

PLATO AND THE EQUALITY OF WOMEN

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I

AMONG CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S LIBERATIONISTS, Plato is beginning to emerge as something of a hero. There are laudatory references to him in more popular publications: in her book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett commends him for the "liberal suggestions" he made concerning the education of women; similarly, many years previously, Theodor Gomperz said that Plato proclaims "what we generally call the emancipation of women".¹ These writers all have in mind, of course, that part of the *Republic* where the question is raised about whether women should be admitted to the class of guardians, and it is on this familiar passage that I wish to concentrate my attention. I shall not be primarily concerned with whether, or to what extent, this section is typical of Plato's remarks on the status of women throughout the rest of the dialogues; for it seems to be universally agreed that it is here, if anywhere, that his most radical views are to be found, and where he emerges most strongly as a sympathiser with the feminist cause. However, the passage concerned presents problems, because we find in it two distinguishable arguments. Each arrives at the same conclusion—that some women are as naturally equipped as some men to be guardians. But whereas the first reaches this conclusion by an appeal to principles of justice, and certainly supports Plato's ranking as an advocate of the rights of women, the second seems to put Plato in quite a different light. For in it he appears to hold the view that men are superior to women, a view which, if it is his (and most commentators attribute this view to him), would be rather embarrassing for those who regard him as a champion of the equality of the sexes. In particular, it would involve Plato's argument in a major inconsistency, for it would mean his advocating for women a position that, on his own account, they did not justly deserve.

Nevertheless, as I shall attempt to make clear, I have no desire to tarnish Plato's image in this matter. Rather, I shall seek to refurbish it, so that it may stand better in the face of critical examination.

II

A major part of the first four books of the *Republic* is devoted to an argument that there should be a special class of men, uniquely qualified by virtue of their natural abilities and education, to act as guardians of the state. At 451c ff., the question is raised whether this class is to be

¹T. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers* 3 (London 1905) 77. The reference in Kate Millett's book is to be found on page 74.

restricted exclusively to men, or whether it is possible and desirable for women to be guardians also. An argument against the latter proposal is put forward at 453a. In summary, it goes like this:

1) Each person ought to do the one thing for which he (or she) is naturally fitted. (This is the initial principle of justice which was first formulated at 369e ff.)

2) There are great natural differences between men and women, so different employment should be given to men and women corresponding to these natural differences. Therefore

3) it is an error and contradictory (to the principle of justice) to say that men and women should do the same things.

Plato's response to this is to marshal two counter-arguments. In the first he examines the notion of a natural difference, and claims that distinctions have to be drawn within it. The principle of justice that assigned different pursuits to different natures did not mean "sameness and difference in every sense, but we heeded only that kind of diversity and likeness that was relevant to the pursuits themselves" (454c-d). Unless some such refinement is made in the notion of a natural difference, the principle of justice would lead to absurdity. For it would involve, to use Plato's example, saying that since bald men are plainly different in nature from hairy men, they cannot have the same occupation on account of *this* difference. So that if bald men are cobblers, for instance, the hairy will be excluded from pursuing this trade. Some qualification is necessary—namely, that of saying that differences in nature have to be relevant to the task at hand. In which case discriminatory treatment can only be justified when such differences are relevant. Consequently, if it cannot be shown that any of the natural differences that exist between men and women incapacitate the woman from occupying the highest office, there is no just reason for excluding her.²

Plato, we may notice, makes no attempt to deny that there are natural differences between the sexes. What he does do is to indicate some of the differences which have been thought to be relevant, and deny that they are relevant. Two are mentioned here.

(a) The male is stronger than the female. Plato replies that this difference is not sufficient to prevent women from being trained for warfare.³

(b) Females bear children, males beget them. Plato denies that this

²As far as I am aware, Plato was the first to formulate the principle that discriminatory treatment can only be justified if a relevant difference is found. This principle seems to be accepted by most contemporary writers on justice.

