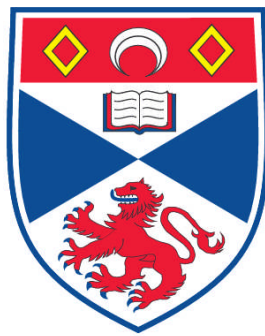


**THE IDEAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN PLATO'S AND ARISTOTLE'S  
SOCIETIES**

**Alixandra Jawin**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St. Andrews**



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# **The Ideal Role of Women in Plato's and Aristotle's Societies**

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Degree: MPhil in Philosophy  
Date of Submission: 31/08/11**

## **Abstract**

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I was admitted as a research student in September, 2009 and as a candidate for the degree of MPhil in September, 2011; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2009 and 2011.

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This dissertation analyzes Plato's and Aristotle's conception of women's proper role in the state. The first chapter demonstrates that due to Plato's belief that the soul is sexless it is impossible to determine one's role in society by one's sex. Plato's claim in the *Republic* that women who are qualified by nature will become guardians is therefore consistent with his larger view that one's role in society should only be based on one's nature. Since the only distinction between male and female Guardians is that women give birth to children and are physically weaker than men, there is no justification for barring women from the Guardian class. The second chapter turns to the *Symposium* and Plato's thoughts on intellectual as well as physical pregnancy, and specifically that according to Plato the process of giving birth does not affect a woman's soul or capacity to reason. In the third chapter I demonstrate that even outside the ideal city of the *Republic*, Plato does not revise his position on women's capacities. The *Laws* is more concerned with practicality than the *Republic* and Plato is therefore forced to make concessions which limit women's opportunity to govern, but such concessions are minor. This chapter also emphasizes Plato's belief that good laws make good people and describes how this realization enables him to recognize that the poor condition of the women in Classical Athens is due to Athenian social institutions and not to women's inferior nature. Finally, the fourth chapter turns to Aristotle and seeks to prove that his position on women's role in the state is far more nuanced than appreciated.

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## **Introduction**

Modern scholars claim to have investigated Plato's and Aristotle's views on women, but surprisingly few have actually done so and those that have tend to have done so poorly. I believe there are two main reasons for this: 1) philosophers place too much importance on whether Plato or Aristotle can be considered feminists, and 2) philosophers who approach classical texts with an interest in women appear to do so with preconceptions and anger. First, trying to determine Plato's or Aristotle's feminist leanings makes little sense. Before one can agree or disagree with women's rights one must have a conception of what a right is; as Plato and Aristotle had no such conception, attempting to put their ancient views into modern

terminology is pointless. When Plato and Aristotle are analyzed in terms of feminism both fare badly, but such criticism is unfair; we are judging them by criteria that did not exist in their time. Second, many seem to read Plato and Aristotle with a preformed agenda that both have only negative views of women and fail to pay attention to what is actually stated. A careful examination of Plato's and Aristotle's work, however, proves that both philosophers held nuanced views of women's natures and capacities, and this dissertation aims to do exactly that: carefully analyze what Plato and Aristotle actually wrote and how this fits into their larger theories and the society they lived in.

## Chapter One

The most appropriate place to begin investigating the role of women in Plato's ideal state is the *Republic*, a text dedicated to the ideal state itself. In Book V of Plato's *Republic*, Plato addresses this question indirectly by advocating the inclusion of women into the elite class of Guardians. It is addressed indirectly for the Guardian class is comprised of only the most excellent individuals and Plato does not seek to determine the ideal role for all women in the state. Since we can only deduce what Plato thought the role of women would be in his ideal state from the comments he does make concerning women, this chapter will undertake a detailed examination of his proposal to elevate qualified women to the rank of Guardian. Many claim that Plato's demand for equality in the Guardian class is insincere and are



skeptical about the genuineness and breadth of his proposals. If this claim were true then we can barely state that Plato gave any serious attention to women's role in his state but, as I will argue, this is not the case. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that Plato is serious in his proposal by providing evidence to support this conclusion throughout the *Republic* as well other dialogues, and that there is no such thing as an ideal role for women as such in Plato's state.

## I.

No one can deny that Plato makes many derogatory remarks on the subject of women in the *Republic* as well as in various other dialogues,<sup>1</sup> but whenever Plato makes such a remark, he never uses women's nature as the explanation of why they act in the way he is critical of. In the Greek literary tradition of Plato's time, women were condemned due to their *phusis* (nature).<sup>2</sup> While Plato does use *phusis* and its cognates throughout many dialogues, in none of them does Plato use *phusis* as the reason for why he is critical of women. When discussing women in Athens, Plato offers generic criticism of how women behave, but when it comes to women in his ideal city who will be raised under ideal circumstances, Plato differs from the poets by judging women by the quality of their soul. If Plato thought that the ways women did not behave well were incurable, he would say women

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<sup>1</sup> *Phaedo* 60a4-5, *Apology* 35b *Timaeus* 563b7-9, *Republic* 549c-550b, 550d, 557c, 563b-d, and 579b-c.

<sup>2</sup> Levin 1996, 21

acted the way they did due to their nature.<sup>3</sup> If we do as Levin suggests though, and:

[E]valuate Plato's derogatory comments with the distinction between current (or less than optimal) and ideal circumstances in mind, those remarks need not, and in fact cannot, count against the view that he seriously intends the proposal concerning women's equality.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Plato's derogatory remarks towards women do not detract from his support for his proposal since the women he speaks poorly of are almost a different species of women from the ones he will make equal in his ideal state. The women in his ideal state will be judged by the quality of their souls, and those who are qualified to become Guardians will be rigorously educated. If Plato condemned women for their nature, then the discussion of the role of women in the ideal city would be brief and we would be forced to conclude that Plato did not make his proposals in *Republic V* seriously. If women were by nature incapable of ruling over their emotions and base desires, then not even Plato's rigorous education system could overcome their inferior *phusis*. But, since women are not by nature incapable of governing their emotions, they can be taught to do so, and one can be confident that Plato thought his education system up to the challenge.

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<sup>3</sup> Levin 1996, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Levin 1996, 24.

Levin conducts a detailed study of passages that use words such as *gune*<sup>5</sup> and *thelus*<sup>6</sup> versus *phusis* in dialogues up to and including the *Republic*, and observes that when derogatory comments appear, feminine behavior is explained as the cause for the criticism rather than woman's nature. By cross-referencing passages for words featuring *gune* and *thelus* as well as *phusis* and its cognates, Levin concludes that when these two terms are found in close proximity to each other they can be broken down into three types. In group one,<sup>7</sup> Plato's attitude towards women is neutral. He offers neither praise nor criticism, and but for one exception, *phusis* and its cognates are not utilized; the exception where we do see *phusis* near 'women' arises in a context not strictly related to women.<sup>8</sup> This case occurs in the *Symposium* at 189d-e when Aristophanes states that human *phusis* differs from the original human *phusis* as the original had three kinds of natures.<sup>9</sup> The first kind was androgynous and contained male and female components.<sup>10</sup> Considering that this speech is poetic in nature, a type of myth and not from the voice of Socrates or his account of

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<sup>5</sup> Woman as well as wife.

<sup>6</sup> The adjective "feminine."

<sup>7</sup> Passages in this group include: *Prot*, 325a6-b2, *Menex* 237d4-238a5; *Symp* 191a5-b4, 191c4-d3, 206c4-5, *Rep* 324e7-424a8, 451c2-6, and 620c2

<sup>8</sup> Levin 1996, 25.

<sup>9</sup> These natures will be explained in greater detail later in the chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Levin 1996, 25.

*eros*, Levin is correct that this use of *phusis* is not relevant to female nature.<sup>11</sup>

The second group of passages which concern women are negative in tone. When the assessments of women are negative, however, *phusis* and its cognates are rarely near the passage in question.<sup>12</sup> The one time it is, however, at 579b4-8, has no relation to the question of women's nature. While discussing the soul of tyrannical man Plato writes "He alone can never travel abroad to attend the great festivals which every freeman wants to witness, but must live like a woman ensconced in the recesses of his house."<sup>13</sup> Barring this exception, one would expect that if Plato thought women were by nature inferior, he would have taken the opportunity to say so while characterizing them negatively.<sup>14</sup> A particularly compelling example of this argument can be found in the opening of the *Phaedo* where Socrates attributes his wife Xanthippe's emotional reaction to habit, saying that her emotional exclamations are "just the sorts of things which women are accustomed to say."<sup>15</sup> With the exception of 620c where Plato does discuss women's *phusis*<sup>16</sup>, none of the passages

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<sup>11</sup> The next chapter, however, will look more carefully at speeches in the *Symposium* which are from characters other than Socrates.

<sup>12</sup> Examples include: *Apology* 35b, *Phaedo* 60a, *Republic* 387e-388a, 550d, 557c, 605d-e.

<sup>13</sup> *Republic* 579b4-8.

<sup>14</sup> Levin 1996, 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Phaedo* 60a4-5.

<sup>16</sup> I will go into greater detail concerning this passage later in the chapter.

in the first two groups (neutral and negative) discusses women in relation to their *phusis*. In the third group where women and *phusis* are found close together, Plato does not provide a clear and direct answer. Rather, Plato uses this as the beginning of the discussion that I will examine: "Whether female human nature is capable of sharing with the male all tasks or none at all, or some but not others."<sup>17</sup> When Plato's full attention is focused on the subject of women's nature, his comments oppose the current attitudes towards women. Instead, he argues that the current state of women goes against what is natural<sup>18</sup> and begins to reflect upon women as they would be under ideal circumstances, when people are evaluated on the quality of their souls and are educated accordingly.<sup>19</sup>

The positive comments concerning women's nature do not only occur in Book V, the Book where women's equality is the most relevant. At the close of Book VII Plato finishes his discussion of the education plan for the philosopher-rulers and writes, "You must not forget that some of them will be women. All I have been saying applies just as much to any women who are found to have the necessary gifts".<sup>20</sup> This comment is unexpected for women do not feature strongly in Book VII. Book VII is famous for its allegory of the Cave

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<sup>17</sup> *Republic* 452e-453a.

<sup>18</sup> *Republic* 456c1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Levin 1996, 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Republic* 540c.

and the education of the philosopher-rulers, so discussing women in this Book is not necessary and their exclusion would not raise questions. Instead, Plato abruptly brings women into the discussion to ensure they are not excluded from the rank of philosopher-ruler. The fact that Plato does so suggests that he takes the proposal of women becoming philosopher-rulers seriously.

If a woman in Plato's ideal state did not have the soul to qualify for Guardianship, she still came out ahead of Athenian women, for every child in the ideal city has a better upbringing. In Book II, when Plato discusses the early education of the Guardians, some of the passages also apply to all children born in the state. Plato's quarrel with the poets goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, but in brief he criticizes poetry for setting examples of how to behave that are far from virtuous or worthy of imitation. Plato writes:

Then we must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We'll select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren't. And we'll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the ones we have selected, since they will shape their children's souls with stories.<sup>21</sup>

Whether or not Plato is correct as to whether poetry has such a profound effect on the moral education of children, for our purposes it is only important that Plato clearly believes poetry can influence us in such a way. Thus, if certain tales are not told to any children, then all

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<sup>21</sup> *Republic* 377b-c.

people in the ideal city will have a stronger moral core than the Athenians. A woman who is not a Guardian will still be in more control of her emotions than an Athenian woman, for in the ideal state she is not exposed to bad influences which might cause her to act in an undignified manner. Plato continues, "Such then...are the kinds of stories that I think future guardians should and should not hear about the gods from childhood on, if they are to honor the gods and their parents."<sup>22</sup> According to this passage, a girl raised in the ideal city will honor her parents and others more so than in Athens, so it is not an intellectual leap to conclude that all women will be better in the ideal state. Not all women will be Guardians, but the womanish behavior that Plato berates people for demonstrating will not be tolerated in his state and children will be raised from birth not to behave in such ways. By way of discussing what is and is not appropriate for children to hear, Socrates concludes, "by the dog, without being aware of it, we've been purifying the city we recently said was luxurious."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, without the excesses that cause moral decay, all people in the ideal city are morally superior to their Athenian counterparts. It is true that Plato never explicitly discusses the position of women outside the Guardian class, but for reasons that will be discussed later in the chapter, it does not make sense for Plato to keep women secluded in

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<sup>22</sup> *Republic* 386a.

<sup>23</sup> *Republic* 399e.

their homes.

It is important to note that many of the most negative comments regarding women are in Books VIII and IX, the books where Plato describes the degenerate types of states and souls, and the extent to which they differ from the ideal.<sup>24</sup> In these sections Plato is particularly harsh towards women due to the fact that the spirited and appetitive elements govern their soul rather than reason.<sup>25</sup> One must also note though that Plato is equally as critical of men for having the same misrule in the soul. Moreover, there are many opportunities where Plato has the chance to comprehensively condemn contemporary Athenian women but he does not.<sup>26</sup> Take for example Socrates' statement:

We shall do well, then, to strike out descriptions of heroes bewailing the dead, and make over such lamentations to women (and not to women of good standing either) and to men of low character, so that the Guardians we are training for our country may disdain to imitate them.<sup>27</sup>

While Plato is undeniably harsh in his criticisms of women, Plato is critical of everyone in contemporary society. Rather than seeing Plato as criticizing women for being ruled by their emotions, we should see Plato's main concern as worrying that all people are ruled by their emotions and appetites.

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<sup>24</sup> *Republic* 549c-550b, 557c, 563b-d, and 579b-c.

<sup>25</sup> *Republic* 387e-388s, 431b-c, 469d, 549d, 549c-550b, and 550d.

<sup>26</sup> Levin, Susan 1996, 24.

<sup>27</sup> *Republic* 388a.



Another quote which benefits from Levin's claim that we must differentiate between times when Plato is remarking on women in Classical Athens as opposed to the ideal city occurs when Socrates asks:

Do you know of anything practiced by human beings in which the male sex isn't superior to the female in all these ways? Or must we make a long story of it by mentioning weaving, baking cakes, and cooking vegetables, in which the female sex is believed to excel and in which it is most ridiculous of all for it to be inferior?<sup>28</sup>

In this instance Plato clearly references women as they were in his society, and due to the conditions that women in ancient Athens lived in, it was highly unlikely any of his interlocutors would disagree. In regard to his reference to men's ability with housework, I believe we can understand this comment as an attempt to illustrate his point rather than a further indictment against women's capacities. Plato's next comment, "It's true that one sex is much superior to the other in pretty well everything, although many women are better than many men in many things. But on the whole it is as you say,"<sup>29</sup> is more positive than it appears at first glance. Even though he qualifies the "many women are better than many men in many things" with "But on the whole it is as you say," Plato's positivity in this passage goes even further than Levin's argument. In this statement

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<sup>28</sup> *Republic* 455c.

<sup>29</sup> *Republic* 455d.

Plato is not referring to women as they might be but women as they are, women in his very own society. Admittedly when Plato says "many women are better than many men in many things," he possibly refers to the domestic arts, but it is still a statement in favor of women in present circumstances. I doubt Plato had any grand capabilities in mind when he states that many women are better at "many things," but it is interesting that he does not qualify the "many things." If women were by nature inferior to men, then it would stand that men should be superior to women in every respect.

## **II.**

The relation of the body and the soul is of the utmost importance to this chapter since the answer will determine whether Plato seriously intends his proposals regarding women in *Republic V*. If one's biological characteristics influence the quality of one's soul, then one can say that Plato is not committed to making qualified women Guardians. Such a conclusion can be reached for if the quality of one's soul can be determined by physical characteristics such as sex, then it can be argued that the biological characteristic of being a woman indicates an inferior soul. If being a woman is a sign of a lesser soul, then it is unlikely that any woman would ever have the requisite nature to become a Guardian. However, should the body and the soul have a minimal connection, and more specifically, should biological

features be unable to indicate the type of soul one has, then we can conclude Plato deems that certain women can have the soul worthy to become a Guardian. Of course, Plato can claim in the *Republic* that due to physical reasons it is more difficult for women to be rational, but when they are, they are as fit as rational men. I do not think this is what Plato intends, but this question will be addressed in greater detail later in the chapter.

The question of whether one's physical or biological attributes are relevant to the caliber of one's *psuche* is appropriately discussed in *Republic V*. Plato writes:

We have been strenuously insisting on the letter of our principle that different natures should not have the same occupations, as if we were scoring a point in a debate; but we have altogether neglected to consider what sort of sameness or difference we meant and in what respect these natures and occupations were to be defined as different or the same. Consequently, we might very well be asking one another whether there is not an opposition between bald and long-haired men, and, when that was admitted, forbid one set to be shoemakers, if the other were following that trade.<sup>30</sup>

Undoubtedly this example acts as a metaphor for the forthcoming discourse, but beginning the discussion with the distinction between bald and long-haired men is clever; an interlocutor would be hard pressed to say there was a qualified difference in the soul of a bald person and a long-haired person vis-a-vis shoemaking by the virtue of their hair alone, for some of Plato's metaphors are more obscure.

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<sup>30</sup> *Republic* 454d.

Plato has already declared the premise that one's ability to practice a certain *techne*<sup>31</sup> is based on the caliber of one's soul, so now is the appropriate time to determine whether biological and physical features influence or even determine the quality of their souls.<sup>32</sup> According to this passage, Plato recognizes that while they have been focusing on the principle that people with the same natures should pursue the same occupations, he has been remiss in not stating clearly what constitutes this sameness in significant respects. By providing the example of the bald man, Plato frames the question of sameness and difference in terms of physical and biological traits. As we see with the hair example, purely biological differences are not reason enough to make a qualitative opinion as to the condition of one's soul.

Now that the discussion has been framed, the question we must address is what can the biological differences between men and women in their reproductive functions tell us about the quality of their souls? Reproductive theories at the time held that there was a correlation between reproduction and the quality of one's mind, and this worked against women,<sup>33</sup> for women's role in reproduction was thought of as passive and indicated a lesser kind of soul. Plato, however, takes a different view and writes:

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<sup>31</sup> Craft, art, or skill.

<sup>32</sup> Levin 1996, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Mayhew 2004, 113.

If the male sex is seen to be different from the female with regard to a particular craft or way of life, we'll say that the relevant one must be assigned to it. But if it's apparent that they differ only in this respect, that the females bear children while the male begets them, we'll say there has been no kind of proof that women are different from men with respect to what we're talking about, and we'll continue to believe that our guardians and their wives must have the same way of life.<sup>34</sup>

The passage begins by reiterating the principle by which all decisions must be made in light of: one must do the job which one is suited to do by nature, so if one sex is better at one job than the other, the sex that is more suited to the job ought to perform it. If the only difference between men and women is biological in nature, and for our purpose here that "the male begets and the female brings forth," then Plato has explained why women cannot be excluded from the Guardian rank due to sex alone. The popular view that women's role in the reproductive process is a sign of the type of soul women possess is not even acknowledged. Plato makes no mention of any physical process that signifies the quality of one's soul, for as we have seen with the example of the bald-headed man, there is none. What makes Plato's omission of a correlation between reproductive roles and the soul more important than the cobbler example, however, is that reproductive roles are a far greater biological difference and importance than hair. By discussing the reproductive roles in such neutral terms as "beget" and "bring forth," we do not even see an acknowledgment that

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<sup>34</sup> *Republic* 454d-e.

one might think that reproductive roles reveal the type of soul one has. Whatever doubts or questions Plato may have had concerning biological differences between men and women, he did not let these doubts overshadow his principle conviction that if people are judged on the quality of their souls then there is no reason that women and men are not capable of the same level of philosophical ability.

This section has demonstrated why we cannot determine the quality of one's soul due to one's sex, but the next section will take this a step farther and argue that the soul itself is sexless. I will reveal how Plato's dualist conception of the mind and body proves that his intent for qualified women becoming Guardians is sincere, for as Smith states "the reason it is unnatural to discriminate on the basis of sex in such cases is that the nature involved (the soul) is sexless."<sup>35</sup> The Myth of Er is where the argument shall begin.

### **III.**

The use of myth in Platonic dialogues is a dissertation in and of itself. While this project will be unable to go into Plato's use of *mythos* too deeply, it will look at Plato's Myth of Er and how it relates to women's roles in the ideal city. In this section I demonstrate that due to Platonic dualism and the disassociation between the body and the soul as discussed in the previous chapter, the quality of one's soul

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, N 1983, 473.

cannot be judged by sex alone. As we shall see in the Myth of Er the soul is sexless, thereby making any claims about one's soul due to one's sex false.

