically, grieving is depicted as "unworthy" and "shameful" (605de), this "womanish" activity being construed as another violation of temperance, prudence, fortitude, and ultimately, justice.

Historians recognize fifth-century Athens, or the Age of Pericles, as a period of economic and cultural growth. The Greek Assembly is considered a precursor to the democracy of contemporary Western civilizations. To negate poverty as an impediment to civic participation, classical governance initiated social programs such as land grants, public building programs, and assistance for orphans and invalids. The classical notion of equal participation gave rise to the *kleroterion*, whereby identity tokens were randomly drawn to select legislative representatives and court juries. There was, however, an important limitation to this principle of equality – only men were eligible to participate. Most, though not all, women focused on their responsibilities at home, tending to their children and servants. This is not to say there weren't exceptions such as Aspasia of Miletus, who belonged to the Socratic circle. Still, men far more often enjoyed the privileges afforded by access to education and power.

In this context, an examination of Plato's *Republic* demands careful reading guided by judicious parsing of the literature. If the *Republic* is to be examined in terms of layer, readers might posit that Socrates must rely on contemporary gender inequity in his use of metaphor and argumentation in order to make himself intelligible to his interlocutors. Yet he envisions a time of maximal gender equity, where his metaphoric and argumentative reliance on the classical contemporary sentiment is quite of use, since in the Kallipolis, men and women regard each other as equals. When contemplating the *Republic* holistically, we are left with the question of whether Plato is posing a state that allows gender equity, if not maximal, then at least to a greater degree beyond what existed at the time. There are multiple passages that appear to support gender equity, and there are multiple passages that appear to support gender inequity. There are even multiple passages that appear conducive to both points of view, contingent upon the predilection and interpretation of the specific reader.

In a final contemplation of Plato's Socratic dialogue, I call attention to Plato's two most extreme representations. The most flattering representation analogizes the female with philosophy, his ideal basis for government. The most unflattering depiction of femininity poses women as instigators for tyranny, his most despised form of government. Perhaps the paradox of these extreme representations

is incidental. Perhaps the femininity of philosophy is merely an artifact of Plato following the linguistic conventions of his time. Perhaps each gender could be described only generally, with allowances for male and female individuals on both ends of a continuum of quality and ability. Keeping in mind that the *Republic* is not a treatise on gender but on civic governance, a civic governance dependent on harmony within and between crafts, perhaps Plato felt nothing particular against women but had no vested interest in their empowerment either. Maybe Plato all along was depicting women as needed for a moment, consistency being no object, to advance and complete his proposal for the ideal city.

The Ideal City. Painting by Piero della Francesca (c.1470).

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