³Cf. *Laws* 804d, where Plato mentions women from Pontus "upon whom equally with men is imposed the duty of handling bows and other weapons, as well as horses, and who practise it equally." This shows that it is quite possible for women to participate with men in warfare, a necessary condition if a woman is to be a guardian.

difference should disqualify an otherwise qualified woman. Nurses will take over the care of children born to female guardians, so that their attention is not diverted from their duties to the state. In more modern terms, there is no "two-role" problem for women because the conflict of loyalties does not arise.

Nurses will take care that the mothers themselves [i.e., the female guardians] shall not suckle too long, and that the trouble of wakeful nights and similar burdens they will devolve upon nurses, wet and dry. (460d)

When the reply comes that this is to make maternity a "soft job" for the female guardians, Plato responds that this is how matters ought to be. For justice demands that women guardians, like men, should spend their time doing the job for which they have been trained.

So far all is well for those who see Plato as an enlightened liberal. The position just considered, which appeals to the idea of discriminatory treatment's only being justifiable if relevant differences can be produced, would suffice to refute one common kind of argument for what has been called the "separate spheres" doctrine.⁴ That is to say, it would refute that kind of argument which depends on the claim that motherhood and the generally greater strength of the man exclude the woman from being able to perform certain tasks. The onus now lies on the anti-feminist to specify what other relevant differences there may be that would act as disqualifying factors.

But now the trouble begins. For Plato goes on to present another argument against the doctrine, which appears to amplify the conclusions of the first. In it he claims that there is nothing for which a woman is quali-

⁴The "separate spheres" doctrine I understand as being the doctrine that certain differences between the sexes should regulate their roles in life. Since women bear children, it is taken to follow that this biological fact should determine their destiny. Consequently women have been brought up traditionally to regard their main function in life as that of wife and mother. Or again, the assumption has been made that women are not only physically but also psychologically different from men. Even if she does work, the doctrine contends that a woman's temperament fits her for certain jobs where allegedly feminine qualities, such as tenderness, sympathy, kindness, patience, and understanding (qualities closely associated with those needed for being a good mother) are required. As a result, the concept emerges of there being "service" occupations particularly suited to women, traditionally those of secretary and nurse. But where hard decisions which demand disciplined reason and determination have to be made, in areas where the "real power" lies (e.g., in politics and business), these are the provinces of the man.

Some eminent psychologists and social scientists (e.g., Freud and Margaret Mead) have been accused of re-inforcing this doctrine by urging, in effect, that because this is the situation in which most women find themselves today, this is how it must be, this is what nature intends. They are accused of not distinguishing between what is the case because of cultural, educational, and historical influences, and what is naturally the case. (In classical terms, this would be the error of confusing what is conventionally so with what is so by nature.)

fied by virtue of her being a woman—so denying that there is any division of labour corresponding to sexual differences.

... there is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all . . . (455d-e).

The conclusion is drawn that no field of activity, including that of being a guardian, belongs to a man *qua* man. Rather, some women and some men will have the necessary qualifications:

Then it is likewise true that one woman has the qualities of a guardian and another not. Were not these the natural qualities of the men also whom we selected for guardians? (456a)

On closer examination, however, this second argument has features in it which not only seem to go against the liberal temper of Plato's views on women in the *Republic*, but are actually contradictory to the principles of justice he has been setting forth. The conclusion of this second argument is, in effect, the same conclusion as that of the first argument—a denial of the separate spheres doctrine. But whereas the first argued to this conclusion by denying that there are any relevant differences, differences in nature that affect the capacity of a woman to be a guardian,—the second reaches this conclusion by an appeal to different, and importantly different, premises.

The line of thought leading up to this second conclusion is, in outline: In *every* field of activity the man is superior to the woman.

Therefore, there is no field in which a woman may be said to predominate simply because she is a woman.

Now while this argument, like the first, is intended to refute the "separate spheres" doctrine, it has the great blemish, unlike the first, of relying for its strength on the thesis of a general masculine superiority. Let us consider the passage in more detail. There are three important sentences which have to be assessed.