To summarize the plot, the myth concerns the man Er who perishes in battle. Two days after his death he is resurrected and tells a tale of the cosmos and what he observed on his journey in the afterlife. My examination begins when souls from the heavens and souls from the earth meet in a field and are organized into rows and given lottery tokens. The Speaker tells the souls:

[T]his is the beginning of another cycle that will end in death. Your daemon or guardian spirit will not be assigned to you by lot; you will choose him. The one who has the first lot will be the first to choose a life to which he will be bound by necessity. Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or less degree, depending on whether he values or distains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none.<sup>36</sup>

The point emphasized is that there is no predestination and every soul has the opportunity to determine what sort of life it wishes to lead. The Interpreter then lays before the souls many lives, and importantly as we shall see later, there are more lives than there are souls. Every sort of life is presented ranging from the famous and infamous to the unknown. The text focuses on examples that would have strongly resonated with the ancient reader such as despots, some of whom lived their lives and died while still in power and others who were

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<sup>36</sup> *Republic* 617d-e.

ruined and met tragic ends. Some lives would become famous for their beauty, talents, or high birth, but of course there were a great many undistinguished lives of men and women.

The next statement discusses a key concept: the disconnection between the body and the soul and the soul's superiority over the body. Plato writes:

But the arrangement of the soul was not included in the model because the soul is inevitably altered by the different lives it chooses. But all other things were there, mixed with each other and with wealth, poverty, sickness, health, and the states intermediate to them.<sup>37</sup>

This comment demonstrates how the soul is independent of the body, for the soul determines which body it will inhabit. Not only does the soul determine its body for this life, but the soul makes this choice over and over again. The sex of the body is not a determinant as to the quality of the soul as Plato writes "But the arrangement of the soul was not included in the model because the soul is inevitably altered by the different lives it chooses." This statement entails that the models of the lives do not predestine the ethical characters of the souls that will live those lives, for one's soul will acquire ethical character from living that life, and hence cannot be fully determined beforehand. Influence, then, is mutual: the soul chooses a next life, including the body, but is then affected by the choices it makes during that life.

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<sup>37</sup> *Republic* 618b.



The Interpreter then states "There is a satisfactory life rather than a bad one available even for the one who comes last, provided that he chooses it rationally and lives it seriously Therefore, let not the first be careless in his choice nor the last discouraged."<sup>38</sup> Here again we see evidence that the sex of the body does not correlate to the quality of the soul, for if the last soul's best option is a fourth-century Athenian housewife, according to Plato it is still possible for this soul to lead a good life. Had this soul had a better lottery token, then it could have been in the body of a legendary hero or infamous tyrant. The element of chance shows how the body that one ends up in is part choice and part luck, but that there is no body that cannot house a virtuous soul. It must be noted, however, that while one can determine the body one inhabits, that body's life will still be subject to the social conventions of its time. So even if a soul selects the body of a woman with great intelligence, it is unlikely that her wisdom will be appreciated by the men of her time.<sup>39</sup>

According to the myth, souls that had previously been in heaven tended to pick evil lives for they were not disciplined by the experience of earthly life, while souls newly arrived from earth were more likely to make a more careful choice. Plato explains:

Because of this and because of the chance of the lottery, there

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<sup>38</sup> *Republic* 619b.

<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that the thesis that lesser souls tend to pick female lives is never ruled out.

was an interchange of goods and evils for most of the souls. However, if someone pursues philosophy in a sound manner when he comes to live here on earth and if the lottery doesn't make him one of the last to choose...it looks as though not only will he be happy here, but his journey from here to there and back again won't be along the rough underground path, but along the smooth heavenly one.<sup>40</sup>

This passage reveals that we cannot deem a soul that chooses to be in a woman's body as a lesser soul. We must keep in mind that perhaps choosing the role of a woman was the least objectionable life available or maybe that life was exactly what the soul was seeking. Take for example the life of a slave girl as opposed to the life of a wealthy Athenian male. On a superficial glance the life of the privileged male appears as the better choice, but as the myth has shown us a body does not give us a clue as to the soul inside. Perhaps this man's life will be dominated by violence and cruelty, he will become a murderer and a thief who uses his money and status to hide his crimes until he is eventually caught and is miserable in soul and circumstances. Take then the life of a slave girl, her life may be one of toil and little pleasure, but it may also be a life of contented simplicity. We see the desire for a simple life with Odysseus. We are told that in the lottery witnessed by Er, Odysseus' token came last. Plato writes:

It chanced that the soul of Odysseus got to make its choice last of all, and since memory of its former sufferings had relieved its love of honor, it went around for a long time, looking for the life of a private individual who did his own work, and with difficulty it found one lying off somewhere neglected by the others. He

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<sup>40</sup> *Republic* 619d-e.

chose it gladly and said that he'd have made the same choice even if he'd been first. Still other souls changed from animals into human beings, or from one kind of animal into another.<sup>41</sup>

Odysseus is an example of one who has not forgotten the lessons from his previous life and made his decision with wisdom. Though he will not lead a glamorous life, Odysseus is careful enough to recollect that his soul has had enough ambition and has learned its lesson. In Plato's account we find echoes of the modern cliché "don't judge a book by its cover;" for all one knows the bird one sees houses the soul of Achilles. We can never know why a soul chose the life it did, for before the soul returns to earth it must drink from the River of Unmindfulness which causes the soul to forget all that has passed.

Plato demonstrates that as long as one is not very unlucky in the body one's soul is encased in and as long as one lives virtuously, one is likely to find happiness in this life as well as the next. Plato writes "Er said that the way in which the souls chose their lives was a sight worth seeing, since it was pitiful, funny, and surprising to watch. For the most part, their choice depended upon the character of their former life."<sup>42</sup> What this entails is that if one lives the best life possible in every life one has, then one can be happy in every life without qualification of any sort for sex. A vegetarian<sup>43</sup> might even see

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<sup>41</sup> *Republic* 620c-d.

<sup>42</sup> *Republic* 620a.

<sup>43</sup> The Pythagoreans were vegetarians. Huffman, Carl, "Pythagoras", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

justification for vegetarianism in this myth or at least justification for treating animals humanely, though no doubt this is not what Plato intended. Instead, what Plato did intend was to show that the body acts as a shell or container, but to judge one's soul based on the sex of the container makes no sense.

In order to demonstrate the disassociation between the soul and the body it is housed in, Plato gives us many examples such as Orpheus who 'hated the female sex because of his death at their hands, and so was unwilling to have a woman conceive and give birth to him,"<sup>44</sup> and "the soul of Thamyras choosing the life of a nightingale, a swan choosing to be changed over to a human life, and other musical animals doing the same thing."<sup>45</sup> The two examples most relevant to this chapter, however, are those of Atalanta and Odysseus. Plato writes "Atalanta had been assigned a place near the middle, and when she saw great honors being assigned to a male athlete, she chose his life, unable to pass them by."<sup>46</sup> His choice of Atalanta is significant for she is hardly a typical Athenian woman. Atalanta, often considered a goddess, grew up in the wild and was an acknowledged fierce hunter. Her interest in picking the body of an athlete is unsurprising due to the way her previous life was affected by running.

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<sup>44</sup> *Republic* 620a.

<sup>45</sup> *Republic* 620a.

<sup>46</sup> *Republic* 620b.

According to the myth Atalanta had no desire to marry, so when her father attempted to force her into marriage she agreed but with one condition, she would only marry if one of her proposed suitors could best her in a race. Her father conceded and for a time Atalanta appeared safe for her suitors were put to death after she won the race. Her luck changed when Melanion sought the aid of Aphrodite who gave him three irresistible apples. When racing, every time Atalanta took the lead over Melanion he would roll an apple in another direction and she could not help but chase after it. This was how Melanion came to win her hand in marriage, and though this is speculation, one can imagine she was peeved at this result. Plato's choice of Atalanta as the only soul who we are specifically told has resided in a female body in the Myth of Er highlights positions already discussed. Here, we are given an explicit example of a soul that was once housed in a female body becoming housed in a male body - and not just any male body, but one that will be honored for his talent. But Plato did not have to include a woman to demonstrate how the souls change body, for a man becoming a swan and a swan becoming a man is a far stronger example of this principle than a woman becoming a man. What is of interest, however, is that Plato could have chosen any woman from all of Greek mythology, so why Atalanta?

It could be coincidence that female Guardians and Atalanta

appear in the *Republic*, for they do admittedly appear in different books. But, if Plato is serious in his claim that women can become Guardians, there is no better woman to use as an example in the Myth of Er than Atalanta. She is in many respects an ideal Guardian. The myth speaks of her virtue and physical skill, and while there is no specific mention of her wisdom, there are enough tales of her holding her own alongside men that there is no reason to suppose she was not equally sharp in mind.<sup>47</sup> Regrettably, there is no way to know why Plato chose Atalanta for this myth, but we would be justified in supposing that if he wanted to use an example that included a soul who wanted to become an athlete, then Atalanta is a perfect choice. No matter what motivated Plato's choice of Atalanta and even if he did not have her in mind as one who in different circumstances could have become a Guardian, on every interpretation her inclusion demonstrates that a soul once housed in a female body can also be a great male athlete. Had Plato not been serious in his proposal, he had a myriad of women in Greek mythology who were not famous for their control over their emotions or proportional responses. He could have picked any character from mythology famous for irrationality and had her pick the life of a baseless scoundrel.

Atalanta not only represents the potential that women

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<sup>47</sup> Though admittedly her wisdom failed her when it came to the apples.

have to become Guardians, but in a way she also represents the struggle that women face in their current lives to live up to their potential. Though Atalanta has the spirit and the skill of a Guardian, the circumstances of being a woman in ancient Greek society cause her to lose her freedom. Atalanta has no wish to marry but is forced to by her father, an occurrence any Athenian girl would face. Though I will not argue that Atalanta is the inspiration for women entering the rank of Guardian for there is no proof that this is the case, it is possible that Plato recognized Atalanta as a soul in a female body that with proper instruction could become a Guardian. Even if this was not done intentionally on his part, it underscores how with proper instruction women can become Guardians. How Atalanta's life resembles that of an Athenian woman's is that she also did not have control of her destiny nor did she grow up under ideal circumstances. Atalanta's end is a sad one, for the myth says that after marriage she allowed Melanion to seduce her in the temple of Zeus, and having so angered Zeus he turned them into lions, for it was then thought that lions could only mate with leopards thereby preventing them from mating again. Had Atalanta's soul been brought up under ideal circumstances, it is likely she would not have given into lust.

It is possible that Plato thought there might be girls like Atalanta in ancient Athens, but that due to the influence of human institutions

and conventions they were physically and intellectually stunted.

Gregory Vlastos writes:

We should recall here his vivid sense of the power of a corrupt society to pervert the heart and conversely the power of education to improve moral character. Putting into context those woman-denigrating remarks, we can understand them as voicing what Plato thinks most Athenian women grow up to be in their present habitat, the domestic ghetto, which stunts them intellectually and warps them morally.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, part of the reason why Athenian women were susceptible to Plato's less than complimentary remarks is due to the social institutions of Athens, but as Vlastos notes, Plato is not one to pay too much credence to cultural or popular values; he is aware of the damage that a "corrupt society" has on the soul and recognizes that once these influences are removed, women like Atalanta will appear.

One factor that many philosophers fail to consider is that not all women that Athenian men came into contact with were sequestered house wives, though even house wives had far greater responsibility and management skills than they are credited for. In Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* the husband Ischomachus gives detailed instructions to his young bride as to how she is to manage his estate. In it he gives specific instructions for ruling and training slaves, housekeeping, and farming technology. These topics are hardly suitable for one with little

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<sup>48</sup> Vlastos 1989, 25.



intellect. Instead, the *Oikonomikos* presents a picture of the Athenian wife as a competent manager of a large estate. We must also pay close attention to Aspasia, a *hetairai*, or high-class courtesan for we know that Plato knew of her as she is mentioned in the *Menexenus*.

Plato writes:

But I was listening only yesterday to Aspasia going through a funeral speech for these very people. For she had heard the report you mention, that the Athenians are going to select the speaker; and thereupon she rehearsed to me the speech in the form it should take, extemporizing in part, while other parts she had previously prepared, as I imagine, at the time when she was composing the funeral oration which Pericles delivered; and from this she patched together sundry fragments.<sup>49</sup>

*Hetaera* led significantly different lives than Athenian wives in that they were educated to discuss philosophy with their male clients, learned the economic and management skills necessary to run their own brothel, they were independent, and paid taxes. As a non-Athenian and a *hetairai*, Aspasia was freed from the law that kept Athenian wives secluded in their homes and was therefore able to participate in Athenian public life. Though her marital status is disputed, she was the mistress of Pericles and their house became the intellectual meeting point of Athens' most famous writers and philosophers, including Socrates.<sup>50</sup> According to Plutarch, Athenian men would bring their wives to hear her converse despite her immoral

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<sup>49</sup> *Menexenus* 236b.

<sup>50</sup> Adams 2007, 75–76.

lifestyle.<sup>51</sup> It is clear from the passage above that Plato had a very high opinion of Aspasia and we do not see a single criticism of her or her speech. It is not astounding then, that Plato imagined female Guardians, for he did encounter intelligent women and praised them.

Plato had good reason to believe that better social institutions produce better women, for there were examples of proficient women in Plato's own time. Women in Sparta did not live in ideal conditions, but the Spartan social institutions were so different from those in Classical Athens that it created different women. Unlike their Athenian counterparts, Spartan women were educated in the arts and athletics,<sup>52</sup> owned more than a third of the land in Sparta in their own right, dressed in shorter garments to allow more freedom of movement, raised their sons until the age of seven, and with the men often at war the women were free to take charge of all state affairs, with the exception of the military. It is highly unlikely that Plato was not influenced by Sparta's women when conceiving the female Guardians. If he harbored doubts that Athenian women were incapable of physical exertion or intellectual thought, he had only to look at Sparta to see that women who received training were capable. As long as Athenian wives remain in their current condition of little education and marriage at 14, it is unlikely that they will show traits

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<sup>51</sup> Plutarch, *Pericles* XXIV.

<sup>52</sup> *Republic* 452c

that Atalanta or Aspasia possess. But, if Athenian girls were raised under ideal circumstances, it seems like much less of a leap to think that women could become Guardians.

One very important social institution which would be changed in the ideal city is that female Guardians are not responsible for raising their children. The result is that minus the actual process of giving birth, the female leads the exact same life as the male Guardian. Plato writes:

As the children are born, they'll be taken over by the officials appointed for the purpose, who may be either men or women or both, since our offices are open to both sexes...And won't the nurses also see to it that the mothers are brought to the rearing pen when their breasts have milk, taking every precaution to insure that no mother knows her own child and providing wet nurses if the mother's milk is insufficient? And won't they take care that the mothers suckle the children for only a reasonable amount of time and that the care of sleepless children and all other such troublesome duties are taken over by the wet nurses and other attendants?<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, on Plato's view, giving birth is more of a purely physical process than emotional, for once the children are born there is no sense that the female Guardians will feel any loss or desire to raise a child. In the passage above, giving birth is depicted as a routine physical process; there are no mentions of emotions, irrationality, or sadness at not knowing one's child. This is vital since giving birth is the main distinction between male and female Guardians. If giving

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<sup>53</sup> *Republic* 460b-d.

birth affected the rationality of a female Guardian, or in some essential way changed her nature, then female Guardians would be significantly different from male Guardians. But, if childbirth is just a physical process and it does not change the nature of the emotions of the female Guardian, then there is no fundamental way in which male and female Guardians are distinct.

#### IV.

The *Republic* is not the only text where the soul's sexless nature is seen, for despite the negative comments about women during the stage-setting,<sup>54</sup> the *Phaedo* champions this view. The *Phaedo* is set during Socrates' final moments before his death as he discusses the Forms and the immortality of the soul. It is not surprising that in a dialogue where death is the climax, Plato's dualism is more central than in any other dialogue. When discussing the soul's immortality, and more specifically recollection, Plato considers the relation between the soul and the body.<sup>55</sup> In his account of recollection Plato writes, "Our souls also existed apart from the body before they took on human form, and they had intelligence."<sup>56</sup> In other words, before a

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<sup>54</sup> Plato asks for his wife to be removed from his room so her crying will not disturb him. Plato writes that Socrates' wife Xanthippe "broke out and said just the kind of things that women are given to saying: 'So this is the very last time, Socrates, that your good friends will speak to you and you to them.' At which Socrates looked to Crito and said: 'Crito, someone had better take her home.' So she was taken away by some of Crito's people, calling out and lamenting." (60a).

<sup>55</sup> Levin 1996, 28.

<sup>56</sup> *Phaedo* 76c.

soul becomes encased in a human body, the soul has intelligence.

One of the core philosophical points of the text is how practicing philosophy is in actuality preparation for death. Plato explains this by describing the nature of the soul and writes, "So the soul is more like the invisible than the body, and the body more like the visible?"<sup>57</sup> By the invisible he is referring to the Forms and concepts such as sameness, difference and number whereas the body is more akin to the physical world of visible objects. He continues and writes, "The soul is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same."<sup>58</sup> If we apply what Plato writes about the soul in this passage to the discussion of whether one can determine the quality of one's soul according to one's sex, we have further proof that the soul has little correlation with the body; if the soul has qualities such as divinity and constancy then the question of sex becomes relatively minor.

In a certain sense it is more accurate to look at the myth in the *Phaedo* than the Myth of Er, for the Myth of Er differs from all other Platonic myths in how much choice the soul has in determining its next life. In the other myths, and probably closer to Plato's thought,

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<sup>57</sup> *Phaedo* 79c.

<sup>58</sup> *Phaedo* 80b.

the next body a soul inhabits will be determined by one's lifestyle in one's previous life. While there is a certain amount of choice in every myth, there is much more preordination in the *Phaedo* for the soul is an extension of the behavior that influenced its lifestyle. Consequently, if the soul is influenced by the lifestyle it led in its previous life, the souls housed in Athenian women will have a more difficult time improving the quality of their souls. If social institutions remain as they are, the souls in Athenian wives will have greater difficulty improving and will slowly become corrupt. If the lifestyle of the body can influence the quality of the soul, then it is unsurprising that Plato's ideal state is so strictly run. On his view, all souls will improve from his education system, ban of inappropriate poetry and music, and life under the rule of the wise Guardians.

#### **V.**

If we have any doubts as to Plato's sincerity in making certain women Guardians, his earnestness in the following statement proves that his first commitment when it comes to determining profession is based in nature rather than sex. Plato writes:

We'll say, I suppose, that one woman is a doctor, another not, and that one is musical by nature, another not...And, therefore, won't one be athletic or warlike, while another is unwarlike and no lover of physical training? Further, isn't one woman philosophical or a lover of wisdom, while another hates wisdom? And isn't one spirited and another spiritless...So one woman may have a guardian nature and another not, for wasn't it qualities of this sort that we looked for in the natures of the men we

selected as Guardians...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.<sup>59</sup>

In this passage we see that men and women having the same abilities is not only limited to the Guardian class, but also that this principle applies to *technai* such as medicine and music. Plato's final caveat in the passage above is not as problematic as many think. Plato issues a similar statement when he declares "various natures are distributed in the same way in both creatures. Women share by nature in every way of life just as men do, but in all of them women are weaker than men."<sup>60</sup> Claiming that women are weaker may not sound right to the modern ear, but it cannot be denied that Plato is in a sense correct. Modern athletics recognize that men are physically stronger than women, and accordingly do not let them compete against each other as it is unfair. A female athlete will be stronger than a physically inactive male and perhaps even stronger than some male athletes; physiologically though, most men are stronger. We should in no way conclude that women cannot be strong warriors and effective in battle, but only that they will acquire sufficient skills that will enable them to fight with and alongside men. It should also be remembered that while strength in battle is a crucial skill for a Guardian, for if the ideal state

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<sup>59</sup> *Republic* 455e-456a.

<sup>60</sup> *Republic* 455d.

is to continue it must be able to defend itself, it is by no means the most important. What marks the Guardian from the rest of society is his or her ability to practice philosophy and comprehend the Forms. Physical training may be difficult, but many citizens could undertake such training, while the philosophical training a Guardian endures is a trial only those with the best nature can survive.

Philosophers such as Julia Annas are correct that Plato's argument for making women Guardians is a utilitarian one, but this is not as negative as she assumes.<sup>61</sup> Yes, Plato was partly motivated to include women into the rank of Guardian in order to widen the pool of candidates, but this is not the only reason. More importantly, Plato is only interested in how *anybody* can be of use to the state. His argument is partly utilitarian, but it is equally utilitarian to both men and women; everyone is raised to serve the state to his or her best ability and no one is released from that duty. In addition, Plato does not see service to the state, or as Annas terms it "usefulness," as some manner of servitude.<sup>62</sup> To Plato there is no profession more honorable than to serve the ideal state, and Annas fails to grasp the sense of civic duty that Guardians will feel towards it. Annas also reproaches Plato by claiming that even if a woman did not wish to

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<sup>61</sup> Annas 1996, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Annas 1996, 8.



serve the city, Plato's system would coerce her to.<sup>63</sup> But, if Plato believes people ought to be compelled to serve the state, then he would believe that men as well as women are to be equally compelled. It is improbable that anyone would be forced to become a Guardian for it seems certain that one who did not aspire to serve the state would not have the soul that would enable one to become a Guardian in the first place.<sup>64</sup> Guardians are by nature excellent and every single person of this rank must be of the highest caliber; a less than stellar Guardian is the downfall of the ideal state, so the women who will comprise the Guardian class must contribute equally. Nowhere in the *Republic* is there to be found any mention of female Guardians' contributions to the state as being any less valuable than that of their male counterparts.<sup>65</sup>

If what Annas is objecting to is how women in classes other than that of Guardian fare, then it is an equally unfair objection as the subject is never raised. If we are to speculate though, I assume Plato continues to uphold the principle that every person ought to pursue the activity to which they are suited to do by nature. There is no reason to think that Plato suddenly diverges from this fundamental

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<sup>63</sup> Annas 1996, 8.

<sup>64</sup> With the exception when trainee Guardians must be forced to return to the cave: "They must be made to climb the ascent to the vision of Goodness, which we called the highest object of knowledge; and, when they have looked upon it long enough, they must not be allowed, as they now are, to remain on the heights refusing to come down again to the prisoners or to take part in their labors and rewards," (520a).

<sup>65</sup> It is an acknowledged difficulty that all Guardians are forced to return to the cave.

principle when it came to the lower ranks of his ideal state. If a woman's nature suited her to practice medicine, then it makes little sense for Plato to waste her talent on a more domestic pursuit. Some women will remain in domestic labor, but it is possible that some men may be said to have natures suitable to such work as well. Plato is after a city which functions harmoniously, and the ideal city will run more smoothly when every citizen performs the function they are suited for. It is unlikely, therefore, that women are allowed to be idle all day and not occupied furthering the state. What is unclear is whether a female doctor would practice medicine equally well as a male doctor, but I believe we can assume so as we have already demonstrated how natures are irrelevant to a body's sex. None of this is certain, but as Plato has been uncompromising in his principle so far, we have no reason to think he suddenly becomes squeamish.

Annas does make a valid point when she writes that as soon as Plato stops thinking that the ideal state will ever exist in the *Republic*, he concurrently stops thinking women should perform the same functions as men. Annas writes "It comes as no surprise, then, that when Plato stops believing that the ideal state can be realized, he also stops thinking that women should do the same jobs as men."<sup>66</sup> Rather than see this as an indicator that Plato only endorses his proposals in

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<sup>66</sup> Annas 1996, 12.

*Republic V* on a whim, we should see that if the ideal state does not exist, then the principle that people should be judged by their nature also has no application. This argument provided the justification for how all of society functioned, not just women; as soon as this principle is no longer what determines people's roles in society, the entire ideal state collapses. Admittedly, once the ideal state ceases to exist we say farewell to female Guardians, but to say that this is the whole position is to miss the much larger one; unjust men will rule the state. Plato is unconcerned about what happens to women after the ideal state, for it was never his intent to examine women's role in society as it is. Instead, Book V demonstrates how the principle of judging people according to their nature will reveal that some women will have the nature of the Guardian and should partake in the ruling of the state.

## **VI.**

To return to the initial question of the ideal role of women in Plato's state, I hope to have demonstrated that while Plato does intend his proposal in Book V seriously, the ideal role of women in his state is whatever her nature deems her best suited to do. If we extend the principle that everyone should pursue what they are best suited to pursue by nature to include women, then a woman's role will be determined by her nature. As this chapter has shown, however, the sexless nature of the soul makes it impossible that a soul residing in a

female body is necessarily lesser than a soul in a male body.

## **Chapter Two**

When a large part of a dissertation on the role of women in Plato's ideal state then turns to investigate Plato's *Symposium*, the

natural conclusion one comes to is that the author intends to make an argument focusing on Diotima, Socrates' female teacher of *eros*. Diotima is a fascinating figure, especially for those attempting to discern Plato's attitudes towards women, for while Plato often laments the poor state of Athenian women, he gives a woman a supremely distinguished position. Diotima and her theory of *eros* have been thoroughly investigated in terms of how they apply to women, but my investigation will only briefly touch on Diotima before addressing the main reason for my examination: Plato and his attitudes towards pregnancy and giving birth, for men and women.<sup>67</sup> In the *Symposium*, a dialogue about Love, Diotima gives a detailed account of how men can be pregnant with ideas and give birth to true virtue. Intellectual pregnancy is clearly of great interest to Plato for the topic arises again in the *Theaetetus* where Socrates describes his role as a midwife of ideas. One may wonder what all this discussion of pregnancy and birth has to do with the role of women in the ideal state, but it is in fact of the greatest importance since in Book V of the *Republic* Plato claims that, besides women being physically weaker than men, the only difference between male and female Guardians is that women become pregnant and give birth. In Book V Plato explains that if men and

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<sup>67</sup> There is not a lack of articles on the *Symposium* and women but surprisingly few of these pay close attention to textual detail and therefore come up with rather odd ideas which bear little relation to any Platonic theory. Examples include: Julia Ward 1996 and Anne-Marie Bowery 1996.

women:

differ only in this respect, that the females bear children and while the males beget them, we'll say that there has been no kind of proof that women are different from men...and we'll continue to believe that our guardians and their wives must have the same way of life.<sup>68</sup>

I believe the proof that he fully supports this claim is seen by his discussions of pregnancy in the *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*, and *Laws* for in these dialogues Plato's writings on pregnancy range from high praise to pragmatic neutrality. The *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus* emphasize the virtues of male pregnancy and birth, while the *Laws* demonstrates that Plato views human pregnancy and birth as a bodily function that does not fundamentally alter the nature or rational capacity of the woman. By demonstrating that pregnancy is a purely biological function with no relation to rationality and that pregnancy does not change one's capacity to reason, Plato removes the greatest barrier women face in becoming Guardians.

Before we begin, however, I will take the opportunity to do some stage-setting as Plato does. The *Symposium*, often considered Plato's poetic and dramatic masterpiece, recounts a formal drinking party in honor of the tragedian Agathon after his first triumphant production. Phaedrus, a member of the party, laments the paltry treatment the subject *eros* receives, thereby giving the rest of the

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<sup>68</sup> *Republic* 454e.

party the idea to take turns orating speeches in honor of *eros*. There are six initial speeches with a seventh delivered by a drunken latecomer, but it is Socrates' speech that is most unusual since Plato has Socrates not provide his own account, but instead reports a discourse on *eros* he had with Diotima, a priestess from Mantinea. Diotima provides a description of the "final and highest mystery" of the "rites of love," though she doubts Socrates is capable of following her account.<sup>69</sup> In her discourse, one begins the ascent of *eros* by loving an individual and ends by loving the Form of the Beauty; she states the Beautiful "always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes" as well as that it is "not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another" but instead "just what it is to be beautiful."<sup>70</sup> We are lead to believe that the party occurred many years previously and that Apollodorus who recounts the symposium was not himself there that night.<sup>71</sup>

Another point we must clarify is how we are to understand the term 'Love', or in Greek '*eros*', both of which I shall use throughout

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<sup>69</sup> *Symposium* 210a.

<sup>70</sup> *Symposium* 211a.

<sup>71</sup> The *Symposium* itself is told as a story. The true narrator of the story is Apollodorus, a friend of Socrates who was not present the night of the party in question. Instead, Apollodorus heard it from Aristodemus who was in attendance. To increase the distance from the actual event, we learn that it occurred many years ago as Apollodorus explains he was not there as he was a child at the time. By the time we come to the tale then, not only was the party a very long time ago, but since Socrates was an old man when he told the symposiasts about Diotima's lessons and he learned them from her when he was a young man, Diotima's narration to Socrates took place long before that. Unfortunately, not only is time against us, but we hear Diotima's narration on a fourth telling: Diotima told Socrates, Socrates told the symposiasts including Aristodemus, Aristodemus told Apollodorus, and Apollodorus tells the readers.

the course of this chapter. In the *Symposium* *eros* has a quite specific usage. Here the emphasis is on the adult male's position as an intellectual and ethical educator of the teenage boy, which was customary among Athenians whether it was sexual or not. Though this concept may seem unusual to the modern reader it was common enough in Classical Athens that Plato does not feel it necessary to define *eros* further; the conception of *eros* discussed here includes sexual attraction, affection, and love between men and women and between men and adolescent boys.

### I.

What makes the *Symposium* interesting in terms of female Guardians is that while Plato does not address the issue of women's roles in this text, he does give a woman a position of prominence. Plato discusses women in the *Republic* because he has to; when discussing the ideal state he can hardly ignore half the population. In the *Symposium*, however, where the issue of sex and the role of women in the state is not addressed nor are women much discussed, we are presented with Diotima. According to the *Republic* we are to judge one by one's soul rather than one's sex, but that principle only exists in the ideal city. The *Symposium*, which takes place in contemporary Classical Athens, presents us with an opportunity to look at Plato's thoughts on a woman in a non-ideal state. We never



learn the specifics of her background, but we can be sure they are far from what Plato deems ideal. Plato does not only make her wise but in addition wiser than all the participants of the symposium, for Plato has her give the correct account of *eros* when all the men who preceded her could not.

Athenian females contributed to the welfare of the city by participating in a multitude of religious matters. In his play *The Captive Melanippe* Euripides writes:

And in divine affairs - I think this of the first importance -  
We have the greatest part. For at the oracle of Phoebus  
Women expound Apollo's will. At the holy seat of Dodona  
By the sacred oak the female race conveys  
The thoughts of Zeus to all Greeks who desire it.  
As for the holy rituals performed for the Fates  
And the nameless goddesses, these are not holy  
In men's hands; but among women they flourish,  
Everyone of them. Thus in holy service woman  
Plays the righteous role.

(*The Captive Melanippe*, frag.13, Page *Greek Literary Papyri* [420's B.C.E.?]: trans. Helene P. Foley.

This passage demonstrates not only that women played a part in religious life, but specifically that women could perform religious duties men were incapable of. Though women spent the majority of their lives in the domestic sphere women participated publicly in religion. Athena Polias, or "Athena of the city," the patron goddess of Athens and the chief priestess<sup>72</sup> held great power and influence. The priestess of Athena Polias was worshipped in Athens but also played a role in

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<sup>72</sup> The priestesshood of Athena Polias was passed down through the women of the Eteoboutadae family.

international politics. Herodotus provides us with proof of her power and prestige when he recounts that in 508 B.C. Cleomenes, the King of Sparta, endeavored to interfere in domestic Athenian politics by going against Cleisthenes, a popular reformer. As the Spartan King came to Athena Polias' shrine the priestess declared he could not enter since it was sacrilegious for a Dorian to come into the shrine (5.72).<sup>73</sup> Herodotus provides another example: in 480 B.C. the priestess agreed with the judgment to evacuate the city prior to the battle of Salamis and encouraged the citizens to comply by declaring that Athena's sacred snake had already left the acropolis.<sup>74</sup> It also should not be forgotten that Athena, the goddess of wisdom, was female.

In festivals such as the Panathenaea celebrated on the birthday of Athena Polias, both men and women participated but it was the young girls who played an especially important role. These girls, the *kanephoroi*, were virgins from aristocratic families and were given the responsibility and honor of carrying sacred baskets in the procession. Other festivals which both sexes participated in included the Lesser and Greater Mysteries which took place every year at Eleusis to pay tribute to Demeter and her daughter Kore. The Mysteries, which remained the most venerated cult till paganism ended, were associated with the cycles of the harvests and eventually became a

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<sup>73</sup> Fantham 1994, 93.

<sup>74</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 75.

metaphor for man's immortality. The Mysteries included two priestesses, *hierophantides*, and a group of priestesses known as *panageis* who lived in isolated conditions and were banned from any contact with men.<sup>75</sup> The most prestigious of all was the chief priestess of Demeter who originated either from the Phileidae or Eumolpidae family. Any man, woman, or child who could speak Greek and had not committed murder was able to become initiated into the Greater and Lesser Mysteries. Only women were eligible to participate in the *kernophoria*, an opening ceremony where sacred vessels were carried. All initiates looked on as the women commemorated earlier women who danced in tribute to Demeter by performing sacred dances themselves.<sup>76</sup>

The important festival of the Thesmophoria, also in honor of Demeter, only allowed women to participate. The Thesmophoria was not as complicated as the Mysteries and resembled as well as acted as an agrarian festival. The festival occurred during the autumn to guarantee a bountiful harvest by way of the festival's fertility magic.<sup>77</sup> The only role men played in the festival was that the sufficiently wealthy were obligated to pay for the festival on behalf of their wives. All women with an unblemished status<sup>78</sup> were eligible to participate,

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<sup>75</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 76

<sup>76</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 77.

<sup>77</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 77.

<sup>78</sup> "Unblemished" refers to an unmarried woman's virginity and a married woman's fidelity.

but all women were required to be chaste for three days previous to the festival and throughout its continuation. Sexual behavior was prohibited, but the women freely used foul language often found in fertility rituals.<sup>79</sup> It is likely that female-only festivals existed due to women's connections with birth and fertility and the desire to transfer these properties to the harvest.

Plato and his contemporaries therefore would not find anything abnormal in a priestess speaking authoritatively. When Socrates begins to give his account of *eros* he declares:

I shall try to go through for you the speech about Love I once heard from a woman of Mantinea, Diotima - a woman who was wise about many things besides this: once she even put off the plague for ten years by telling the Athenians what sacrifices to make. She is the one who taught me the art of love, and I shall go through her speech as best I can on my own.<sup>80</sup>

If one argues that Plato creates a fictional character because he does not believe a woman can be wise, one could then object that the greatest fictional leap Plato takes is to make a human, regardless of sex, so wise.<sup>81</sup> Admittedly, Diotima's fictionality is the strongest

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<sup>79</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 78.

<sup>80</sup> *Symposium* 201d.

<sup>81</sup> It is also noteworthy that Diotima is not only wise but extremely powerful. To the modern reader whose only experience of the plague is through media such as literature and film, it may be difficult to comprehend how the plague would resonate with Plato's audience. The plague of Athens occurred in 430 B.C., during the second year of the Peloponnesian war. The exact number of deaths is unknown, but the losses were devastating. The plague not only claimed soldiers, but their leader Pericles as well. Things went from bad to worse for Athens, so by the time Plato began writing it must have appeared as if the glory days of Athens had passed. While modern historians vary on whether the plague played a significant role in the loss of the Peloponnesian war, it is likely that the Athens of Plato's time would not only remember the damage of the plague but the stinging loss of the war as well. When considered with the history, Plato's attributing Diotima with preventing the plague for ten years is to imbue her with incredible power. Donald Kagan. *The Peloponnesian War*. New York: Penguin Group, 2003.

objection to claiming Plato believes that a woman is capable of being Socrates' teacher since one can say that Plato creates a fictional woman because in fact he does not think it possible for a woman outside of the ideal city to possess wisdom. While I cannot definitively prove this is not the case, I do not believe it to be so; the concept of Socrates having a female teacher would have been extremely outlandish regardless of her being fictional.<sup>82</sup> But perhaps the most obvious and simplest reason for using a fictional character is that Socrates never had the conversation in the *Symposium* with anyone at all, so if Plato were to give a historical person this role he would be guilty of falsely representing someone and attributing thoughts to this person that he did not have. In this respect, it is much simpler for Plato to be free from any historical restraints and create a character who could freely espouse Plato's account of *eros* without having to worry about what this person actually thought. To continue on this thought, one common argument explaining the fictional Diotima is that Plato creates a fictional character to separate his own ideas from Socrates. Cooper writes that Diotima's fictionality is how "Plato lets us know that this theory of the Beautiful is his own contrivance, not really an idea of Socrates (whether the historical philosopher or the

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<sup>82</sup> An Athenian man would find Diotima's role as Socrates' teacher so remarkable that the fact that she was not a historical character would not take away from the novelty of her being a woman, indeed it made it more acceptable.

philosopher of the Socratic dialogues).<sup>83</sup> While this is probably true, it still does not explain why Diotima is a woman, and if it is true, then Plato chooses to present his own views in the voice of a woman. Despite Diotima's fictionality, Plato still chose to give a woman this role rather than give it to a fictional man.

## II.

Before I discuss Plato's views on pregnancy and birth it seems appropriate to address Socrates' role in this process and why he needed a teacher such as Diotima on the subject of *eros*. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates explains he is the son of the famous midwife Phaenarete and that he practices the art of midwifery as well though he himself is barren.<sup>84</sup> But rather than aid people in giving birth to babies, Socrates helps young men give birth to abstract ideas. Though he induces young men to give birth to their ideas, Socrates himself plays no part in the creation of these ideas. Socrates says, "And yet it is clear that this is not due to anything they have learned from me; it is that they discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into the light. But it is I, with God's help, who deliver them of this offspring."<sup>85</sup> A woman is aware of the great pain and difficulty involved in giving birth, but Socrates claims that the

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<sup>83</sup> Cooper 1997, 457.

<sup>84</sup> *Theaetetus* 149a

<sup>85</sup> *Theaetetus* 150c.

process is even more painful for men when he states “those who associate with me are like women in child-birth. They suffer the pains of labor...indeed they suffer far more than women. And this pain my art is able to bring on, and also to allay.”<sup>86</sup> But how has Socrates acquired this art if Socrates has not given birth himself previously? He may have learned the principles of midwifery from his mother but explains:

For one thing which I have in common with the ordinary midwives is that I myself am barren of wisdom...and that is true enough. And the reason of that is this, that God compels me to attend the travails of others, but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom.<sup>87</sup>

It is unfortunate that this point is not elaborated upon since it is possible that Socrates’ barrenness is what causes him to know only his own ignorance, for if Socrates is barren he himself will be unable to give intellectual birth to ideas. Socrates takes the inscription at the oracle of Delphi “know thyself” seriously, and by knowing himself he is aware that he lacks wisdom. In the *Alcibiades* Socrates implores Alcibiades to “trust in me and in the Delphic inscription and ‘know thyself’.”<sup>88</sup> Later in the dialogue Socrates demonstrates the inherent difficulty in the inscription when Socrates asks “Is it actually such an easy thing to know oneself? Was it some simpleton who inscribed

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<sup>86</sup> *Theaetetus* 151a.

<sup>87</sup> *Theaetetus* 150c-d.

<sup>88</sup> *Alcibiades* 124a-b.

those words on the temple wall at Delphi? Or is it difficult for me and not for everybody?"<sup>89</sup> In other dialogues such as the *Phaedrus* Socrates claims to lack even this knowledge, "I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that."<sup>90</sup> When Socrates states "I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom," he asserts that his own soul cannot produce wisdom in himself.

It may seem as if the discussion has entirely veered away from the role of women in society all together, but I believe one way to explain Diotima's sex is concerned with the discussion of pregnancy. One possible explanation is the philosophically unexciting one that the discussion of giving birth is more natural coming from a woman. Considering Socrates' declaration of his barrenness, how could Plato have had Socrates as the expert of giving birth, especially when he has no personal experience of it?<sup>91</sup>

Diotima discusses male and female pregnancy, but for philosophical purposes she deals primarily with male intellectual reproduction. When men and women come together to reproduce they are "providing themselves through childbirth with immortality and

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<sup>89</sup> *Alcibiades* 129a.

<sup>90</sup> *Phaedrus* 230a.

<sup>91</sup> It must be noted that we are unaware, and Socrates never inquires, as to how Diotima came to have knowledge of *eros*, though there is no reason to suppose that she does not follow the model she endorses.



remembrance and happiness, as they think, for all time to come,” but the process is not very different for men. Men who are pregnant in soul, and Diotima states that men can be *more* pregnant in their soul than a woman could be physically pregnant, are “pregnant with what is fitting for a soul to bear and to bring to birth.”<sup>92</sup> The reason that reproduction and pregnancy is the aim of love is that reproduction is the closest human equivalent to immortality; Diotima explains “a lover must desire immortality along with the good, if what we agreed earlier was right, that Love wants to possess the good forever”.<sup>93</sup> Diotima describes that a lover is “turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge,” so Socrates’ barrenness bars him from reaching the pinnacle of thought.<sup>94</sup>

There are many instances in the *Symposium* where Diotima clearly questions Socrates’ ability to fully comprehend *eros*, possibly due to Socrates’ barrenness.

“Even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated into these rights of love. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly - that is the final and highest mystery, and I don’t know if you are capable of it. I myself will tell you,” She said, “and I won’t stint any effort. And you must try to follow if you can.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Symposium* 208e-209a.

<sup>93</sup> *Symposium* 207a.

<sup>94</sup> *Symposium* 210e.

<sup>95</sup> *Symposium* 210a.