1) There is a great superiority (πολὺ κρατεῖται) of the *one sex* (τὸ γένος)—[he is referring to the male sex]—over the other in every field (ἐν ᾧ πᾶσιν). (455d)

2) Many women are better than many men in many things. (455d)

3) . . . the one learned easily, the other with difficulty, . . . the one with slight instruction could discover much for himself in the matter studied, but the other, after much instruction and drill, could not even remember what he had learned; . . . the bodily faculties of the one adequately served his mind, while, for the other, the body was a hindrance. (455b-c)

If these latter are the features by which one marks superiority, they would seem very important—so important that anyone who had any such defect would fail to meet the stringent requirements Plato lays down

as necessary to become a guardian.⁵ In which case, if men are superior to women in these respects, the fact could be damaging rather than helpful to the cause of women's equality.

I say this argument *could* be damaging to the feminist cause. Consider, firstly, Allan Bloom's comments on this passage:

However, Socrates also admits that the best women are always inferior in capacity to the best men; it is then highly improbable that any women would even be considered for membership in the higher classes. Thus the whole consideration of their education as guardians is unnecessary.⁶

Then again, Sir Ernest Barker writes:

All women, indeed, have an inferior capacity to that of men, in politics as elsewhere: many women, like many men, have no capacity at all for the political functions of the guardian; but there are some women who, in their inferior degree, have a capacity for discharging the same function of guardianship which some men possess, and these must be trained and serve as guardians in common with the men who are similarly qualified. Otherwise the principle of justice will be defeated, and there will be elements in the State which are not discharging the proper function for which they are qualified by their nature.⁷

If these critics were right, Plato's position would be even more difficult than it is. For the position they seem to be putting forward is that the only really "top people" are men, but thereafter there is a lot of variety. Some confirmation of this interpretation is to be found in Grote's summary of the argument at this point. Grote takes Plato to mean that "the best women will be on a level only with the second-best men, but they will be superior to all men lower than the second-best."⁸ To use a diagram, letting A . . . n stand for a decrease in ability, the model would be

<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
A	
B	B
C	C
D	D

It is important to emphasise here that, according to this interpretation, the men designated by 'A' constitute a separate category or kind. They are those who possess the characteristics mentioned above that are necessary attributes for qualifying as guardians. The possession or non-possession of these attributes would count as the "relevant difference" in terms of Plato's earlier discussion. Moreover this model would also

⁵At several places Plato re-emphasises the importance of these and related qualities for the guardian. See 487a, 490c, 503b-504c.

⁶Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (Basic Books 1968) 383.

⁷Sir Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory* (London 1964) 256.

⁸G. Grote, *Plato* 3 (London 1865) 68.

account for "many women being better than many men in many things," but deny that the best women ever come up to the standard of the best men. They would, in R. H. S. Crossman's terms, always be "weaker rivals."⁹

Now, if this is the case, it is very hard to see, with Barker, how any woman could possibly be educated, with justice (in Plato's sense), to be a guardian. For if she is inferior to the best man, it is a perversion of justice to train her for something for which she is not naturally fitted. Moreover, if the highest qualifications are necessary, and only some men have these, then no woman is going to have the *same* nature as the best men. There will be relevant differences that will disqualify her from being a guardian. On the other hand, it is not simply the case, as Bloom asserts, that education of women for the post of guardian is "unnecessary," or that membership in the higher classes is "highly improbable." It is not at all a question of probabilities; rather, such education and membership would be, on Plato's terms, unjust and immoral.

Therefore, if Barker and Bloom are correct in their interpretation, Plato's account now suffers from a glaring defect. It is inconsistent with his former argument in that it brings forward differences that would affect the function of being a guardian, and it goes against his more general principle of justice that people should do the one thing for which they are naturally equipped.