She flatly doubts his ability to understand *eros* when she says “I don’t know if you are capable of it.” She agrees to attempt, even though she doubts the success of this venture, and one can imagine her doing the ancient equivalent of rolling up her sleeves to get to work on a challenge when she states “I won’t stint any effort. And you must try to follow if you can.” The previous passage is not the only instance where she voices concern over Socrates’ capacities to follow her lesson on *eros*. A little later on in the discussion you can see her attempting to keep Socrates focused on her message when she states “Try to pay attention to me...As best you can.”<sup>96</sup> Diotima is clearly concerned that Socrates is incapable of fully understanding *eros*, though it is unclear if she attributes this fact to his barrenness or that he is just in fact incapable.

### **III.**

This section will more directly address a topic briefly mentioned in the previous chapter: Plato and his thoughts on pregnancy. Plato’s approach to pregnancy is especially interesting as it is often clinical or practical. When it comes to women giving birth, he seems to view it as a biological function, so once the birth takes place the woman is as she was before; if anyone is fundamentally affected by pregnancy it is men, though pregnancy affects them for the better.

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<sup>96</sup> *Symposium* 210e.

Not only is Plato's interest in pregnancy significant, even more essentially he does not view pregnancy as a women's issue or something that denotes inferiority in the sexes. Where Aristotle and others will take the view that pregnancy is tied to women and is part of the reason why women are inferior, by giving men and women the experience of pregnancy he demonstrates there is nothing in this process that affects the pregnant person's rationality or quality of the soul, which lends credence to his stance in *Republic V* that the only true difference between men and women is that women need nine months away from their physical Guardian duties; once they have given birth they are just as qualified to return to work as they were before. Pregnancy is thus a purely biological process that in no way reflects negatively on women; how can it when Plato states that men can be *more* pregnant than women. If Plato looked down on pregnancy or had an inclination that it fundamentally changed a woman's nature there would be reason to think that men and women are distinct in fundamental ways, putting the matter of female Guardians into jeopardy.

By making pregnancy available to both sexes the sexless soul once again comes into play: the sexless soul indicates a soul can enter the body of any sex, so since both sexes give a kind of birth this suggests that all souls desire to give birth. This implies Plato has in

mind a sexless or sex-neutral society, for by having men give birth to ideas and giving women the chance to govern and fight he removes the traditional male and female boundaries. There is no reason to assume this is not his intent, for if the difference in sex is only in the body and this does not affect the quality of one's soul, what importance does sex hold except for the pragmatic concern of resupplying the state's population. And, by giving both sexes the impulse to give birth it seems as if all souls desire this and that it just manifests itself differently depending on the body.

One serious objection to this is that the *Symposium* and the *Republic* are not only different works, but works that do not cohere particularly well together. By applying the principles of female Guardians to the intellectual birth of the *Symposium* we face risks as well as many unanswered questions. For example, could two women give birth to an idea? Can a man and a woman give birth to ideas as well as to children? Perhaps most importantly: are people allowed to give birth to ideas in the ideal city? Would it create relationships that would interfere with the unity of the Guardians and would conceptual birth somehow interfere with human birth? Since Plato may not have

ever asked himself these questions we are unable to speculate.<sup>97</sup> As far as thinking of the two dialogues in conjunction, however, I do not think it too risky to do so. As long as we keep in mind that the *Symposium* does not exist in the ideal state and that we do not know what Plato would have thought about intellectual birth in the ideal city amongst the ranks of the Guardians, I do not believe we are guilty of butchering Plato's thoughts; I only intend to demonstrate how two different theories from two different texts support the view that women are not by nature inferior to men, rather that current society raises them to be.

#### IV.

In this section we shall turn towards Plato's views on human birth, the logistics required to ensure healthy children, and how female Guardians are able to return to their responsibilities and have their mothering duties delegated to others. In Plato's *Laws*, Plato looks at female pregnancy in a purely objective manner. Like the *Republic*, the *Laws* is a dialogue about the construction of the state, but unlike the *Republic* the *Laws* is not an ideal society; this entails that when pregnancy is discussed, it neither tries to defend nor support a theory

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<sup>97</sup> I shall engage in some speculation, however, for I do not believe that intellectual birth or the resulting "intellectual children" violate the conditions of the Guardian class. Guardians are prohibited from owning property and knowing their own children, but once an intellectual child/concept is born it no longer belongs to the parents. The idea which they have given birth to becomes the public property of all Guardians and therefore becomes communal.

regarding women as the *Republic* does, rather, the discussion looks at pregnancy in purely practical terms. Such a discussion is vital for it is our first opportunity to understand to see Plato's thoughts on pregnancy when nothing philosophical is at stake.

Plato's approach to pregnancy in the *Laws* can best be described as pragmatic. He makes no value judgments and cannot be accused of sentimentality. Of course it must be noted that Plato's notions on pregnancy are often incorrect or not based on modern science, but it is unfair to hold this against him as he only has the medical knowledge of the time. Incorrect as he may be, his incorrect views do not display any hint of bias. The first mention of pregnancy is clinical in nature and begins with a discussion of the "athletics of the embryo": "It's hardly surprising you haven't heard of these athletics of the embryo."<sup>98</sup>

Plato describes the benefits of these athletics when he writes:

All bodies find it helpful and invigorating to be shaken by movements and joltings of all kinds, whether the motion is due to their own efforts or they are carried on a vehicle or boat or horse or any other mode of conveyance. All this enables the body to assimilate its solid and liquid food, so that we grow healthy and handsome and strong into the bargain.<sup>99</sup>

Whether or not motion helps digestion we see that Plato puts the emphasis on producing the healthiest child possible. It is not odd for Plato to have such interest in the production of his future citizens as

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<sup>98</sup> *Laws* 789b.

<sup>99</sup> *Laws* 789b-d.

he needs the best possible citizens for his state. Clearly he thinks the first step towards producing a healthy and strong population begins before birth. To demonstrate this we can look at the precise guidelines he provides:

If you like, we could lay down precise rules (and how people would laugh at us!): (1) A pregnant woman should go for walks, and when her child is born she should mold it like wax while it is still supple, and keep it well wrapped up for the first two years of its life. (2) The nurses must be compelled under legal penalty to contrive that the children are always being carried to the country or to temples or relatives, until they are sturdy enough to stand on their own feet. (3) Even then, the nurses should persist in carrying the child around until it's three, to keep it from distorting its young limbs by subjecting them to too much pressure. (4) The nurses should be as strong as possible, and there must be plenty of them.<sup>100</sup>

In this passage Plato gives specific instructions as to how a child must be carried in order to prevent the child's limbs from becoming "distorted." What is unusual here is the practical nature of the guidelines for they are in no way philosophic. It is true that Plato often discusses practical logistics in order to demonstrate how his theory can work; take for example the details of the living arrangements of the Guardians in the *Republic*. What is different in this passage though is that there seems to be no other end than producing healthy babies. We therefore have a non-philosophical discussion about pregnancy and childbirth which is of interest to us

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<sup>100</sup> *Laws* 789e.

due to the philosophical discussion of this topic in the *Symposium*. In the *Symposium* Plato extols the virtue of male pregnancy and birth, but as noted earlier he does not pay much attention to female pregnancy. While Plato does not have glowing praise on the virtues of female pregnancy there is nothing negative either; the tone is neutral and disinterested.

There is one passage in the *Laws*, however, that on first impression may appear as an objection to my argument. In this passage Plato finally turns to the emotional state of the pregnant mother and states that a pregnant woman must be monitored to prevent her from having intense emotional experiences. Plato writes:

All newly-born children...that's the age when habits, the seeds of the entire character, are most effectively implanted. I'd even say...that all expectant mothers, during the year of their pregnancy, should be supervised more closely than other women, to ensure that they don't experience frequent and excessive pleasures, or pains either. An expectant mother should think it important to keep calm and cheerful and sweet-tempered throughout her pregnancy.<sup>101</sup>

I would note first that nowhere in this passage is a woman's nature or her inferiority to men mentioned. In other words, he does not say he gives his advice because women as such are more susceptible to undue pleasure or pain. The passage does not refer to women's emotionality or reasonability as the reason they need to be watched, but so they don't experience anything very painful or pleasurable. A

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<sup>101</sup> *Laws* 792e.



painful or pleasurable experience would elicit a reaction from a man or a woman, otherwise the experience does not have the quality of being pleasurable or painful; so while Plato is cautioning not to become overexcited, he is not cautioning them *because* they are women. The need arises from the belief that the mother's temperament will affect the unborn child and from that perspective it makes perfect sense that the mother should be calm.

The only reason to have a negative impression from this passage is the supervision which makes it appear as if the mother needs help achieving the desired calm. I do not believe this to be the case for if we look at the passage carefully the supervision is necessary to prevent the mother from having an intense experience, but we must remember that "experience" does not equal emotion. We must be careful not to confuse a pleasurable or painful experience with a pleasurable or painful emotion. If a woman needed to be supervised so that she did not have intense emotions then it would appear as if Plato thought a woman could not control her emotions. An experience, however, can take many forms and it is not difficult to come up with examples that might upset the calm of the mother. Painful experiences could include learning that a loved one has died or falling and breaking a limb which would agitate and upset the calm of any person; if agitation is thought to harm the child it makes perfect

sense to shield the mother as much as possible from such experiences.

There seems to be little evidence that Plato views pregnancy and giving birth as anything other than a bodily function when it produces a child and as a desire for immortality when it produces true virtue. The fact that Plato views human pregnancy and birth as a physical process that does not affect the soul proves that women can be Guardians, and that with the exception of the nine months needed to have a child, once they have had the child they have not fundamentally changed. In the *Republic* Plato writes "Do you think 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 puppies, while the males do work and have the entire care of the flock?"<sup>102</sup> Philosophers such as Julia Annas have raised the criticism that Plato's watchdog analogy is a metaphor rather than an argument.<sup>103</sup> I disagree with this as I believe that the watchdog example is exactly what Plato intends to argue, that aside for giving birth women Guardians are in no way different than men. I do agree with Annas though when she states that Plato is "taking seriously the idea that the life of the human female is like

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<sup>102</sup> *Republic* 451d.

<sup>103</sup> Annas 1996, 4.

that of any female animal, with reproduction making only short breaks in physical activity otherwise like the male's. No doubt this is because he is mainly interested in the eugenic possibilities for his 'herd'."<sup>104</sup> It is true that in the ideal state Plato has strong opinions on how to create the best "herd," but even in these arguments there is no hint of bias against female Guardians.

By this point in the *Republic* Plato has already abolished the traditional model of the family. One of the consequences of this action is that "no parent will know his own offspring or any child his parent."<sup>105</sup> This separation sounds cruel to the modern and perhaps even the ancient reader, but this statement is part of what enables female Guardians to be equal to the males, for by freeing the female Guardian of any sense of responsibility towards one specific child she in a certain sense does not become a mother. If the female Guardian does not know which child is hers she will not feel a pull to take care of her child, which would interfere with her primary role as a Guardian. In a certain sense Plato creates an extreme form of child day-care; a child is watched by a professional so the mother can continue with her professional life. We have already seen Plato's explanation of this extreme day-care center, namely:

And won't the nurses see to it that the mothers are brought to the rearing pen when their breasts have milk, taking every

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<sup>104</sup> Annas 1996, 4.

<sup>105</sup> *Republic* 457d.

precaution to insure that no mother knows her own child and providing wet nurses if the mother's milk is insufficient? And won't they take care that the mothers suckle the children for only a reasonable amount of time and that the care of sleepless children and all other such troublesome duties are taken over by the wet nurses and other attendants?<sup>106</sup>

While mothers who have children might see matters differently, Plato clearly believes he is doing the female Guardian a service by liberating them from "troublesome duties." If the female Guardians appear to lack maternal instincts it is because she does. In Plato's society she is a Guardian first and foremost who has the extra duty of giving birth to future citizens. If Plato thought female Guardians had maternal instincts *then* he would be creating a distinction between female and male Guardians, for if female Guardians had concerns besides the welfare of the state they would be inferior to male Guardians. One may object that modern society demonstrates that women can have children and a successful career, but in an unusual twist Plato is truly treating female Guardians equally by viewing them as Guardians first and their capacity to produce citizens as a byproduct of the body their souls inhabit.

## V.

This section turns to Aristophanes' account of *eros* in the *Symposium*, for though it is not the correct account, it indirectly gives insight into Plato's thoughts on women. Aristophanes' speech

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<sup>106</sup> *Republic* 460d.

may provide support for the claim that Plato does take his proposal in *Republic V* seriously, and further the view that Plato did not see a soul that resided in a female body as necessarily inferior. It would be putting words in Plato's mouth to claim anything definitive from Aristophanes' speech, but it is also neglectful not to analyze the text. Aristophanes' account of *eros* closely resembles the modern conception of soul mates and seeks to describe why people search for another person that will make one feel whole. The account is set in the past before humans were as they are now; these original humans were of three types, physically distinct having many arms and legs, and freely interacted with the gods. Aristophanes' tale describes how these three kinds were the original humans were great:

in strength and power, therefore, they were terrible, and they had great ambitions. They made an attempt on the gods, and Homer's story about Ephialtes and Otus<sup>107</sup> was originally about them: how they tried to make an ascent to heaven so as to attack the gods.<sup>108</sup>

The first type as discussed in the previous chapter was androgynous with both male and female elements. The second and third types of original humans are similar in that they have two elements but these are of the same sex, so the second kind of human was composed of two male elements whilst the third kind of two female elements.

There is something curious for our discussion about

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<sup>107</sup> *Iliad* v.385, *Odyssey* xi.305 ff.

<sup>108</sup> *Symposium* 190b.

Aristophanes' account in that there is no value judgment between the three kinds of original humans, or more specifically, there are no stated differences between the three types of original humans based on gender. There is nothing to indicate that the humans who were composed of two female elements are in any way inferior to the ones with two male elements. While sexuality is more prevalent than sex in this passage, as the objective of the account is discussing love rather than the state as in the *Republic*, the fact that sex plays so small a role is telling. The fact that there is no distinction between the males, females and androgynous humans indicates that when Plato does not have to prove women are equal, he does not do so and lets the facts stand for themselves. One would expect that if Plato thought female nature was inherently inferior, there would be some mention that the original females were physically weaker or that their thoughts were not as great as their androgynous or male counterparts. But as there is no such qualification, this lends support to the claim that Plato did not think that women had a naturally inferior *physis*, for if they had, not all of these original humans would have been able to attack the gods.

After Aristophanes explains the three types of original humans he continues his tale with the gods' fear of them. Aristophanes writes that Zeus creates a plan to weaken the humans:

[H]e cut those human beings in two, the way people cut sorb-apples before they can dry them or the way they cut eggs with

hairs. As he cut each one, he commanded Apollo to turn its face and half its neck towards the wound, so that each person would see that he'd been cut and keep better order.<sup>109</sup>

The text makes no reference to any distinction between the three kinds of humans. The original females are never portrayed as anything other than equal to the male and androgynous humans. Aristophanes then explains how the humans were so devastated at their separation that the humans embraced with their other half, willing themselves to grow back into one; but when they could not, they began to die from hunger and neglect of the body. Zeus pitied these men and women and reshaped their bodies so they could reunite through sexual acts and reproduce. After this second alteration we arrive at modern humans: the original androgynous became heterosexual humans, the females became lesbians, and the males became homosexuals.<sup>110</sup>

Even when discussing modern humans, however, Plato offers no criticism or qualifier for the women. He is only critical of the heterosexual humans and deems them lecherous: "That's why a man who is split from the double sort (which used to be called "androgynous") runs after women. Many lecherous men have come from this class, and so do the lecherous women who run after men."<sup>111</sup> He does not offer any explanation of why this should be so,

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<sup>109</sup> *Symposium* 190e.

<sup>110</sup> The translation uses "homosexual" to refer only to gay men reserving lesbian to refer to gay women.

<sup>111</sup> *Symposium* 191d-e.

but for whatever reason he clearly thinks heterosexual love is lesser than the other types. It is unsurprising that Aristophanes espouses the virtues of homosexual love, but what is most unexpected is his statement on lesbian love: "Women who are split from a woman, however, pay no attention at all to men; they are oriented more towards women, and lesbians come from this class."<sup>112</sup> One cannot find anything negative in this statement. Plato does not praise lesbian love as he does homosexual, but he in no way derides it or claims that it is inferior to any other form of love. Even his comment on male love does not make it seem superior to female love: "People who are split from a male are male-oriented. While they are boys they are chips off the male block, they love men and enjoy lying with men and being embraced by men; those are the best of boys and lads, because they are more manly in their nature."<sup>113</sup> The only potential indicator that male love is superior is "these are the best of boys and youths." Here I would bring in Levin's argument from the previous chapter that Plato distinguishes between women as they are now and women as they might be under ideal circumstances. Considering that Socrates' account of love will reveal that falling in love with bodies is the first step on the ladder to falling in love with the Forms and philosophy, I think this at that very least suggests that Plato fully supports his

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<sup>112</sup> *Symposium* 191e.

<sup>113</sup> *Symposium* 191e-192a.



claims in *Republic V* that women can become philosopher-rulers.

## VI.

The *Symposium* therefore reinforces the argument that since Plato believes the soul to be sexless, there is nothing about the female body that makes it less rational than the male body. The two ways the *Symposium* does this specifically tackle two of the main objections levied against Plato which claim that he did not truly believe women could become Guardians: that women could only become Guardians in an ideal society and since this city will not be realized he does not truly think women could occupy this position, and that giving birth made female Guardians fundamentally distinct from male Guardians. To address the first issue Plato presents us with Diotima, and while she is not a warrior she is undeniably wise and given the credit of being Socrates' philosophical teacher of *eros*. Had Plato not thought a woman could have had a philosophical nature then how could he have made Diotima the expert on *eros*? And while she is fictional it is far more likely she is so in order that Plato had free license in his theory without worrying about historical accuracy, rather because a real woman could not possess knowledge.

## Chapter Three

Plato's *Laws*, one of Plato's last works, is less well known than the *Republic* due to its length, dry style, and the often dull subject matter. Though by no means a pleasurable read, the *Laws* presents us with Plato's second account of women's role in society. The *Republic* and the *Laws* differ in many respects, but the most significant difference to our discussion is that the *Republic* presents an ideal state whereas the *Laws* does not. Unlike the *Republic* which does not have a spatial location, the *Laws* seeks to create good laws for a state that will be colonized in an area of Crete called Magnesia. Not only does the area of Magnesia exist, but it is picked specifically for the area's self-

sufficiency and distance from the sea.<sup>114</sup> The *Laws* is often understood as a more pragmatic version of the *Republic*, leading Magnesia to be known as the “second best” state. There is evidence to support this claim as Plato allows private property and the family into Magnesia; two institutions he forcefully banned from the Guardian class in the *Republic*. Magnesia is a more realizable state, but it is a mistake to think of the *Laws* as only a compromised *Republic*. Plato himself recognizes that the reintroduction of private property and the family compromises the integrity of Magnesia when he states:

You'll find the ideal society and state, and the best code of laws, where the old saying 'friends' property is genuinely shared' is put into practice as widely as possible throughout the entire state. Now I don't know whether in fact this situation - a community of wives, children and all property - exists anywhere today, or will ever exist, but at any rate in such a state the notion of 'private property' will have been by hook or by crook completely eliminated from life...It may be that gods or a number of the children of gods inhabit this kind of state...And so men need look no further for their ideal: they should keep this state in view and try to find the one that most nearly resembles it."<sup>115</sup>

We should not assume, however, that this passage automatically indicates that Magnesia is merely a second best state; to do so is to fail to appreciate the distinct aims of each city. One way of understanding the difference between the state in the *Republic* and Magnesia is that the *Republic's* is the *ideal* state whereas Magnesia is the good state.

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<sup>114</sup>704a-705c.

<sup>115</sup> *Laws* 739d-e.

It is unlikely that Plato thought a state like Magnesia possible when he wrote the *Republic*, for it was not until his later period that he became optimistic about people's ability to achieve genuine virtue.<sup>116</sup> The reason for this optimism can be found in a belief he acquired after the *Republic*, that non-philosophers have the capacity to attain virtue, though they will attain it imperfectly<sup>117</sup>. Now that Plato believes non-philosophers can achieve genuine virtue, he is able to devise new concepts of the good city and the good citizen.<sup>118</sup> As we look at the role of women in Magnesia we must keep in mind that the aim of the *Laws* is to create the best laws it can for non-philosophers, but that these laws are not ideal and cannot make the citizens truly virtuous. A tangible result is a less certain role for women in Magnesia. With the just laws of the *Republic's* state people were judged according to the quality of their souls, and to judge by any other criteria like sex was unjust. Women in Magnesia will have a more nuanced role in society than their female Guardian counterparts in the *Republic*. An important similarity between the *Republic* and the *Laws*, however, is that Plato is unconcerned with creating more justice for women. It is true that women are treated more fairly in Magnesia than they were in any actual state of Plato's time,<sup>119</sup> but greater

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<sup>116</sup> Bobonich 2004, 374.

<sup>117</sup> Bobonich 2004, 374.

<sup>118</sup> Bobonich 2004, 92.

<sup>119</sup> *Laws* 805d-806c.

fairness to women was not Plato's intention. As in the *Republic*, women's improved situation in Magnesia is the result of his political aim to create a good state, but this does not entail that Plato had any particular concern with justice for women as such.

Some of the confusion about women's role in Magnesia stems from the Athenian stranger's<sup>120</sup> own inconsistent positions regarding women and the negative remarks he makes concerning women's nature. In this chapter I shall address these inconsistencies and negative remarks, and demonstrate how neither lead to the conclusion that Plato views female citizens as inferior to the men. Acknowledging that the role of female citizens in Magnesia is not as definitively equal to the men's as it was in the *Republic*, the reintroduction of the family and private property are not the main cause. Rather, the main cause is the colonizers of Magnesia themselves, for they bring their own prejudices and ideas on what is natural for women into the new state. Plato, however, is prepared for such an eventuality and writes:

It shall not be left up to the father's wish to decide who shall attend and whose education shall be neglected, but rather, as the saying goes, 'every man and child insofar as he is able,' must of necessity become educated, because they belong more to the city than those who generated them. Indeed, my law would say all the very same things about females that it says about males, including that females should be trained equally.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> In the *Laws* the Athenian stranger occupies Socrates' usual role.

<sup>121</sup> *Laws* 804d-e.

From this statement we can infer that Plato acknowledges some early colonizers will disapprove of women being educated, but that such resistance will be met and will eventually disappear through the good laws of Magnesia.

In this chapter I hope to demonstrate that Plato conceives that the women of Magnesia are not inherently inferior to the men, but he recognizes that he will need specific laws to turn the domesticated and uneducated Athenian women into educated citizens who fight in the military and run for elected office. In the *Republic* we saw that Plato understood the power social institutions have in shaping people, so while the good laws in Magnesia can create good women, he will need laws to undo the generations of habituation they have been subjected to. The reason we see comments on women's inferior nature and laws focused on ridding them of their "feminine traits" is that in order for the women in Magnesia to be the equal members he envisages them as, he will have to fundamentally alter the colonizers' conception of what is natural for women.

## I.

Just as scholarly opinion is sharply divided on Plato's views of women in the *Republic*, so too we find great controversy about the *Laws*. This is hardly surprising as the women in Magnesia are similar to female Guardians with the important exception that the women in

Magnesia will be part of a family.<sup>122</sup> Part of the uncertainty in the *Laws* stems from the fact that we know the reintroduction of the family and private property will affect women, but how these effects take shape is unclear. It is tempting to agree with Susan Okin when she states that “Despite all his professed intentions in the *Laws* to emancipate women and make full use of the talents he was now convinced they had, Plato’s reintroduction of the family has the direct effect of putting them firmly back into their traditional place.”<sup>123</sup> It is easy to assume that the family will affect women’s role in society, but we have no specific reason to do so; indeed, to do this may be to make the very assumptions about the ‘proper place’ of women that Plato is attempting to dispel. The wife and mother in Magnesia bears no resemblance to her Classical Athenian counterpart or the traditional archetype of housewife: women in Magnesia do not prepare meals for their families due to the communal meals, slaves are responsible for work in the field and the home,<sup>124</sup> and children are sent off to their teachers at dawn.<sup>125</sup> Like men, women are educated, fight in the military, and hold elected office.

The Athenian sets the appropriate ages for marriage, entering public office, and military service for men and women, and here we

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<sup>122</sup> This exception applies equally to the men.

<sup>123</sup> Okin (1979, p. 50).

<sup>124</sup> *Laws* 806e.

<sup>125</sup> *Laws* 808d.

can see that men and women will participate in these activities with the only significant difference being when they start:

A girl should marry between the ages of sixteen and twenty...and a boy between thirty and thirty-five. A woman can enter office at forty, a man at thirty. A man is subject to service in war from the age of twenty until the age of sixty; in whatever military services it seems women should be employed, each will be ordered to do what is possible and fitting for her, after she has borne children and until she is fifty years old.<sup>126</sup>

Several things must be mentioned about this passage, but the overarching theme is one that gives women the same opportunities as men. Let us begin with the marriage age of women. Sixteen sounds young to the modern reader, but is quite late for a woman to be marrying in the ancient world. In Classical Athens the ideal marriage situation included a fourteen year old girl marrying a thirty year old man.<sup>127</sup> Fourteen and sixteen may not seem like a significant age difference, but we also must remember that a great deal of maturation may occur during those two years and sixteen is the absolute minimum age for marriage in Magnesia.

The passage above explicitly states that women can hold elected office; the only distinction between men and women is that women must wait ten years longer. Plato does not provide an explicit reason for the delay, but it seems reasonable that it is related to reproductive concerns rather than apprehension over a woman's

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<sup>126</sup> *Laws* 785c.

<sup>127</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 64.



ability to perform the job at a younger age. At the age of thirty, when a man can enter office, a woman is in the middle of her childbearing years. If we keep in mind that a woman may be married as late as twenty, Plato will expect her to produce children into her late thirties. By having women enter office at forty, he suggests that a woman can enter office as soon as she has finished her duty of producing children. The twenty-year child-bearing period is of vital importance to the repopulation of the state, so it is unsurprising that Plato would not have them enter office while they are repopulating Magnesia.<sup>128</sup> Admittedly, Plato has another option: allowing women to serve in office while pregnant and accept that they will need some time off to give birth. It is interesting Plato does not take this option for he could easily create a sophisticated day-care system enabling women to return to work as soon as the baby is born as in the *Republic*, but there is evidence that Plato thought women holding office while pregnant might create difficulties for the pregnancy.

In the previous chapter I noted that in the *Laws* Plato states that pregnant women must remain calm, cheerful, and avoid extreme pleasure or pain.<sup>129</sup> Considering the grave responsibilities, duties, and decisions the elected officials must deal with, no official

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<sup>128</sup> Although we do not know the infant mortality rate in Classical Athens, we can assume it was quite high by modern standards. A lack of medical knowledge, unhygienic conditions, and a host of other factors made childbirth dangerous for the mother and child.

<sup>129</sup> *Laws* 792e.

could always remain calm and cheerful. If pregnant women are to remain in a peaceful state then they cannot engage in the complexities and challenges of holding office for nine months. One could argue that women will not be pregnant for the entire ten years from age thirty to forty, so Plato could allow women at thirty to hold office but make them temporarily resign during their pregnancy. This solution, however, raises more problems than it solves. The first logistical issue is replacing the pregnant women for nine months. If women are elected, then how can they be replaced? Matters also become more complex when we remember that women in the ancient world had far less, if any, control over when they had children. This fact has consequences for female officials of childbearing age, for the women will have no control over when they become pregnant; women could become pregnant during the middle of an important project or when one woman is for some reason irreplaceable. The far simpler measure is to avoid such complexities altogether and have women begin work at forty.<sup>130</sup>

A significant difference between the lives of female Guardians and the women of Magnesia is that the female Guardians

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<sup>130</sup> Women not only begin their political careers later but they must also end their military duties earlier. Men serve in the military until they turn sixty whereas women only serve until they are fifty. One possible cause for this is that women's bodies likely wore out earlier. Without any birth control and with women marrying at a young age, a woman could easily have ten children by her fortieth birthday. A significant amount of pregnancies, without modern medical treatment, combined with ten years of military service could cause a woman's body to weaken faster than a man's. More importantly, however, is that there is no age where men or women are made to leave elected office.

seem much less interrupted by pregnancy. While it is possible that Plato for some reason thinks Magnesian women are less equipped to hold office while pregnant than the female Guardians, there are two more plausible reasons. The first is that the *Republic* is not concerned with the logistics of human pregnancy. The discourse of the *Republic* concerns the structure and nature of the ideal state, so an in-depth inquiry as to what makes a healthy pregnancy and baby would be out of context. The discourse of the *Laws*, however, aims to give philosophic as well as practical measures, so a discussion on what women must do and not do to produce strong children is relevant. The only comment on the logistics of a female Guardian's pregnancy<sup>131</sup> is "a woman is to bear children for the city from the age of twenty to the age of forty."<sup>132</sup> Given the fact that Plato imagines the female Guardians and female Magnesians having similar age-ranges for giving birth, it is not impossible that had Plato thought of the pragmatics of female Guardians having children, he would have also cautioned them to avoid extreme pleasures and pains and to remain calm during their pregnancies. Perhaps one reason that female Guardians are less affected by pregnancy than women in Magnesia is due to Plato's education system. In Magnesia, women old enough to have children

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<sup>131</sup> I mean "pregnancy" to refer to the nine month gestation period rather than the process of becoming pregnant, for Plato has much to say on that topic.

<sup>132</sup> *Republic* 460e.

will have likely completed their education and are competent to hold office. As there is no mention of boys being better educated than woman or of male office-holders being more competent than female ones, there is no reason to think that women of childbearing age would be unfit to hold office. Female Guardians, on the other hand, are still in the midst of their studies. Plato writes:

From the age of twenty...the subjects they learned in no particular order as children they must now bring together to form a unified vision of their kinship both with one another and with the nature of that which is...you'll have to look out for the ones who most of all have this ability...And after they have reached their thirtieth year...you'll have to test them by means of the power of dialectic.<sup>133</sup>

Studying mathematics and dialectic is extremely challenging, but oddly enough ideal for Plato's conception of pregnant women. Pursuing mathematics and dialectic requires intense concentration, reasoning, and excludes extreme emotional responses and passions. In this respect, a pregnant woman can continue her study of these subjects without any threat to her pregnancy. It is true that physical training continues during this period,<sup>134</sup> but this is merely maintenance as most physical skills were developed at a younger age.<sup>135</sup> Since this discussion occurs during Book VII, long past the description of female Guardians, there is no mention of pregnant women studying

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<sup>133</sup> *Republic* 537b-537d.

<sup>134</sup> *Republic* 537c.

<sup>135</sup> *Republic* 537b.

mathematics and dialectic, so we do not know for certain if Plato made this association. Regardless, female Guardians from twenty to forty will not have their studies inconvenienced by pregnancy, but the duties and politics of elected office entail that Magnesian women cannot be pregnant while holding office.

It appears as if every office is open to women after the age of forty but there is one office for which only women are qualified. Here Plato is perhaps guilty of reverting to traditional sex stereotypes or acknowledging that in the less than perfect state sex-based roles exist, but in any case women are in charge of marriage. Plato writes that marriages:

Should be supervised by the women whom we have chosen<sup>136</sup> (several or only a few - the officials should appoint the number they think right, at times within their discretion). These women must assemble daily at the temple of Eileithuia...and when they have convened each must report to her colleagues any wife or husband of childbearing age she has seen who is concerned with anything but the duties imposed on him or her at the time of the sacrifices and rites of their marriage.

If the primary aim of marriage is to produce children, then it is not difficult to understand why Plato gave this position to women. Instead of seeing this as a regression back to traditional stereotypes, we can also recognize the fact that Plato is entrusting the welfare of this vital institution to women. Plato is rightly concerned with marriage, for its

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<sup>136</sup> But as Cooper notes [1456] “No such women have been mentioned. In other ways too the state of the text hereabouts suggests a lack of revision.”

product, children, is essential for Magnesia to continue. If Plato was concerned women would regress once back in the family, he was not concerned enough to give this imperative responsibility to men.

## II.

Despite the reemergence of the family and private property, there is no indication that Plato has reversed his belief that men and women have the same capacity for virtue, or that there is any connection between the two. According to Susan Okin,<sup>137</sup> Plato believes that equality between the sexes is political and can only exist in conditions such as those in Book V of the *Republic*, so once private property and the family return in the *Laws*, women return to the household.<sup>138</sup> While it is true that women in Magnesia lose some of the privileges that created the equality of the sexes female Guardians enjoyed in the *Republic*, such as the permanent nursery and wet-nurses which allowed female Guardians to return to work as soon as they gave birth, there is no reason to think the women of Magnesia will be essentially distinct from, or inferior to, the men. If the only differences between men and women remain that women are physically weaker and give birth, then there is no reason to assume that the return of private property and the family will significantly alter

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<sup>137</sup> Okin 1979, 31, 42.

<sup>138</sup> While Okin's beliefs seem unwarranted, it is important to note that her writings are from over thirty years ago and she was one of the first philosophers to look at Plato from a feminist perspective. Her conclusions now seem conservative, but at the time they were published they were groundbreaking.

the women in Magnesia.

The specific reason that the family was abolished in the *Republic* was not that it hinders sex equality, for that is not what concerns Plato, but that the family and the preferences and affections that come with it are unjust; the family causes the placement of disproportionate value on the welfare of friends and family.<sup>139</sup> Socrates takes great pains to demonstrate that the second wave of Book V in the *Republic* is necessary, for a family will contain its own allegiances. In essence, without the family, the community itself is of the utmost importance to every citizen. With each citizen sharing an attachment to the same goal, we see a completely just community where, with complete solidarity, everyone cares for each other and the state. With the introduction of private property and the nuclear family into Magnesia, however, its citizens will be inclined to nourish such private attachments. Aware of this inevitable result, Plato envisages laws to keep such attachments to a minimum and maximize the concern one feels for the entire community. One such law is the mandatory communal meals, for by eating with other citizens an individual citizen will widen the ties that one feels towards one's family and extend them towards the entire community.

Susan Okin is concerned that women cannot own property, but

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<sup>139</sup> Forde 1997, 664. It is possible that by the time Plato began writing the *Laws*, he was aware of Aristotle's criticisms of the *Republic*.

this does not necessarily have any connection to women's capacities. The Athenian stranger does not provide a reason for not allowing women to own property, but I think it is safe to conclude that Plato imagined all women old enough to own property to be married and producing children. One could why women past child-bearing age could not own property, but I suspect Plato did not see a reason why a woman owning property would better the state. Though I do not believe there are specific provisions for widows, with the concern that every citizen is meant to feel for the whole community it is easy to imagine her living with one of her children. That being said, very few citizens benefited from Magnesia's property and inheritance laws, for unless you were the favorite son, you would not inherit your father's property; any other children in the family, even the non-favorite sons, would not inherit anything. If the property laws are unfair to women, then they are similarly unfair to sons:

As for the other children, in cases where there are more than one, the head of the family should marry off the females in accordance with the law we shall establish later; the males he must present for adoption to those citizens who have no children of their own - priority to be given to personal preferences as far as possible.<sup>140</sup>

By not being able to inherit or own private property, parents have no reason to love one daughter more than another, or to even approach their daughters with that mindset. When parents have more than one

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<sup>140</sup> *Laws*740b-e.



son, they must actively think which about which one they love more, and they have reason to not love the other sons as much as they will either be adopted or leave Magnesia altogether.

The marriage laws for daughters not only entail that all daughters are treated equally, but also assume that a father will pick a prospective son-in-law based on his suitability with his daughter. Such sentiment is best expressed when the Athenian discusses marriage arrangements for a family with only daughters. The Athenian states that the father:

must forgive that lawgiver if he arranges the giving of them in marriage with an eye on only two out of three possible considerations: close kinship, and the security of the estate. The third point, which a father would have taken into account - namely to select from among the entire citizen body someone whose character and habits qualify him to be his own son and his daughter's bridegroom - these considerations, I say, will have to be passed over, because it's impractical to weigh them.<sup>141</sup>

In this passage there is no mention of preferring one daughter to another, or any indication that a father has any motivation or need to love one daughter at the expense of another. Instead, this passage assumes that a father will look for a husband that he believes is worthy to be his son-in-law. Women also have the advantage in marriage over men, for even if there is a shortage of men in Magnesia, girls are not forced to find new adoptive parents or emigrate to a new colony. In fact, if this is the case, a girl gets to choose a husband from

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<sup>141</sup> *Laws* 924c-d.

another colony. The Athenian states:

If a girl is hard put to find a husband among her compatriots, and has in view someone who has been dispatched to a colony whom she would like...then if the man is related to her, he should enter into the state under the provisions of the law; if he is not of her clan...he shall be entitled by virtue of the choice of the daughter of the deceased...and return to his homeland.<sup>142</sup>

Here we have a situation where a girl picks her husband, and it is unclear whether the husband has much choice to refuse. Marriage and inheritance laws in Magnesia are complex, but men suffer more from them as it forces their parents to love their sons unequally.

In Magnesia there is a great emphasis on compatibility and equal legal rights for men and women in marriage. Of particular note are the divorce laws which are far fairer towards women than the laws in Classical Athens. In Magnesia, divorce depends upon the agreement of ten Guardians and the ten women who are responsible for marriage. These members will make up a court in order to determine whether there is no possibility of saving the couples' marriage. If the court decides that reconciliation cannot occur, the couple may part ways and the court shall attempt to find new partners for the male and female.<sup>143</sup> The Magnesian procedure greatly differs from Athenian divorce, where a husband could send his wife back to her family or guardian without any legal action; the wife did at least

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<sup>142</sup> *Laws* 925b-c.

<sup>143</sup> Chase 1993, 148. *Laws* 929e-930a.

get to keep her dowry.<sup>144</sup> This system was not only unfair to women in that no legal process was necessary for their husbands to divorce them, but it was also extremely difficult for a woman to divorce her husband. A wife could only divorce her husband with the aid of her former guardian, and then present the Archon with a writ of divorce that had to be successfully defended.<sup>145</sup> Another legal departure from Classical Athens is that in Magnesia, a woman over the age of forty and without a husband can act as an associate in a legal case and can bring suit as well.<sup>146</sup> In Athens, a woman could do little without a male as her legal representative.<sup>147</sup>

### III.

In the second chapter I argued that Plato was aware of wise priestesses such as Diotima and educated courtesans like Aspasia, so even though his comments on idle Athenian housewives are unforgiving, he knew not all women were in such a poor state. Plato was aware different Greek states gave women different roles, and put this empirical knowledge to work in the *Laws*. Such knowledge is vital for it demonstrates the power of habituation, enabling Plato to look at a society's institutions and see how they affect women. Had

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<sup>144</sup> Lysias, *Against Alcibiades*, I, 28; Pseudo-Demosthenes, *Against Neaera*, 51 ff., 82 ff.

<sup>145</sup> Demosthenes, *Against Onetor*, I, 17, 26, 31; Isaeus, *On the Estate of Pyrrhus*, 78. Andocides, *Against Alcibiades*, 14, Alcibiades wife was forced to go the Archon without her legal protector.

<sup>146</sup> Chase 1933, 160.

<sup>147</sup> Isaeus, *On the Estate of Pyrrhus*, 2-3.

Plato thought the women in Magnesia were not potentially virtuous or good, he could have treated them as the Thracians did: "What about the practice of the Thracians and many other peoples, who make their women work on the land and mind sheep and cattle, so that they turn into skivvies indistinguishable from slaves?"<sup>148</sup> The Athenian is much more impressed and influenced in the *Laws* by the Spartan treatment of women. Unlike the Athenians, the Spartans:

Make your girls take part in athletics and you give them a compulsory education in the arts; when they grow up, though dispensed from working wool, they have to 'weave' themselves a pretty hard-working sort of life which is by no means despicable or useless...but they don't take up military service. This means that even if there were some extreme emergency ever led to a battle for their state and the lives of their children, they wouldn't have the expertise to use bows and arrows, like so many Amazons, nor could they join men in deploying any other missile.<sup>149</sup>

Plato, however, proposes to go farther than the Spartans, for he is conscious of another contemporary Greek state with military trained women: the Sarmatians, who Plato hopes to recreate in Magnesia. The Spartan women are industrious, but:

I would speak without being at all afraid of the argument that horseback riding and gymnastics are fitting for men, but not fitting for women. For I am persuaded by the ancient stories I have heard, and at this moment, so to speak, I know there are countless myriads of women around the Black Sea - women called Sarmatians - who are enjoined to handle not only horses, but the bow and the other weapons as well, in equality with men, and who practice them equally.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *Laws* 805d-e.

<sup>149</sup> *Laws* 806a-b.

<sup>150</sup> *Laws* 805a.

Plato's awareness and knowledge of women's roles in other cultures is essential, for it proves he was aware that women were capable when given an opportunity, and in the case of the Sarmatian women, they rival their men. Since Plato was unlikely to think Athenian women fundamentally or inherently different from Spartan or Sarmatian women, Plato would have correctly inferred that the most logical explanation for the Athenian housewife's state was the way Athenian social institutions habituated her to be.