However, the case need not be so damaging. For when Plato talks about the great superiority of the male over the female in every field, he does not talk about *every* man and *every* woman. What he does do is to make a generalisation about the class as a whole, using the class term (*τὸ γένος*). He does not use the term for each (*ἐκαστος*), or every (*ἅπας*), and is not making a distributive claim to the effect that all the best women are inferior to all the best men—the picture suggested in the diagram above. Interestingly enough, in his commentary on the passage, Grote does draw this very distinction, but then, having drawn it, fails to see its implications, and commits the fallacy of division. In his own words,

... speaking of women *generally and collectively*, there is not a single profession for which they are peculiarly fit, or more fit than men. Men are superior to women in everything, in one occupation as well as in another. Yet among both sexes, there are serious individual differences, so that many women, *individually* estimated, will be superior to many men: no women will equal the best men, but the best women will equal the second-best men, and will be superior to the men below them.¹⁰

Even if we grant the truth of saying that the class of men is superior to the class of women, it certainly does not follow, as Grote or Bloom would have it, that the best woman is inferior to the best man, or, as

⁹R. H. S. Crossman, *Plato Today* (Unwin Books 1959) 125.

¹⁰Grote (above, n. 8) 199.

Barker puts it, that all women are inferior. All that would be likely to follow, in this case, would be that there are *fewer* gifted women than men. There is no inconsistency between saying that the class of men is superior to the class of women, and that the best women are equal to the best men—and provided *this* possibility remains open, there is no conflict with the demands of justice. Only on this interpretation, it seems to me, can consistency be preserved between Plato's claim about the class of men being superior to that of women, and the demand that the natures of those men and women who are qualified to be guardians be the same.¹¹

In logical terms, what I am claiming here is that a distinction should be made between collective and distributive judgements, and that if it is made, Plato's case can stand in a much better light. I have already argued that Grote commits the fallacy of division. Similarly, it appears to be the case that Barker and Bloom take Plato's collective statement about the class of men and the class of women as a distributive statement about all men and all women. If so, they either themselves, like Grote, commit the fallacy of division, or take Plato to do so. This latter alternative is unlikely, for if they had thought Plato had committed an error in reasoning, one would expect mention of it. Hence it would seem that they themselves are also guilty of the fallacy, and, as a result, misrepresent Plato's argument.

On the other hand, it is difficult to be sure whether Plato was aware of this distinction. At 457a he seems to fall into the trap himself, when he says that "lighter tasks must be given to the women than to the men because of the weakness of the sex (τοῦ γένους)." It doesn't follow that if women as a class are weaker than men as a class, that the strongest woman couldn't be just as strong as the strongest man. However, even if Plato himself commits the fallacy of division here,¹² it could still be the case that he does not do so earlier on.

¹¹The statement at 455d, τὸ δὲ ὅλον ἔχει ὡς σὺ λέγεις ("on the whole it is as you say"), together with the use of the collective noun (γένος) indicates that the statement of male superiority is collective.

The distributive reply, "Many women are better than many men at many things," is consistent with both

- a) "the best women are as good as the best men" and
- b) "the best women are inferior to the best men."

In the text reasons are given for preferring (a).

¹²The same mistake seems to occur in the *Cratylus* (392c-d). After securing Hermogenes' agreement to the statement that the wise give names more correctly than the unwise, Socrates continues the dialogue as follows:

Do the women in states seem to you to be wiser than the men, considered as a whole class? (ὡς τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν γένος)

The men do.

Do you know that Homer says that Hector's child was called Astyanax by the Trojan

One other way of trying to bring about a reconciliation between the claims that men and women have the same nature and that the male is superior in every sphere should be mentioned. It suggests that what Plato means is that while men and women have corresponding ranges of talents, men possess these talents to a greater degree. Or, to express this point in terms of the model I used earlier, the argument would be that the men designated by 'A' do not constitute a relevantly different kind, but differ only in degree from those below them. Such an interpretation as this is taken by Gomperz, when he says that "between the sexes there are only quantitative, and not qualitative differences in capacity."¹³ It also occurs in the passage quoted earlier from Barker. Davies and Vaughan, in their analysis of the argument of the *Republic* write as follows:

... the woman is just as capable of music and gymnastic as the man; and, like him, she displays marked ability for a variety of pursuits—the only difference being one of *degree*, not of *kind*, caused by the fact that the woman is weaker than the man. Those women who give evidence of a turn for philosophy or war, are to be associated with the Guardians or Auxiliaries, are to share their duties, and become their wives.¹⁴

Finally, in Grote, we read:

The specific or formal characteristic, in the case of males, is doubtless superior, taken abstractedly: yet in particular men it is embodied or manifested with various degrees of perfection, from very good to very bad. In the case of females, though inferior abstractedly, it is in its best particular embodiments equal to all except the best males; and superior to all such as are inferior to the best.¹⁵

Grote's version of the "degree" interpretation, we may notice, is specifically linked with the model discussed earlier. And though Grote immediately goes on to claim not that "females *may be* taken, but that they *ought to be* taken, conjointly with males, under the selection of the Rulers, to fulfill the most important duties in the Commonwealth," we have already seen that we cannot reconcile, with consistency, the position that the best women are only equal to the second-best men with the demands of Platonic justice, which would require that only the most

men; and it is clear that he was called Scamandrius by the women, since the men called him Astyanax?

Apparently.

Then Homer too thought the Trojan men were wiser than the women?

I suppose so.

Even if we allow that men, as a class, are wiser than women, as a class, it does not follow that all the Trojan women considered distributively would give Hector's son his "incorrect" name. All that follows is that most would do so; which leaves open the all-important possibility that some Trojan women would be just as wise as the men in the matter of correct name giving.

¹³Gomperz (above, n. 1) 77.

¹⁴J. L. Davies and D. J. Vaughan, *The Republic of Plato* (New York, undated) xviii.

¹⁵Grote (above, n. 8) 201.

highly qualified individuals (for Grote, the best men) should become rulers.

Similar difficulties are to be found in Davies and Vaughan. They do not explicitly commit themselves to the same position as Grote. Nevertheless, in that they shift from talking of "the woman" to "women," we may suspect that they are involved in the fallacy of division; it may be true that the *class* of women is inferior in degree to the class of men, but from this nothing follows about the inferiority of the best individual women to the best men. Or again, though Davies and Vaughan don't specify, as Grote does, that they take Plato to mean that the best women are equal only to the second best men, it seems likely that they do hold such a view. They do describe the woman as "just as capable" as the man, they talk of women "sharing" duties (which could, but does not necessarily, imply recognition of full equality), but they also describe women as being the "wives" of the guardians, and being "associated" with them. They hold back from saying, as Plato does not, that women are to be guardians in their own right. Further, one requires more than "a turn for" philosophy, if one is to become a guardian. As later sections of the *Republic* make clear, one requires people of very rare and exceptional ability to be capable of discharging the highest duties of the state. It is hard to avoid the impression that by committing themselves to the position that women are inferior in degree, Davies and Vaughan also feel that women are not quite up to the mark.

Although I have only discussed two particular versions of the "degree" view, it is difficult to see how any version could escape from making the best women inferior to the best men. In which case, how could women be said to have the same nature as men, or how could women be held to be on a level with men in those necessary features of character and intellect on which Plato lays so much stress? It would appear, therefore, that this kind of interpretation cannot bring about the reconciliation it was designed to do.

Nevertheless, two other questions may be raised about the statement that the class of men is superior to that of women in every field. First of all, should we accept it as true? Secondly, why is it introduced here?

Let us consider this latter question first. The answer may be that it is introduced for purely tactical reasons. The first argument, designed to attack the "separate spheres" doctrine, made no mention of inferiority and superiority. But a traditional Athenian gentleman¹⁶ might not have

¹⁶The views of a traditional Athenian appear at *Meno* 71e: "Let us take first the virtue of a man—he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman's virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described: her duty is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband."