Another point of scholarly controversy is the question of women's role in the military. The Athenian himself wavers on how much military training is appropriate for women, sometimes declaring that women's participation is optional and at other points that it is mandatory. We see an example of the former when the Athenian states:

When the boys and girls have reached the age of six, the sexes should be separated; boys should spend their days with boys and girls with girls. Each should attend lessons. The males should go to teachers of riding, archery, javelin-throwing and slinging-and the females too - if they are agreeable, may attend at any rate the lessons, especially those in the use of weapons.<sup>151</sup>

Here we see a clear indication that girls should be allowed to participate if they wish, but they are by no means forced to do so. One way of understanding this passage is that the Athenian is cognizant

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<sup>151</sup> *Laws* 794a.

that the first few generations of women will be wary of military training, so he leaves the door open for later generations of girls who will see no reason not to participate. The following passage, however, directly contradicts the previous passage by making martial training necessary:

Lessons must be attended by the boys and men of the state, and the girls and women as well, because they too have to master these techniques. While still girls, they must practice every kind of dancing and fighting in armor, when grown women, they must play their own part in maneuvering, getting into battle formation and taking off and putting on weapons, if only to ensure that if it ever proves necessary for the whole army to leave the state and take the field abroad, so that the children and the rest of the population are left unprotected, the women at least will be able to defend them. <sup>152</sup>

I contend that this passage is closer to Plato's view, for half of the motivation to train women in the first place was to increase the military's capacity. This passage still presents us with a further ambiguity when he states that women must be trained to fight in case the city is attacked while the army is elsewhere. One obvious interpretation is that women will not actively serve in the military, so when the male army is away, all the women in Magnesia can defend the city. I believe that Plato has a different picture in mind: the army is comprised of men and women, and the women left to defend the city are the women who are too young to serve, women under forty. Admittedly the reason women under forty are not allowed to serve is

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<sup>152</sup> *Laws* 813e-814a.

that they must focus on bearing healthy children for the state, but it would be nearly impossible for all the women in Magnesia to be very far along in their pregnancies at the same time. In theory, a certain proportion of the women will be too far along in their pregnancy to fight, but all the other women under forty can defend the city. Another passage which lends credibility to this theory acknowledges that females can be fearsome warriors when protecting their young. The Athenian posits a situation where Magnesia is invaded when the army is away. He explains the disastrous consequences for Magnesia if:

Women proved to have been so shockingly ill-educated that they couldn't even rival female birds, who are prepared to run every risk and die for their chicks fighting against the most powerful of wild animals. What if instead of that, the women promptly made off to temples...with the disgrace of being by nature the most lily-livered creatures under the sun?<sup>153</sup>

What this statement suggests is that if women are not educated, they act cowardly without even showing the bravery of female birds. We are well aware, though, that this is not the case in Magnesia; since women will be educated and trained to fight, it is not difficult to surmise that the women under forty left to guard Magnesia will fight fiercely to defend their young.

Plato then clearly believes women - and not just a select few - can accomplish martial feats as well as the men if they are given

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<sup>153</sup> *Laws* 814

the opportunity to learn and practice. The tasks mentioned above, horseback riding and handling various weapons, lend credibility to the argument that Plato envisaged women in Magnesia as full members of the army and not just in supporting roles. We also see here a critique of Athenian society, for if women can become warriors if given the opportunity, then the poor condition the Athenian housewife is in is the fault of Athenian society rather than any natural defect in women. The Athenian continues the passage above by claiming:

If, indeed, it is possible for these things to turn out this way, then the way that they are now arranged in our lands - where it is not the case that all the men with their entire strength...practice the same things as women - is the most mindless of all. For in this way, almost every city is just about half of what it might be, when with the same expenditures and efforts it could double itself.<sup>154</sup>

We must note that the Athenian declares that states like Classical Athens are "half" of their potential, whereas if women were trained equally with the men, the state's capacities would be "doubled." The choice of "half" and "double" demonstrate that Plato believes women's efforts will equal and match those of the men. This is an important point, for some argued that the female Guardians in the *Republic* would be inferior to the male Guardians but here we have evidence that Plato views women's talents to equal those of men. We must also bear this point in mind when it comes to Magnesia, for this

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<sup>154</sup> *Laws* 805a-b.



concept gives Plato reason and motive to have the women in Magnesia contribute just as much as the men.

There has been much scholarly debate on whether Plato truly intended the women of Magnesia to hold office. Trevor Saunders is correct when he states that we should not be asking if Plato meant for women to hold office and expect a straight yes or no answer. As Saunders explains, a better question is "Would he have intended it, once convinced it was feasible?"<sup>155</sup> Saunders continues to argue that in accordance with Plato's:

own functional and pragmatic premises, he surely would have regarded any state in which women hold major office successfully as a better state than one in which they do not. In Magnesia, by accident or design, he is not clear whether he envisages it; but he has at any rate left the door open, and would surely be very happy to see the Magnesians walk through it.<sup>156</sup>

I disagree with Saunders in that I do believe Plato envisages women holding office, but his remark brings up an interesting possibility. Perhaps a better way of stating Saunders' comment is that Plato did not think the first female colonists or even the first few generations of female Magnesians would hold office. This position makes pragmatic sense as the first female settlers would lack the education to hold office, and if they found the idea of eating in public outlandish, then the idea of holding office would have been beyond imagination. The

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<sup>155</sup> Saunders (1995, p. 604).

<sup>156</sup> Saunders (1995, p. 604).

daughters of these first settlers would have the education to hold office, but lingering prejudices or social views from their parents may dissuade them from running. By around the third generation, however, one can see that those young girls would see no reason why they should not hold office. Admittedly this transition may take more generations, but the chief point is that Plato did envisage women holding office, but he was aware that it would take time to bring this about. In this respect I agree with Saunders that Plato has “left the door open,” but I do not think Plato would have *only* been “very happy to see the Magnesians walk through it.” Instead, Plato fully expected women to walk through it, for a state in which women did not hold office is not nearly as good as a state where women did.

#### **IV.**

One way of resolving the tension between the praise for the women of Magnesia and their capacities and Plato’s negative remarks is similar to the way we solved this problem in the *Republic*: when Plato discusses the women who have been raised in Magnesia he sees them as equal to the men, but when he speaks of the female colonizers he declares that they are secretive, crafty, etc. A good example of a discussion where Plato makes negative remarks on the female colonizers’ nature occurs as the Athenian explains that communal meals for women must be mandatory since they are used

to seclusion and will have difficulty adjusting to their new dining arrangements. The Athenian, knowing the female colonizers are habituated to seclusion asks:

How on earth are you going to avoid being laughed to scorn when you try to force women to take their food and drink in public...women have got used to a life of obscurity and retirement, and any attempt to force them into the open will provoke tremendous resistance from them.<sup>157</sup>

The key point in this passage is that “women have got used to a life of obscurity,” so they will be habituated to protest with “tremendous resistance.” Not only does the Athenian believe the women will resist this measure, they will do so because they are inclined to be secretive and crafty:

On the contrast, half the human race - the female sex, the half which in any case is inclined to be secretive and crafty, because of its weakness - has been left to its own devices because of the misguided indulgence of the legislator. Because you neglected this sex, you gradually lost control of a great many things which would be in a far better state today if they had been regulated by law. You see, leaving women to do what they like is not just to lose half the battle (as it may seem): a woman’s natural potential for virtue is inferior to a man’s, so she’s proportionally a greater danger, perhaps even twice as much.<sup>158</sup>

Athenian wives *would* appear secretive to the Athenian stranger, and it is also possible that without as many rights or education, a woman in Athens would need to be cunning to get what she desired.<sup>159</sup> More specifically, weakness does not always make women secretive and

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<sup>157</sup> *Laws* 781d.

<sup>158</sup> *Laws* 781a-b.

<sup>159</sup> Bobonich 2004, 387.

crafty, but it inclines them to be so. If women are given educational and physical training, however, they will not be weak and will not need to resort to subterfuge. Plato does not blame the women, but the legislators, for by having “neglected this sex, you gradually lost control of a great many thing which would be in a far better state today if they had been regulated by law.”<sup>160</sup> There is no doubt concerning the negativity of this statement, but there is reason to believe that women’s inferiority is a result of how they have been habituated, for the next line states, “So the happiness of the state will be better served if we reconsider the point and put things right, by providing that all our arrangements apply to men and women alike.”<sup>161</sup> It should also be remembered that the Athenian is in the midst of a conversation with the Cretan Clinias and the Spartan Megillus, which entails that the Athenian must not only persuade the reader of his measures, but his two companions as well. Though Clinias and Megillus prove themselves worthy interlocutors, they are more influenced by the social conventions of their time than the Athenian. When the Athenian therefore makes declarations such as a woman’s natural potential for virtue is less than a man’s, he may be framing the argument at a level where it is more likely to influence Clinias and Megillus. We have such an example at 805a-b, where after the

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<sup>160</sup> *Laws* 781a.

<sup>161</sup> *Laws* 781b.

Athenian describes the impressive Sarmatian women and continues to declare that the current state affairs entails that a state only develops half its potential, Clinias responds:

A lot of these proposals, sir, are incompatible with the average state's social structure. However, you were quite right when you said we should give the argument its head, and only make up our minds when it had run its course. You've made me reproach myself for having spoken.<sup>162</sup>

This quote indicates that even though Plato believes women are as good by nature as men, he must occasionally pitch the argument at a level which will appeal to his interlocutors' sensibilities as to what is natural for women. A curious result is that even if Plato does not convince Clinias and Megillus that women are not by nature inferior to men, they will still have reason to support the Athenian's proposals for women; if women are weaker and more deceitful than men, they are therefore potentially dangerous in secret and accordingly must be made to be in public. Another interpretation of woman's natural potential being inferior to man's is that this will only apply to the first generation of colonizers.

We must not forget that the men and women who will colonize Magnesia will not be citizens who have benefited from Plato's rigorous education system. Rather, they will suffer from the common prejudices and institutions of their time and society, so the women

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<sup>162</sup> *Laws* 805a-b.

who will colonize Magnesia may in fact be inferior to their husbands. Taking this into account we must imagine how the typical Athenian wife, accustomed to spending the majority of her time in her own home, would react to being told not only that she must have communal meals with every other female citizen of Magnesia, but that she also has a right to vote and hold office, and a duty to serve in the military. It is hard to imagine anyone not having a certain degree of difficulty in adjusting to this requirement. As the generations change their ways through the superior laws of Magnesia, the women will shed the characteristics which Athenian social institutions produced. The detailed nature of the *Laws* demonstrates Plato's belief that good laws make good people, and by creating laws that educate women he believes that women will become good enough to hold office in the state; hardly a duty he would give to those of questionable virtue or nature. There is a point Plato does not make, though it would not be inconsistent with his views on habituation: if in a different society gender roles were reversed and the women were lawmakers while men were uneducated and idle at home, then the men would be just as secretive as the women of Classical Athens.

The Athenian stranger paves the way for an argument on the equality of the sexes when he discusses ambidexterity and claims that right-handedness is not related to our nature but due to habituation.

The Athenian declares that habituation of this kind is wasteful for it unnecessarily squanders half of our natural talent.<sup>163</sup> After discussing how the two sexes should be educated the Athenian states:

People think that where the hands are concerned right and left are *by nature* suited for different specialized tasks - whereas of course in the case of the lower limbs there is obviously no difference in efficiency at all. Thanks to the silly ideas of nurses and mothers we've all been made lame-handed so to speak. The natural potential of each arm is just about the same, and the difference between them is our own fault, because we've habitually misused them.<sup>164</sup>

If taken in the context of sex equality and education, this passage strongly asserts that "there is obviously no difference in efficiency at all," and that habituation of this sort leads us to be "made lame-handed so to speak." He also asserts that the "natural potential of each arm," or boy and girl, "is just about the same," and therefore any difference between them is not natural but as a result of having "habitually misused them."<sup>165</sup> Such a strong argument echoes those of the *Republic*, so it is interesting to note that in the *Laws* this argument is not made explicitly in reference to sex but is placed after a discussion on educating the sexes. But once this *Republic*-like argument is made the Athenian pulls back.

## V.

In this section I shall turn my attention to the *Timaeus*,

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<sup>163</sup> *Laws* 794d-795a.

<sup>164</sup> *Laws* 794d-e.

<sup>165</sup> *Laws* 794e Okin 1979, 61.

where Plato makes possibly his most negative comments on women. Chronologically the *Timaeus* takes place the day after Socrates has given a discourse similar to that of the *Republic*. Socrates begins the dialogue by briefly recounting the discourse's three-fold division of labor, the Guardians' education, and how Guardians must search for the best children in order to provide them with the proper education.<sup>166</sup> There is no indication in Socrates' summarization that he has revised his opinion on female Guardians, for Socrates states "In fact we even made mention of women. We said that their natures should be made to correspond with those of men, and that all occupations, whether having to do with war or with other aspects of life, should be common to both men and women."<sup>167</sup> Socrates is present for the entire *Timaeus*, but the majority of the text is a speech by Timaeus, a cosmology describing the origins of the world. Having spent the earlier part of the chapter discussing the Athenian stranger, we know we cannot necessarily infer anything from a change in narrator. Timaeus, however, differs from the Athenian in an important way: Socrates *is* present for the dialogue, so Plato's usual mouthpiece is in attendance but mostly silent; the Athenian stranger, though, is Plato's only spokesman in the *Laws*. The question, then, arises of how much of Timaeus' discourse Plato subscribes to. As Cooper notes "Plato, as

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<sup>166</sup> *Timaeus* 18c-e.

<sup>167</sup> *Timaeus* 18c.



author of the work, is responsible for all Timaeus' theories," but it is unclear if the theories embody Plato's own theories.<sup>168</sup> Cooper also asks us to consider the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates claims that speakers well trained in the art of rhetoric will found their speech on the truth, but they are prepared to alter and exaggerate their account to keep the listener engaged and convince him as to what the most important points are.<sup>169</sup> Timaeus may be Plato's mouthpiece, but it would be careless to forget the *Phaedrus's* warnings on rhetoric.

Much of the literature on Plato's views of women reference the *Timaeus* to demonstrate that despite the positive comments Plato makes in dialogues such as Book V of the *Republic*, he still retains the belief that women are by nature inferior to men. Indeed, the *Timaeus* is unlikely to be used a starting point in a defense of Plato on this topic, but it is not necessarily as negative as most believe. One important distinction that is commonly disregarded is that the *Timaeus* is a cosmology, an entirely different kind of text than the political treatises of the *Republic* and the *Laws*. These dialogues were concerned with women's capacity for virtue and the quality of their souls whereas the *Timaeus* is concerned with women's biology. This entails that any negative biological remarks made regarding women in the *Timaeus* do not necessarily apply to Plato's political beliefs.

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<sup>168</sup> Cooper 1997, 1225.

<sup>169</sup> Cooper 1997, 1225.

We also should not be surprised that a biological account of men and women will focus on their bodily and reproductive differences rather than concern itself with souls and virtues, for it is exactly the biological difference between men and women that makes reproduction possible. Therefore, any comments that Plato makes concerning women cannot be taken as evidence that he sees women's potential for virtue as inferior to that of men.

Once Timaeus finishes describing the creation of men he states "We should go on to mention briefly how other living things came to be - a topic that won't require many words. By doing this we'll seem to be in better measure...so far as our words on these subjects are concerned."<sup>170</sup> This comment, however, is misleading as women are vital for human reproduction and especially important in this cosmology as all animals in one matter or another descend from humans.<sup>171</sup> Though Timaeus does not spare many words on women, those he does are possibly the most pejorative in the Platonic canon: "All male-born humans who lived lives of cowardice or injustice were reborn in the second generation as women."<sup>172</sup> Besides the brevity of this statement, one striking feature is that there is no explanation of how the second generation of humans was born.

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<sup>170</sup> *Timaeus* 90e.

<sup>171</sup> *Timaeus* 91d-92c.

<sup>172</sup> *Timaeus* 91a.

Without any women the logistics are puzzling. More important than the pragmatic difficulties of a second generation of humans produced without women, is the fact that all women are by nature inferior to men. If all women were cowardly or unjust men in their previous life, then it is impossible for a soul in a woman's body to be as virtuous as a soul in a man's body. Curiously there is no mention of whether a woman might be able to change her lot. Take for example a woman lived a just and good life; could she "upgrade" to a man's body in the next life? It is unfortunate that this is cosmological discourse at this point, for if it were political it is likely Plato would have provided an explanation for how such an "upgrade" could be achieved as the *Timaeus* appears to allow them.

The most famous association of women and the *Timaeus* is their being second-generation cowardly men, but the second is not a discussion of women directly, but of the "receptacle." The receptacle enters the dialogue when Timaeus begins his second account of the creation of the world. Concerning Timaeus' previous endeavor, he admits:

I couldn't convince even myself that I could be right to commit myself to undertaking a task of such magnitude. I shall keep to...likely accounts, and so shall try right from the start to say about things...what is no less likely...than what I have said before.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *Timaeus* 48d.

Although this statement occurs before describing the receptacle, we must remember that even his account of second-generation women is also therefore only “likely,” though this likeliness is due to the vague nature of cosmology. Also of note is that though “likely” is less definite than “certain,” a “likely” account still contains reasons for it to be believed to be true. Yet, Timaeus is not as convinced that women are second-generation cowardly men as Socrates is when he states that women are capable of becoming Guardians; this is of course unfair to Timaeus as Socrates’ subject matter allows a greater degree of certainty whereas Timaeus’ does not. On this train of thought, however, it is permissible to think that Timaeus does not rule out that females occurred in the first generation and not only as returning cowardly men. If we look at a few words before that passage we see that Timaeus states “According to our likely account, all male-born humans who lived lives of cowardice or injustice were reborn in the second generation as women.”<sup>174</sup> Clearly this is also another “likely” account, but more importantly, it does not explicitly preclude the existence of first generation women. If first generation women did exist, it would dissolve the mystery of how a second generation could be born if there were no women in the first. It easy to assume why one would suppose women are precluded, but the text does not

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<sup>174</sup> *Timaeus* 91a.

definitively state so. The obvious objection to this argument is that if there were first generation women, why make the cowardly first generation men women in the next? One possible answer I will explore is that this is not a political text, so when it discusses women it is doing so from a fully biological perspective.

As Timaeus does not directly critique women's nature, it is possible to assume that the reason why becoming a woman is a punishment is due to biology as well; more specifically, the biological discomfort associated with giving birth and other hormonal aspects such as menstruation and menopause. It is clear that Timaeus is aware that certain aspects of women's biology are unpleasant, for when he discusses reproduction he states that:

A woman's womb or uterus, as it is called, is a living thing within her with a desire for childbearing. Now when this remains unfruitful for an unseasonably long period of time, it is extremely frustrated and travels everywhere up and down her body. It blocks up her respiratory passages, and by not allowing her to breathe it throws her into extreme emergencies, and visits all sorts of other illnesses upon her until finally the woman's desire and the man's love brings them together.<sup>175</sup>

The biological process of *hysteria* that Timaeus references, it does not seem an enjoyable one.<sup>176</sup> It is therefore possible that the demotion to a woman has to do with biology rather than nature. If this is true,

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<sup>175</sup> *Timaeus* 91c.

<sup>176</sup> As was noted earlier and as was discussed earlier in this chapter, women had no control over how and when they became pregnant so it is not difficult to imagine a man wishing to avoid upwards of ten pregnancies; pregnancies which often lead to the mother's death.

then it ties in with the concept of women upgrading and becoming a man in the next generation, for if she lived virtuously she would avoid the biological discomforts of being a woman in her next life. Timaeus also has an opportunity to criticize women when he discusses how various animals descend from flawed humans, but instead of stating that animals derive from flawed women, they all descend from flawed men.<sup>177</sup>

To return to the receptacle, Timaeus revises his previous claim that the universe had two kinds to say that there are now three. The first kind "was proposed as a model, intelligible and always changeless," and the second kind was "an imitation of the model, something that possesses becoming and is visible."<sup>178</sup> The new addition of the third kind is in Timaeus' own words "difficult and vague," and he defines it as "a *receptacle* of all becoming - its wetnurse, as it were."<sup>179</sup> After a failed attempt at describing its nature he tries again by taking the example of gold which can be melted into any shape. Timaeus states that if one saw a gold triangle and asked what it was, it would be incorrect to say "triangle" for the shape can change, but if one says "gold" one will have grasped its unchanging nature.<sup>180</sup> Timaeus continues:

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<sup>177</sup> *Timaeus* 91d-92b.

<sup>178</sup> *Timaeus* 49a.

<sup>179</sup> *Timaeus* 49a.

<sup>180</sup> *Timaeus* 50b.