been convinced by Plato's appeal to the notion of relevant difference. He might well have regarded such a new philosophical distinction as an artificial fabrication, which was no more than a typically sophistical play on words designed to confuse rather than aid in the achievement of the truth. Moreover, given that the "separate spheres" doctrine was seen by Plato as the main stumbling block to his proposals, it could be that he is trying here to preserve the same conclusion (the refutation of that doctrine), and show that it follows, *even if* one concedes one of the major male prejudices—that men on the whole are superior to women. In fact what Plato may be trying to demonstrate is that the claim that the class of men is superior to the class of women in every pursuit is inconsistent with the "separate spheres" doctrine. This, I think, is an important conclusion, for I suspect it is often assumed that both positions can be held together. That is to say, I suspect that opponents of women's equality in employment and education have defended this view on the grounds that (1) there are certain areas for which men are cut out by nature, and certain areas which are naturally fitted for women, and yet at the same time have held (2) that because of their superiority, men could do better, if they wished, any of the tasks which are traditionally reckoned as a woman's kind of job.

To deal now with the first question. Should we accept as true the claim of masculine superiority, or, perhaps more importantly here, did Plato accept it as true? There is no indication in the text that he did not accept it as true, but what becomes crucial at this point is to try and decide *in what sense* he accepted it. In the twentieth century situation, the most vociferous women's liberationists do accept it as a statement of how things are as *a matter of fact*, but protest that this is not how things *ought to be*. Similarly, if all Plato intended was that he should be understood as giving a description of how things were in his day, he remains as an ally of the cause of women's equality. But if he also thought that this was how things ought to be, because this was what nature intended, this would be to cast him as a male supremacist. This latter position is perhaps best summed up by Aristotle:

Again, as between the sexes, the male is by nature (*φύσει*) superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must also necessarily apply in the case of mankind as a whole.¹⁷

It would certainly have been clearer if Plato had qualified his claim about male superiority in terms of the nature—convention distinction (or, in modern terms, on the basis of whether there is any natural superiority of the man, as Aristotle contends, or whether this superiority is due to culture and education). Without this information, it is difficult to

¹⁷Arist. *Pol.* 1254b.

assess Plato with confidence. On the one hand, there are passages¹⁸ which quite unequivocally support the view that he thought men and women had the same nature, and so should be educated to fulfil the same roles. In which case Plato's assertion of male superiority should be taken as a description, and no more than this. Extra support for this view seems to be forthcoming from Aristotle, who criticises quite severely Plato's proposals for a revolution in the status of women.¹⁹

On the other hand, while there is much in the *Republic* and elsewhere in his writings (including the *Laws*) which advocates complete equality of education and employment because men and women are the same by nature, there are also a number of passages where we find either a hesitant affirmation of equality,²⁰ or some statement of relevant differences²¹ (particularly in the *Laws*). A partial explanation can, no doubt, be found in the shift in attitude from the *Republic* to the *Laws*. The move from the ideal of the *Republic* to the slightly less than ideal, the rather more practical and conventional tone of the *Laws* can account in part for the change in attitude towards women, who seem to drop out of the picture as candidates for the highest office in the state. It may be then, as G. L. Dickinson has said, that the claim of male superiority should simply be understood as "a remnant of masculine prejudice."²²

Or, more strongly, we may say, with R. C. Lodge, that besides his hatred of democracy and tradespeople (such as little bald-headed tinkers), he had "an almost equal contempt for women."²³ In other words, the derogatory references to women that we may find in Plato (some of which will be mentioned later) stem from his being a misogynist at heart. This could be true. But whatever may have been his personal feelings and attitude, the crucial question turns on what he recognised and was prepared to advocate because of the demands of justice. What justice requires, of course, does not always accord with personal likes and dislikes.

However, I suspect that the most likely explanation for these in-

¹⁸E.g., 456a, 457a.

¹⁹*Pol.* 1264b ff.

²⁰E.g., 466b, and *Laws* 804e, where the sharing of tasks is to be "as much as possible."

²¹There are statements to the effect that women are weaker than men at 458c and 466d, so that women should be given lighter tasks, 457a. In the *Laws*, at 781b the woman's nature is said to be "inferior with respect to virtue," while at 802d-e the lawgiver is to set apart music suitable for male and female. The words and music are to fit the "natural difference of the two sexes." "... What is noble and of a manly tendency is masculine, while that which inclines to decorum and sedateness is to be regarded as feminine both in law and discourse. . . ." In teaching one tries to frame "the shapes of their lives according to the modes of their souls."