Now the same account...holds also for nature which receives all the bodies. We must always refer to it by the same term, for it does not depart from its own character in any way. Not only does it always receive all things, it has never in any way whatever taken on any characteristic similar to any of the things that enter it. Its nature is to be available for anything to make its impression upon...These are the things that make it appear different at different times. The things that enter and leave it are imitations of those things that always are, imprinted after their likeness in a marvelous way that is hard to describe.<sup>181</sup>

We clearly have a woman-type figure in the receptacle, but it is difficult to say whether one can garner a position on women from it. Plato describes the three *eide* of Timaeus' second account as "that which is generated, and that in which it is generated, and that of which what was generated is a naturally derived resemblance. What is generated may be likened to a child and what harbors it may be likened to the womb of a mother."<sup>182</sup> It would appear that the receptacle functions in a reproductive sense and is viewed as necessary and positive. Timaeus explains the receptacle's importance in the universe when he states:

We shouldn't call the mother or receptacle of what has come to be, of what is visible or perceivable in every other way, either earth or air, fire or water, or any of their compounds or their constituents. But if we speak of it as an invisible and characterless sort of thing, one that receives all things and shares in a most perplexing way in what is intelligible, a thing extremely difficult to comprehend, we shall not be misled.<sup>183</sup>

The receptacle itself seems neutral, but it is a necessary, perhaps

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<sup>181</sup> *Timaeus* 50b-c.

<sup>182</sup> *Timaeus* 50c-d.

<sup>183</sup> *Timaeus* 51a-b.

catalyzing, component in the universe. Though we are unclear as to how the receptacle actually interacts with what it receives and shares, it clearly plays a vital role. The receptacle is indeed perplexing, but what is important for our purpose is that it is not inherently negative.

## **VI.**

In this chapter I hope to have demonstrated that despite the return of the family and private property in the *Laws*, there is no reason to think either that Plato has changed his view of women's nature, or that he permits any sex-based discrimination. To do so would be unjust, and the only injustice he is allowed to admit in terms of the family is private attachments. We must also remember that any negative comments concerning women's nature reference the female colonizers, but that within a few generations the good laws of Magnesia will re-habituate the women so these remarks are no longer accurate.



## Chapter Four

In the painter Raphael's *The Schools of Athens*, Plato is portrayed as pointing up towards the heavens representing his belief in the Forms whereas Aristotle gestures to the earth, representing his belief that knowledge is gained from empirical observation and experience. The differences in Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies are of course far more complex than *The Schools of Athens* portrays, but in fact it broadly captures a main distinction in their approach to philosophy. Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies are more connected than almost any other pair of philosophers, for Aristotle was Plato's student at his Academy for nearly twenty years. Perhaps Aristotle's greatest departure from the Platonic tradition is a rejection of Plato's Forms and his replacement of them with observable particulars. For Plato, one could look at a bed, but this bed derived its "bedness" from the universal Form of Bed. The Form of Bed was intangible, invisible, and immortal, so any bed observed by the human eye was a lesser form of Bed. Aristotle, however, had his own different theory of the

Forms and argued that the universal quality of a thing existed in its physical manifestation; if Aristotle looked at a bed, he would contend that the universal existed not only in the bed in front of him, but also in every manifestation of a bed. This is a dramatically simplified account, but the point to grasp is that Plato does not think knowledge and truth can be observed in the physical world and therefore discounts empirical observations, while Aristotle believes truth can be derived from observation and experience. Their methods will have implications for what each deems the appropriate role for women in society. Plato is able to conclude a woman should not be excluded from any role in virtue of her sex since one's true nature resides in a soul which cannot be observed. Aristotle however, forms his views of women based on observations and therefore cannot escape tying his theory to the Classical Athenian women he observes.

Plato and Aristotle have differing views on women for many reasons, but perhaps the most significant distinction is that Plato thought that since the only difference between good men and women was that "the females bear children while the males beget them, we'll say that there has been no kind of proof that women are different from men."<sup>184</sup> According to Aristotle, however, the relation of men and women is that of ruler and ruled, men and women have distinct

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<sup>184</sup>*Republic* 454e

virtues due to their distinct functions, although women have the capacity to deliberate their reason lacks authority, and while a man can possess practical intelligence the most a woman can achieve is true opinion.<sup>185</sup> Aristotle's ethical theory makes theoretical reasoning necessary in order to achieve true human excellence, since "reason more than anything else is man."<sup>186</sup> This concept combined with Aristotle's account of women's nature, which he characterizes as a defective capacity for rationality,<sup>187</sup> creates an ethical theory that excludes women from ever achieving human excellence. His political theory carries a similar sentiment in that he writes "some should rule and others be ruled, is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule."<sup>188</sup> Though Plato has similar thoughts, his are based on one's soul rather than one's sex.

Aristotle's negative conclusions concerning women's capacities are surprising considering he knew of impressive women such as Aspasia and knew Plato's arguments in Book V of the *Republic*, even if Aristotle disagreed with them. Aristotle was Macedonian rather than Athenian, but he was likely aware of women's role in religion, of wise women such as Diotima, and that the city of Athens is named

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<sup>185</sup> *Pol.* 1.13, 3.4.1277b24-29, *NE* 8.7.1158b11-28, 8.11.1161a22-25, *Rhet.* 1.5.1361a4-16.

<sup>186</sup> *NE.* 10.7.1178a7-8.

<sup>187</sup> *NE.* 8.9.1160b32-37, *Pol.* 1.5. 1254b12-15.

<sup>188</sup> *Pol.* 1.5.1254a21-23.

after Athena, goddess of wisdom. Plato's observations lead him to conclude that the poor state of Athenian women is due to habituation and Athenian social institutions, but he recognizes that better laws will produce good women. Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not aim to create the ideal state nor radically alter society, but one wonders how he could not attribute even a degree of blame on Athenian social institutions, particularly since like Plato he knew women in other cultures labored to their benefit. In the *Generation of Animals* he writes of women experiencing discomfort during pregnancy:

Their way of life is partly responsible for this, for being sedentary they are full of more residual matter; among nations where the women live a laborious life gestation is not equally conspicuous and those who are accustomed to hard work bear children easily both there and elsewhere; for work consumes the residual matter, but those who are sedentary have a great deal of it in them because not only is there no monthly discharge during pregnancy but also they do not work; therefore their travail is painful. But work exercises them so that they can hold their breath, upon which depends the ease or difficulty of child-birth.<sup>189</sup>

This passage presents many questions for Aristotle for if he knows some women "live a laborious life," then how can he claim as he does in the *History of Animals* that women are soft and unable to withstand levels of pain that men can?<sup>190</sup> Given that Aristotle is aware that exercise benefits women one expects him to advocate at least moderate exercise and a less sedentary lifestyle for Athenian women,

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<sup>189</sup> *GA* 4.6.775a30-b2.

<sup>190</sup> *HA* 9.1.608b1.

but he instead argues women are by nature intended to remain within the home.<sup>191</sup> It appears Aristotle determined that the traits of Classical Athenian women are the traits characteristic of women by nature; rather than concluding Athenian women are softer and less spirited than Athenian men, Aristotle applied this observation to all women. Mayhew argues Aristotle “seems simply to take the Greek social structure as what is natural” rather than as a social structure.<sup>192</sup> Although Aristotle presumes Athens is superior to its neighbors, this claim should not lead to the conclusion that Athenian society is closer to nature than any other state; while Aristotle can claim Athenian society is superior to all other societies, this does not entail that Athenian society is natural and best.<sup>193</sup>

In addition to the above assumption, Aristotle’s consciousness of popular opinion may have prevented him from questioning Athenian society too harshly. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes:

We must, as in all other cases, set up the apparent facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions about these affections of the mind, or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> *Econ.* 1.3.1343b7-1344a8.

<sup>192</sup> Mayhew 2004, 112.

<sup>193</sup> Mayhew 2004, 113.

<sup>194</sup> *NE* 1145b3-10. We must be careful, however, not to take this passage to indicate that Aristotle always aimed to uphold common opinions. Rather, he was conscious that common opinion often contained a grain of truth.

Here we see another distinction between Plato and Aristotle: Plato views the public as corrupting and incompatible with philosophy whereas Aristotle seeks to find the best of popular opinion. Plato states his opinion of the multitude when he writes:

The members of the small group have tasted how sweet and blessed a possession of philosophy is, and at the same time they've also seen the madness of the majority and realized...that hardly anyone acts sanely in public affairs and that there is no ally with whom they might go to the aid of justice and survive...just like a man who has fallen among wild animals...nor sufficiently strong to oppose the general savagery alone.<sup>195</sup>

Plato has reason to distrust common opinion in that it was the decision of the many to sentence Socrates to death on charges of impiety, and partly from this disdain stems his ability to see beyond the conventions of his time. Plato had no motive to assume that women's role in Athens was best and natural and was therefore able to allow his philosophy to dictate what role women should serve in the state. With Aristotle's concern for maintaining common opinion if possible, he had motive to argue against any radical shift in women's positions. I do not mean to suggest that Aristotle thought women were more capable than common opinion allowed but remained silent in order to avoid controversy - rather, Aristotle genuinely believed women's natural place in society was within the domestic sphere and therefore had no reason to advocate a drastic and difficult-to-implement theory.

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<sup>195</sup> *Republic* 496c-d.

Aristotle's remarks on women's nature and women's biology have received a great deal of attention as well as criticism, but far less attention has been focused on women's actual role within society. This is not surprising as he provides little information on women's ideal duties and capacities, but by looking at texts that center on the home such as the *Economics*<sup>196</sup> we learn that Aristotle views women as essential parts of his society, not merely for their reproductive capacities but for the partnership they form with their husbands.

### I.

In addition to the physical distinctions Aristotle observes between men and women, he also asserts that women are psychologically different from men. Aristotle presents his perceived differences in character and cognition in the *History of Animals*. The passage that best demonstrates this, *HA* 9.1.608a21-b18, is long so I shall only reproduce the most pertinent sections:

In all genera in which the distinction of male and female is found, nature makes a similar differentiation in the characteristics of the two sexes. This differentiation is the most obvious in the case of human kind and in that of the larger animals and the viviparous quadrupeds. For the female is softer in character, is the sooner tamed, admits more readily of caressing, is more apt in the way of learning; as, for instance, in the Laconian breed of dogs the female is cleverer than the male...

In all cases, excepting those of the bear and the leopard, the female is less spirited than the male; in regard to the two

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<sup>196</sup> It is possible that this text was not written by Aristotle but by one of his students. Even if this is not by Aristotle's own hand it almost certainly reflects his views.

exceptional cases, the superiority in courage rests with the female. With all other animals the female is softer in disposition, is more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive, and more attentive to the nurture of the young; the male on the other hand, is more spirited, more savage, more simple and less cunning. The traces of these characteristics are more or less visible everywhere, but they are especially visible where character is the more developed, and most of all in man. The fact is, the nature of man is the most rounded off and complete, and consequently in man the qualities above referred to are found most clearly. Hence woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory. She is also more wakeful, more shrinking, more difficult to rouse to action, and requires a smaller quantity of nutriment. As was previously stated, the male is more courageous than the female, and more sympathetic in the way of standing by to help. Even in the case of cephalopods, when the cuttlefish is struck with the trident the male stands by to help the female; but when the male is struck the female runs away.

Two of the qualities ascribed to females are of particular importance: women are softer and less spirited than men. These two essential qualities appear to lead to, or at least have a connection with, women's cognitive and character traits.<sup>197</sup> In the *HA* passage softness refers to one's ability to manage pleasure and pain.<sup>198</sup> Softness relates to bodily pleasures and physical comfort (*NE* 7.4.1148a11-13, *Rhet* 1.10 1368b18), but primarily relates to one's incapacity to endure physical pain and discomfort that most could if forced:

Now the man who is defective in respect of resistance to the things which most men both resist and resist successfully is soft

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<sup>197</sup> Mayhew 2004, 93.

<sup>198</sup> *NE* 7.4.1147b21-23.



and effeminate; for effeminacy too is a kind of softness; such a man trails his cloak to avoid the pain of lifting it, and plays the invalid without thinking himself wretched...But it is surprising if a man is defeated by and cannot resist pleasures or pains which most men can hold out against, when this is not due to hereditary or disease, like the softness that is hereditary with the kings of the Scythians, or that distinguishes the female sex from the male. (NE 7.7.1150b1-5, b12-16)

Softness in a woman cannot be considered a virtue or a vice (NE 7.1.1145a35-b2) whereas softness in an average male is blameworthy, for his softness is the result of active deliberation.<sup>199</sup> Softness in women as well as in men who are inherently effeminate or ill is not deemed a moral flaw for they are soft by nature. Though women cannot be blamed for their softness, it does lead them to disproportionately value and desire appetitive goods. We should not attach too much importance to softness, however, for softness is a specific trait and Aristotle himself makes the point in the *Eudemian Ethics* that is possible for a man to face death bravely while being easily affected by extremes in temperature.<sup>200</sup>

In addition to their softness, Aristotle asserts that women's souls are less forceful than male souls. Women's lack of spirit entails that they are less emotional in regard to emotions connected to "spirit"<sup>201</sup> rather than less emotional in regard to the appetites.<sup>202</sup> According to

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<sup>199</sup> Mayhew 2004, 99.

<sup>200</sup> *EE* 3.1,1229b1-8.

<sup>201</sup> Such as "courage" or "temperance."

<sup>202</sup> Mayhew 2004, 100.

Aristotle, women's softness directly relates to their lack of spirit: a woman's desire for appetitive pleasure cannot be checked by her weak spirit. Less spirit corresponds with Aristotle's other claims such as women are cowardly, unlikely to aid another in trouble,<sup>203</sup> tend to lie, and are disingenuous.<sup>204</sup> In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle claims that the spirited are passionate, quick to act, truthful, and candid whereas the less spirited will reflect upon an event and fabricate a story;<sup>205</sup> when a man angers he reacts without delay, but when a woman angers she mulls over the event and conspires for revenge. One's degree of spirit affects how one controls the appetites, for in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle asserts:

[A] passionate man is not given to plotting, nor is anger itself - it is open; but the nature of appetite is illustrated by what the poets call Aphrodite, 'guile-weaving daughter of Cyprus'...Therefore if this form of incontinence is more unjust and disgraceful than that in respect of anger, it is both incontinence without qualification and in a sense vice.<sup>206</sup>

From this evidence Mayhew concludes that Aristotle judges women as susceptible to bodily pleasures and schemers who act deceitfully to satisfy their appetites and evade pain.<sup>207</sup> One cannot easily avoid the conclusion that women by nature have inferior natures than men. Instead of blaming women for their lesser nature, however, Aristotle

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<sup>203</sup> *HA* 608a33-35, b14-18.

<sup>204</sup> *HA* 9.1.608b12.

<sup>205</sup> *Rhetoric* 1.9.1367a38.

<sup>206</sup> *NE* 7.6.1149b1-18.

<sup>207</sup> Mayhew 2004, 101-102.

assumes women are so by nature and therefore unable to be better. Although women are not faulted for their nature, inherent qualities such as impulsiveness<sup>208</sup> compromise a woman's capacity to act morally; if one acts impulsively one has deliberated on the best course of action but does not follow through due to appetites.<sup>209</sup>

Additional traits discussed in the *History of Animals* passage are women's jealousy, complaints, and tendency to fight.<sup>210</sup> Jealousy and a tendency to fight could indicate a strong spirit, but in context it likely refers to envying material goods, fighting over trivial matters, and scolding, while a predisposition to complain correlates to women's softness. Aristotle writes "the female is softer in character, is the sooner tamed, admits more readily of caressing, is more apt in the way of learning,"<sup>211</sup> but the praise in this statement relates to domestication and how one handles animals, entailing that women are more easily trained and tamed than men.<sup>212</sup> Furthermore, the passage begins by discussing women's softness and lack of spirit, and since animals with less spirit are more easily trained and animals with less control of their appetites require training, it implies women are by nature suited to learn domestic duties.

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<sup>208</sup> An additional result of softness. *HA* 9.1.608b1-2.

<sup>209</sup> Mayhew 2004, 102. *NE* 7.7.1150b19-21.

<sup>210</sup> 9.1.608b8-11.

<sup>211</sup> 608a25-28.

<sup>212</sup> 608b3.

When Aristotle claims women are less simple he does not refer to human intelligence but to the kind of low-level cognition found in some animals, and to a degree, in humans. He also states that women have a superior memory, but the context indicates that women have a better memory for perceived insults: "She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory."<sup>213</sup> In the initial passage, Aristotle discusses the natural characteristics that certain animals as well as humans are born with, but we must not confuse these with the traditional human virtues that belong only to humans. Lennox argues that according to Aristotle, "humans begin life with the very *natural capacities* that are the beast's *likeness* of bravery, temperance, understanding, or intelligence, yet end up with quite different *learned and acquired states*, namely *true* bravery and intelligence."<sup>214</sup> When Aristotle makes the positive-sounding claim that women feel more pity, mercy, and compassion it should be noted that these emotions are related to women's tendency to cry and a lack of spirit.<sup>215</sup> Although feeling pity correctly deserves praise, it is unlikely women experience pity appropriately. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes:

[B]oth fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity

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<sup>213</sup> 608b11-13.

<sup>214</sup> Lennox 1999a, 18.

<sup>215</sup> 9.1.608b8-9, *NE* 2.5.1105b21-25.

and in general pleasure and pain may be felt too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of excellence.<sup>216</sup>

Clearly the way one feels pity is not only specific but requires knowledge and sensitivity as to what is too much pity and what is too little. Women therefore feel pity to a higher degree than a man should, but unlike feeling too much anger or fear, feeling pity acutely does not affect anyone negatively, excepting the woman experiencing the pity. Though declaring that women are more compassionate is praise, this praise is used to set up her negative traits: "Hence woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike."<sup>217</sup> Though feeling a greater degree of compassion is still praise, the fact that it is used to illustrate women's truculent nature makes the compassion seem less important.

## **II.**

One of the many departures from Plato's philosophy is Aristotle's perception of emotions which lead him to form a new conception of human psychology.<sup>218</sup> Understanding that the emotions can be persuaded by reason, Aristotle significantly changes his ethical theory

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<sup>216</sup> 2.6.1106b19.

<sup>217</sup> 608b8-11.

<sup>218</sup> As opposed to Plato's tripartite psychology.

which results in a more thorough consideration of women's subordinate role in the state. Aristotle concurred with Plato that one's role in society should be determined by one's nature, entailing that different natures therefore require different roles,<sup>219</sup> while also concurring with Gorgias that women and slaves have distinct virtues from men due to their different roles in society.<sup>220</sup> Aristotle examines women's role in society and the virtues suited to their domestic role<sup>221</sup> and concludes that not only do women require less courage than men,<sup>222</sup> but that "the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying."<sup>223</sup> If, as Aristotle asserts, the sexes have distinct virtues, women are by nature intended to occupy different roles than men, whereas Plato maintains there are no specifically male or female virtues. Plato and Aristotle both compare men and women's physical conditions and conclude that women are physically weaker, but while Plato attaches little importance to the distinction, Aristotle understands women's physical weakness as an indication that they are meant to occupy a domestic role.

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<sup>219</sup> *Pol.* 1.13.1260b27-28.

<sup>220</sup> *Pol.* 1260a15-17.

<sup>221</sup> *Pol.* 1.13.1260a16-17.

<sup>222</sup> *Pol.* 3.4.1277b20-2.

<sup>223</sup> *Pol.* 1.13.1260a20-24.

The concept of proper virtues for different categories of people in society with the principle that virtue is related to function is important, but the true question occurs on a more essential level: why do different categories of people have distinct roles in the state?<sup>224</sup> The answer lies in observing how Aristotle's new bipartite psychology and the ability to deliberate leads to differences in the souls of the sexes. Aristotle explains the relationship between husband and wife as ruler to subject and writes:

Here the very constitution of the soul has shown us the way; in it one part naturally rules, and the other is subject, and the excellence of the ruler we maintain to be different from that of the subject - the one being the excellence of the rational, and the other of the irrational part.<sup>225</sup>

Men therefore naturally rule women due to the rationality of men's souls and the irrationality of women's souls. Aristotle continues:

[T]he slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature. So it must necessarily be supposed to be with the excellences of character also; all should partake of them, but only in such manner and degree as is required by each for the fulfillment of his function.<sup>226</sup>

Women are thus comparable to slaves and children in that none have control over their deliberative capacity. Women, however, significantly differ from slaves and children in that women's deliberative capacity is not in some way defective, as are the others; instead, women's

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<sup>224</sup> Fortenbaugh 1975, 138.

<sup>225</sup> *Pol.* 1.13.1260a4-7.

<sup>226</sup> *Pol.* 1.13.1260a14-17.

capacity to deliberate is *akuron*, meaning it lacks authority and is often overruled by emotions and appetites. Although women's major flaws are of a volitional nature, this flaw is not as significant as an inability to reason due to the extreme importance Aristotle places on one's deliberative capacity. Rather than base decisions on reason women are directed by pleasure, in need of temperance, and ill-suited for any position of responsibility in society.

Women's functioning ability to deliberate is often overshadowed by the claim that women cannot achieve human excellence, but the essential point to grasp is that this is due to the strength of their emotions rather than a flaw in their reasoning. According to Aristotle, women are intelligent, capable of deliberation, and of giving logical advice, so it is not that women cannot deliberate logically, but that emotions are likely to overpower their deliberations.<sup>227</sup> Proof of his recognition of female intelligence is that it is in virtue of their intelligence that they differ from slaves, who have no reason whatsoever, and children who have reason but use it imperfectly. Euripides' *Medea* demonstrates not only Aristotle's conception of how the emotions overrule reason, but the way Classical Athenians perceived women and how they were portrayed in literature. Medea, angered that her husband Jason has abandoned her for another

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<sup>227</sup> Fortenbaugh 1994, 139. Fortenbaugh notes that this view of women was common in the literature of the time. 139



woman, plots to take her revenge by murdering her children fathered by Jason. Upon deliberation, Medea accepts that killing her own children for revenge is not a proportional response and would greatly pain her as well. Although Medea does indeed waver after deliberating the consequences of her actions, her reason cannot exert the required authority to enable her to follow through with her deliberations and she murders her children.<sup>228</sup> Aristotle clearly sees defects in women's ability to control their passions, but he does not fault their actual capacity to reason; just because a woman acts unreasonably and emotionally does not entail that she is incapable of producing intelligent thought. As Fortenbaugh notes<sup>229</sup> however, Aristotle's evidence of women's acumen was due to the belief that "Women are most clever contrivers of every evil."<sup>230</sup> Aristotle likely assumes women turn their deliberations towards an end that is motivated by their emotions, so like Medea, women recognize that what they are about to do is wrong but are not dissuaded by this recognition.<sup>231</sup>

Although Aristotle's conclusions about women have led many to claim he was blinded by prejudice or was a flawed but eager biologist - and to a certain degree both claims may be true - Aristotle's views are in fact the result of his new conception of the soul in combination with

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<sup>228</sup> Euripides, *Medea* 285, 1079.

<sup>229</sup> Fortenbaugh 1994, 139.

<sup>230</sup> *Euripides Meadea* 409

<sup>231</sup> Fortenbaugh 1994, 139.

Plato's distinction that one's nature should determine one's role in society. A point where Aristotle departs from Plato is that, where Plato argues people should be judged according to their nature only in the ideal city, Aristotle seeks to apply this in his own society. The fact that citizens are not judged by their nature in the *Laws* indicates that organizing society by nature requires factors such as good laws and wise rulers. This is unsurprising for in order for one to judge the caliber of another's soul, one must have knowledge of what comprises a superior soul as compared to an inferior soul. Only Guardians would be capable of making such distinctions and appropriate judgments and if Guardians only exist in the ideal city, then it is not surprising that Plato does not envisage people being given roles in society based on their nature anywhere else. It is unclear if Aristotle understood the implications of assigning roles in the state based on contemporary laws which are subject to the prejudices of the time, for as noted in the introduction, Aristotle does not account for the fact that the way Classical Athenian society is structured is not in fact closest to nature. Where Plato saw how failings in the law led to the less than impressive women in Athens, Aristotle assumed that women were by nature inferior. This assumption is curious for two reasons: the first being that as a student of Plato, Aristotle would at least be aware that there was a school of thought that believed women had been habituated by

laws and social institutions into their current situation, and second that Aristotle himself set great store in the power of habituation to create moral men. Aristotle writes:

[I]ntellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growing to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit...From this it is also plain that none of the moral excellences arises in us by nature...This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator; and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one.<sup>232</sup>

This statement demonstrates that Aristotle relies on the power of the state and habituation to create good citizens, but by not acknowledging the possibility that the current laws and social institutions had habituated Athenian women to be as they are, he fails to appreciate that women could be habituated differently. This passage is reminiscent of the *Laws* where Plato writes:

If, indeed, it is possible for these things to turn out this way, then the way that they are now arranged in our lands - where it is not the case that all the men...practice the same things as women - is the most mindless of all. For in this way, almost every city is just about half of what it might be, when the same expenditures and efforts it could double itself.<sup>233</sup>

Both quotes recognize that the state has the duty and the responsibility to make good citizens, but more importantly both quotes indicate that both philosophers believe good laws and habituation

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<sup>232</sup> *NE* 2.1.1103a14-b2.

<sup>233</sup> *Laws* 805a-b.

can accomplish this. Even though Aristotle neither appears to have considered whether women in Classical Athens were inferior to men by nature or because they have been formed this way by the state, nor had any wish to introduce a theory of radical political change, it is unfair to state that Aristotle would have kept his negative opinion of women if he had had the thought that women could be habituated to become good.

Of course, on Aristotle's view, the clear impediment towards habituating women differently is that no matter how many changes are made, women are still psychologically different from and inferior to men. Though Aristotle may have viewed some changes in habituation as beneficial for women, there would be little reason to put too much store in habituation. If the main psychological distinction between men and women is that women's reason is *akuron*, then to a degree they cannot be easily habituated. Aristotle recognizes that moral excellence does not arise naturally in anyone, but it appears that due to women's incapacity to control their emotions and resist pleasure, habituating them to experience their emotions appropriately and temperance would go against their fundamental nature.

### **III.**

This section discusses women's excellences, but before doing so one should note that according to Aristotle a society is only truly

happy if its women are happy as well. Aristotle asserts that in states where the women are unhappy, the entire state can only achieve half-happiness in society:

Both male and female are here included; the excellences of the latter are, in body, beauty and stature, in soul, self-command and an industry that is not sordid. Communities as well as individuals should lack none of these perfections, in their women as well as their men. Where, as among the Lacedaemonians, the state of women is bad, almost half of them are not happy.<sup>234</sup>

Unlike Plato, Aristotle places value upon individuals' happiness and deems that women's happiness is of benefit to the entire state. It is unfair though to judge Plato harshly on this point as Plato had no concern for the happiness of any individual or individual group. What is perhaps more noteworthy, however, are the traits that comprise women's excellences. Aristotle does not specifically prescribe how the first, bodily, excellences - stature and beauty - can be achieved but a strong possibility is through moderate exercise. As noted earlier, Aristotle recognizes that women who perform physical labor experience an easier pregnancy and childbirth, making this excellence practical for women's health and well-being. Aristotle does not advocate strenuous physical labor for women, but appreciates that moderate exercise which leads to a good stature provides many benefits for all. Further reason to assume that when Aristotle mentions the excellence of stature he envisages women engaging in moderate

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<sup>234</sup> *Rhet* 1.5.1361a6-12.

exercise is that he advocates exercise during pregnancy. In a passage in the *Politics* reminiscent of the *Laws*, Aristotle writes:

Women who are with child should take care of themselves; they should take exercise and have a nourishing diet. The first of these prescriptions the legislator will easily carry into effect by requiring that they shall take a walk daily to some temple, where they can worship the gods who preside over birth. Their minds, however, unlike their bodies, they ought to keep quiet, for the offspring derive their natures from their mothers as plants do from the earth.<sup>235</sup>

Given the problem of 'residual matter' that results from a sedentary lifestyle, presumably Aristotle would want women who were not pregnant to take moderate exercise as well. Arguing that women should take daily walks, pregnant or otherwise, does not necessarily contradict Aristotle's position that women belong in the domestic sphere. One possible interpretation is that whilst nature intended women to remain in the home, he recognizes that even Classical Athenian women would profit from taking walks. Walking, however, necessarily entails leaving the home, something wealthy Athenian wives only did for occasions such as religious festivals and funerals.<sup>236</sup> Suggesting women take daily walks therefore demonstrates that Aristotle is prepared to propose at least minor changes to the status quo when appropriate.

The excellence of women's souls, self-command, appears at

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<sup>235</sup> *Pol.* 7.16.1335b13-19.

<sup>236</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 71.

odds with Aristotle's writings in the *Politics* where he states that women's deliberations are *akuron*. Admittedly, self-command is a virtue of the soul whereas deliberation is connected to one's capacity for reasoning, so one must be careful before claiming that these positions are contradictory. Yet, how can Aristotle claim that women's excellence of soul is self-command be at least reconciled with his belief that women's deliberations are *akuron*? There does not appear to be a simple resolution to this question. One option is that in the *Politics* Aristotle consciously defends the current social structure of Classical Athens and is therefore more persuaded by the popular sentiment that women cannot control their emotions. Another option is that when discussing the deliberative capacities of slaves, women, and children, he observes his contemporary society and to explain why each occupies the role in society that one does. In the *Rhetoric* passage, however, he describes women's excellences not specifically referencing Athens.

Regardless of how one understands that women have self-command and a deliberative capacity that is *akuron*, the important fact is that Aristotle credits women with having the ability to command their souls. Although self-command is an excellence and not an inherent quality, the fact that women can achieve self-command entails that Aristotle recognizes that women have more control of their

soul, or should at least aim to, than he acknowledges in the *Politics*. One could object, though this objection would be weak, that self-command is an excellence that either women cannot achieve and can only aim for, or that only exceptional women will attain this excellence. This objection would be weak as, firstly, there is little sense in mentioning an excellence that cannot be achieved, and secondly, excellences are not easily achieved by women or men; the nature of an excellence is such that only the best people shall achieve them. It is unclear exactly how women's self-command affects their role in society if one only looks at the *Politics*, but as the next section shall discuss there are other texts such as the *Economics* which portray women's role in society as vital and requiring self-command.

Even should women have self-command, however, it still remains that Aristotle deems it necessary for husbands to govern their wives:

Of household management we have seen that there are three parts - one is the rule of a master over slaves, which has been discussed already, another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature.<sup>237</sup>

The fact that children and women are governed differently, however,

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<sup>237</sup> *Pol.* 1.12.1259a37-b4.



suggests that the relation between men and women in the home is in fact more nuanced than many appreciate. In a royal rule it is quite clear that the superiority and power resides in the ruler, but as Aristotle acknowledges a constitutional rule does not have such obvious distinctions. Aristotle writes:

[I]n most constitutional states the citizens rule and are ruled by turns, for the idea of a constitutional state implies that the natures of the citizens are equal, and do not differ at all. Nevertheless, when one rules and the other is ruled we endeavor to create a difference of outward forms and names and titles of respect...The relation of the male to female is always of this kind.<sup>238</sup>

This passage indicates that the natures between men and women are not markedly dissimilar, but due to the conventions and traditions in governance, it is customary to encourage external differences and ways of being addressed. Aristotle writes "Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind."<sup>239</sup> Aristotle unequivocally declares that the superior party must rule the inferior, but what often goes unnoticed is that Aristotle acknowledges the degrees of inferiority by the type of rule. Children are far inferior and therefore require a royal rule, but by declaring women's rule constitutional, Aristotle recognizes that women are only slightly inferior to men.

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<sup>238</sup> *Pol.* 1.12.1259b4-10.

<sup>239</sup> *Pol.* 1.5.1254b13-14.

When promoting women's excellence of industry, Aristotle is vague for he promotes industry with no other clarification than that it not be sordid. Whatever industry Aristotle does envisage most certainly takes place within the home, but there are still many worthwhile tasks and occupations available to Athenian women in the domestic setting. There is also precedent for having women work in Classical Athenian society without any changes to the current social institutions. In particular, Xenophon describes a conversation between Socrates and Aristarchus where Aristarchus laments that due to the political disorder of the time, Aristarchus was forced to allow fourteen of his female relatives to move into his home for protection. Aristarchus, unable to afford the costs of maintaining them laments his upcoming insolvency. To help, Socrates proposes that Aristarchus' relatives should be put to work. Aristarchus counters that this cannot be done, for women of his class are unused to working. Socrates, however, succeeds in convincing Aristarchus not only that honorable work will not demean the women but also that the women themselves will be far happier if they engage in productive employment.<sup>240</sup> Aristotle does not specifically explain the benefits of industry, but he is well aware that industrious women have an easier experience with pregnancy, and according to Xenophon at least, women are happier

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<sup>240</sup> Pomeroy 1976, 71.

with productive industry. If industrious work is considered a woman's excellence, then we should not be surprised – as I discuss in the next section regarding women's role in society - that women are meant, with their husbands, to significantly contribute to the home.

#### **IV.**

If one only focuses on Aristotle's comments concerning women's nature, Aristotle appears to entertain an unwarrantedly negative opinion of women, but if one investigates Aristotle's conception of a good marriage, one comprehends that Aristotle credits women with a far more important and respected role in society than many appreciate. As stated previously, Aristotle provides his harshest criticism towards women in the *Politics*, a text where he defends the status quo of Classical Athens, therefore in order for him to advocate keeping women in their current position he seeks ways in which they are inferior and require governing. In other texts, however, women play a vital role in the family, and by extension, the state. In Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle discusses friendship, he writes:

Between man and wife friendship seems to exist by nature; for man is naturally inclined to form couples - even more than to form cities, inasmuch as the household is earlier and more necessary than the city, and reproduction is more common to man than with the animals. With the other animals the union extends only to this point, but human beings live together not only for the sake of reproduction but also for the various purposes of life; for from the start the functions are divided,

and those of man and woman are different; so they help each other by throwing their peculiar gifts into the common stock. It is for these reasons that both utility and pleasure seem to be found in this kind of friendship. But this friendship may be based also on excellence, if the parties are good; for each has its own excellence and they will delight in the fact.<sup>241</sup>

Admittedly, the friendship between husband and wife is not the highest form of friendship, but this passage recognizes that women are necessary for domestic happiness as well as reproduction. The type of marriage Aristotle describes requires that both parties exhibit excellences of their respective sex, so even though men and women have different excellences, both must be sufficiently competent to contribute to the family. Aristotle expects women to contribute to the family, if not in equal measure to the men then at least significantly. It seems that if women did not make a considerable contribution to the family Aristotle would not write that men and women help each other by utilizing their individual talent. Aristotle seems to argue that men and women have distinct functions, but each function is considerable and that women could not do men's functions as well as men do, and men could not do women's as well as women do. Of course, the reason women have distinct functions from the men is due to the fact that Aristotle believes they have distinct natures, but yet he does not belittle women's contributions.

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<sup>241</sup> *NE* 8.12.1162a15-27.

Aristotle devotes more attention to the relationship between men and women in marriage in the *Economics* and emphasizes the unique bond between husband and wife. Aristotle writes:

As regards the human part of the household, the first care is concerning a wife; for a common life is above all things natural to the male and to the female. For we have elsewhere laid down the principle that nature aims at producing many such forms of association, just as also it produces the various kinds of animals. But it is impossible for the female to accomplish this without the male or the male without the female, so that their common life has necessarily arisen. Now in the other animals this intercourse is not based on reason, but depends on the amount of natural instinct which they possess and is entirely for the purpose of procreation. But in the civilized and more intelligent animals the bond of unity is more complex (for in them we see more mutual help and goodwill and co-operation), above all in the case of man, because the female and the male co-operate to ensure not merely existence but a good life.<sup>242</sup>

Aristotle believes that the partnership between men and women is not simply convenient or a way of replenishing the state, as Plato views it in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In this text, Aristotle unequivocally states that the women do not make a contribution significant for a woman, but that there is "more mutual help" between the man and the woman. We also see a reassertion that the marriage relationship is not only natural, but that the goodwill between the two results in a good life. Aristotle continues:

Thus the nature both of the man and of the woman has been preordained by the will of heaven to live a common life. For they are distinguished in that the powers which they possess are not applicable to purposes in all cases identical, but in some respects their functions are opposed to one another though

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<sup>242</sup> *Eco.* 1.3.134b7-20.

they all tend to the same end. For nature has made the one sex stronger, while the other weaker, that the latter through fear may be the more cautious, while the former by its courage is better able to ward off attacks; and that the one may acquire possessions outside the house, the other preserve those within. In the performance of work, she made one sex able to lead a sedentary life and not strong enough to endure exposure, the other less adapted for quiet pursuits but well constituted for outdoor activities; and in relation to offspring she has made both share in the procreation of children, but each render its peculiar service towards them, the woman by nurturing, the man by educating them.<sup>243</sup>

Unlike Plato who views the soul as sexless, Aristotle believes that a woman's body and a man's body possess preordained natures, thereby preventing any need to investigate what a woman's nature is best suited to do; one's sex, not one's soul, determines what one is most suited to do by nature. On Aristotle's account, husband and wife work for a common end and this common end resembles a mean with the husband and wife being at opposite ends of the spectrum. Unlike the doctrine of the mean where traits on either side of the mean are flawed, Aristotle views women's weakness and men's strength as good, natural, and necessary. According to Aristotle, nature made women more cautious, weaker, well-suited to a sedentary life, and nurturing for specific reasons. It is important to recognize this point as some believe that, when he states that women are weaker than men, Aristotle is claiming that women are deficient in this respect. What the passage above demonstrates, however, is that women's

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<sup>243</sup> *Eco.* 1.3.1343b7-1344a8.

nature is necessary for their role in the family and not only are women by nature suited to a domestic role, but that men could not perform women's role as well or as contentedly. Aristotle does not keep women within the home because their deliberative capacity lacks authority or because women fall short of men in other vital ways; women have the role they do solely because they are best at it and their success is due to their having the natures they do. Aristotle, then, does not view women as deficient men or as somehow lacking, but as ideally suited by nature to perform the tasks at which they excel and men do not.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle criticizes women's *akuron* deliberative capacity, but passages from the *Economics* portray women as not only capable of running the home without their husband's supervision, but that the husband is blameworthy if there is a lack of affection in the marriage. Aristotle writes that a husband:

[m]ust not do her any wrong; for thus a man is less likely himself to be wronged. This is inculcated by the general law, as the Pythagoreans say, that one least of all should injure a wife as being 'a suppliant and taken from her hearth'. Now wrong inflicted by a husband is the formation of connexions outside his own house. As regards association, she ought not to need him when he is present or be incapacitated in his absence, but should be accustomed to be competent whether he is present or not.<sup>244</sup>

This passage implies that it is in a husband's interest to treat his wife well and not view her as "a suppliant and taken from her hearth." What is more telling, though, is the statement that a wife should not

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<sup>244</sup> *Eco* 1.4.1344a9-15.

need her husband's presence or aid to perform her role as mistress of the home; in order for this statement to be true women require intelligence and practical capacities in order to run the home without requiring supervision. Aristotle continues to write:

The saying of Hesiod is a good one:  
A man should marry a maiden, that habits discreet he may teach  
her.<sup>245</sup>

For dissimilarity of habits tends more than anything to destroy affection. As regards adornment, husband and wife ought not to approach one another with false affection in their person any more than in their manners; for if society of husband and wife requires such embellishment, it is no better than play-acting on the tragic stage.<sup>246</sup>

Aristotle, unlike Plato, sees marriage not only as a necessary and natural social institution but one based on more than procreation. When Plato discusses marriage in the *Laws* there is little mention of the relationship of married couples besides those relating to producing children. Though Plato does provide provisions for divorce if a couple is incompatible, he does not emphasize genuine affection in marriage. It is of course possible that Plato assumes that the couples will come to have affection for each other by living their lives together and raising children, but Aristotle appears to place more value on the emotions between husband and wife. From the passage above, Aristotle gives the husband the responsibility to in some manner form his wife, and if we remember that brides could be as young as fourteen, they likely

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<sup>245</sup> *Works and Days*, 699.

<sup>246</sup> *Eco.* 1.4.1334a15-22.



did require maturing and development. Aristotle recognizes not all couples are so fortunate, but he clearly considers genuine fondness to be the goal, if not the norm, in marriage.

## V.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of Aristotle's conception of women's nature and their resulting role in society is its cohesiveness. The same in fact can be said of Aristotle's entire conception of peoples' natures and their appropriate role, for every nature has a perfectly corresponding role in the state. On Aristotle's account every category of person is specifically designed by nature to occupy a certain role and as a result there is no need for any radical change. More importantly, however, everyone is happy in their role and there is a sense of order and continuity. Another result, however, is that by assuming Classical Athenian society is a reflection of what is natural, women cannot be judged by the merit of their soul or their potential. Women are not the only category not to have an opportunity for a different role in society, as slaves are also deemed to be slaves by nature. Aristotle does not explain women's ideal role in society exactly, though it is clear that it is extremely similar to the role of contemporary Athenian women. What is clear is that women's nature makes their ideal role in society to be within the domestic sphere, and since their inherent nature cannot be changed, this is the only

appropriate role for women.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I have demonstrated that women play a vital role in Plato's and Aristotle's states. Plato is philosophically committed to

only judge people by their nature entailing that there is no such thing as an ideal role for women as such in his state; instead, a person should pursue that which he is meant to do by nature. On Plato's account, the main distinction between men and women is that women give birth, but since he views childbirth as a purely biological process that does not affect one's capacity to reason or one's soul, women cannot be barred from any profession based on sex alone. Aristotle, while believing that men and women have distinct natures, sees the differences between men and women as complimentary rather than in terms of better and worse. Women are not as brave or intelligent, but they have their own unique virtues that are equally necessary to the welfare of the family. Plato and Aristotle did not support modern notions of women's equality, but as shown this does not mean women did not occupy crucial roles in their societies.

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