²²G. L. Dickinson, *Plato and his Dialogues* (Penguin Editions 1950) 71.

²³R. C. Lodge, *Plato's Theory of Education* (New York 1970) 239. Cf. also Dorothea Wender, "Plato: Misogynist, Paedophile, and Feminist," *Arethusa* 6 (1973) 1.

consistencies and hesitations is that Plato was operating on two levels at the same time, and that these two levels become unconsciously mingled together. It is not surprising that someone who is trying to formulate and give moral justification for a revolutionary idea should find it difficult to liberate himself from the traditional views, and even at times lapse back into conventional attitudes. As a result, on the one level we sometimes find Plato guilty of the most obvious "male chauvinism," especially at 460b, where the man who displays bravery in war is to be rewarded by having more opportunities for sexual intercourse than is permitted to more ordinary mortals. The notion of women as prizes for the best warriors is surely to come very close to the idea of women as "sexual objects."²⁴ Or again, it is not uncommon to find prejudices reflected in ordinary language, so that they may determine our attitudes though we are unaware of it. So it is sometimes with Plato—the term "womanish" is associated with such qualities as "petty," "nagging," and "cowardly," and it is difficult to assess how much influence this may have had. The word *κοινωνεῖν* (share) is often used when Plato claims that men and women should share the same education and employment, but it is also the same word which recurs when he moves on to talk of the sharing of wives among the guardians, where the women tend to emerge as pieces of property still, but common rather than private. So the very word which has a key place in trying to secure equality of opportunity for women is also the word to put them back in their near traditional place, as women rather than human creatures, as Mary Wollstonecraft put it.²⁵ It is also interesting to notice here how Plato vacillates between describing them as "female guardians," the equals of men, and officials in their own right

²⁴In his essay "Education of Women according to Plato," Rabbi Frank seeks to play down this passage. He says, "Finally, there is (Plato believes) a direct tendency to inherit the moral, as well as the physical, nature of the parents. That is largely why the ancient equivalent of the V.C.'s are especially encouraged to reproduce their kind." However Frank overlooks the fact that the idea of brave warriors' being encouraged to reproduce more often is introduced as a "pretext" or "excuse" (*πρόφασις*): the main reason is to provide "rewards and prizes" (*γέρα καὶ ἄθλα*) for them, with extra sexual intercourse with the women being reckoned as the best reward of all. (Rabbi Frank's essay appears as Appendix II of the book by R. C. Lodge—see previous note; the passage quoted occurs on page 288.)

²⁵"One cause of this barren blooming [of women] I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; . . . the civilised women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect." (*The Rights of Women* [Everyman Editions] 3).

By contrast, Plato's aim of education, stated simply at 456, is to produce "the best possible men and women."

(e.g., 456a, c, 457c, 540; cf. also *Timaeus* 18d) and as “the wives of the guardians” (e.g., 454e, 457a), who are the best possible women available for the eugenic purpose of breeding future guardians, but who are certainly not the equal of the men (458c). The fact that we find these significant changes in terminology so quickly succeeding one another is a symptom of how the novel and the traditional views are intertwined.

On a different level, particularly in the first argument devoted to the distinction of relevant difference, Plato is completely egalitarian. The safest conclusion would seem to be, therefore, that the inconsistencies are to be accounted for depending upon the level of enquiry at which the discussion is cast. At his most rigorous and philosophical level he is certainly an advocate of equality for women. But there is a lot of back-sliding, and on this topic particularly he seems to find it difficult to sustain the rigorously philosophical level for long.

To conclude: I have tried to show that if we read this section of the *Republic* as most commentators would have us read it, Plato emerges at the most, very dubiously, as an advocate of women's equality. But if my analysis is correct, we do have a way of regarding him as less of an enigmatic character in this respect. The problem mentioned in the introduction is resolved, and the inconsistency that appeared to be involved in his account is dissipated.

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