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Plato and the Greek Tradition of Misogyny

Plato's ideas on the subject of women appear at first to present an unresolvable enigma. One might well ask how the same, generally consistent philosopher can on the one hand assert that the female sex was created from the souls of the most wicked and irrational men, and on the other hand make a far more radical proposal for the equal education and social role of the two sexes than was to be made by a major philosopher for more than two thousand years? How can the claim that women are "by nature" twice as bad as men be reconciled with the revolutionary idea that they should be included among the exalted philosophic rulers of the ideal state? Before we attempt to answer these questions, it is essential to look at the Greek tradition concerning women, and the education, status and treatment of the Athenian women of the time.

From the very beginnings of Greek literature, in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, a strong misogynic strain is obvious. According to Hesiod, after a period in which men alone dwelt on earth, free from disease and toil, it was Pandora, the first woman, who brought evil and misfortune to the world. And "from her is a pernicious race; and tribes of women, a great source of hurt, dwell along with mortal men."¹ Thus the fateful degeneration of the human race began with the appearance of woman, man's eternal punishment. Though she is, unfortunately, necessary for reproduction and can be useful in the household—so that Hesiod advises the aspiring farmer to "First of all get a

house, and a woman, and a ploughing ox"²—he warns his readers that never, on any account, is she to be trusted.

From the Homeric epics we derive a similar picture, though one which is less overwhelmingly hostile to the female sex. In *The World of Odysseus*, M. I. Finley says:

There is no mistaking the fact that Homer fully reveals what remained true for the whole of antiquity, that women were held to be naturally inferior and therefore limited in their function to the production of offspring and the performance of household duties, and that the meaningful social relationships and strong personal attachments were sought and found among men.³

There are depicted, in both epics, goddesses of considerable strength, dignity and prestige, but we must remember that, for the Greeks, the title "goddess" did not necessarily connote all the characteristics that were associated with human femaleness. The most powerful of goddesses, especially Athena, were praised for their "manliness."⁴ In the *Iliad*, mortal women are seldom depicted as anything but causes of jealousy and war, or as part of the booty, along with animals and slaves. In the *Odyssey*, women play a more conspicuous part. With the partial and strange exception of Arete, Queen of the Phaeceans,⁵ however, they are consistently relegated to second-class status. In spite of the fact that Penelope is described as "wise" and as having an "excellent brain," spinning and weaving are clearly her proper functions, and on several occasions she is ordered by her son Telemachus to return to the tasks that befit her, much as if she were a slave. Aristocratic women and even goddesses are shown engaged in domestic tasks such as washing clothes, bathing and making up beds for guests, preparing food, and, almost ceaselessly, working with wool. As Finley says, "Denied the right to a heroic way of life, to feats of prowess, competitive games, and leadership in organized activity of any kind, women worked, regardless of class."⁶ They lived in separate quarters from

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the men, very rarely participated in feasts and festivities, and were sent off or sold as brides to the men their fathers chose for them.

The Homeric epics describe a world in which the standards of excellence applied to persons depend on their respective positions and functions in society. A thorough grasp of this conception of ethics is essential for understanding the classical writings at least up to and including Aristotle. The highest words of praise, *agathos* (good) and *arete* (excellence or virtue), were originally applied only to those who fulfilled the role of a Homeric aristocratic man.⁷ The words meant that the individual to whom they were applied possessed both the internal skills and external resources necessary for the performance of this role. As A. W. H. Adkins says, "To be *agathos*, one must be brave, skillful, and successful in war and in peace, and one must possess the wealth and (in peace) the leisure which are at once the necessary conditions for the development of these skills and the natural reward of their successful employment."⁸ Most of society, and notably women, were ineligible for such an aristocratic and male standard of excellence. Thus, "woman's *arete*" was a qualitatively different concept. The virtues required in women, in order for them to best perform their assigned functions, were the quiet virtues of beauty and stature, skill in weaving and other household accomplishments, and, above all, marital fidelity. The obvious reason for this different standard of excellence in women is, as Adkins points out, that it was men who determined the standards, in this strictly patriarchal culture, so that it was women's performance of their functions in relation to men that was considered important. Thus, being confined within the household, women did not need the competitive and aggressive virtues required by the warrior men.⁹

While the behavior of the Homeric heroes shows clearly that monogamous sexuality was not imposed on men, the worst possible crime a woman could commit was unfaith-

fulness to her husband.¹⁰ Helen, and even worse, Clytemnaestra, traitor as well as adulteress, are the real villains of the Homeric epics, and the latter is constantly held up as a foil to the virtuous Penelope. Woman's susceptibility to seduction is accentuated as her weakest point and her characteristic evil. Even the virtuous Penelope is afraid she will be "bewitched" as Helen was, and in spite of her long-lasting fidelity, the suspicion that she may at length betray or forget Odysseus permeates the poem. Thus the theme of the evil and treacherous female is found in Homer as in Hesiod; Clytemnaestra, we are told, has "branded not herself alone but the whole of her sex and every honest woman for all time to come."¹¹

From the heroic to the classical age, the status of women was generally thought not to have improved, and this was especially true of classical Athens.¹² The narrowly defined function of women as childbearers and housekeepers is well documented in classical Greek literature. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, for example, presents a picture of the exemplary wife for an Athenian landowner. Reared "under diligent supervision in order that she might see and hear as little as possible and ask the fewest possible questions," she is given by her parents to a husband at the age of fifteen, and trained by him just to the extent that she can manage his domestic affairs.¹³ The traditional male-female division of labor is presented to her as foreordained by the gods and deeply rooted in the natural qualities of the two sexes. Victor Ehrenberg, in his studies of Greek society, confirms that this is a description of the typical life such a woman would have led. "Marriage was a matter of paternal wishes and economic considerations," he says. "Girls were not educated: they only learned the arts of housekeeping." Even Iphigenia is presented as unable to write, and Ehrenberg makes the interesting observation that the few outstanding female characters of Aristophanes' comedies do not cast doubt on this general impression; rather they acquire their

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“full brilliance only by their complete contrast with the background of women’s everyday life.”¹⁴

The seclusion of respectable women was rigidly enforced throughout their lives. Generally confined to separate quarters within the house, closed off from the men’s apartments by a locked door, wives and daughters were not regarded as fit to participate in serious discussion, with the consequence that the denial to them of intellectual experience continued through adulthood. They were treated as minors, the same things being forbidden to them as to boys under the age of eighteen. Even if unmarried, a woman was not allowed to bring suit under Attic law, except via her legal guardian, or to dispose of more than the worth of a bushel of barley. Women were denied access to all those places where the boys and men discussed and learned about civic and intellectual affairs—the *gymnasia*, the market place, the law courts and *symposia*. As John Addington Symonds has summarized the situation, in his account of the homosexual culture of the Greek aristocracy: “all the higher elements of spiritual and mental activity, and the conditions under which a generous passion was conceivable, had become the exclusive privileges of men. . . . The exaltation of the emotions was reserved for the male sex.”¹⁵

It was not only the activities and movement of Athenian women that were harshly limited; as in the Homeric age, this repression was extended with equal force to their personalities, too. There is much evidence in Greek drama of the application of that “ancient saw” that Aristotle quotes from Sophocles’ *Ajax*—“a modest silence is a woman’s crown.”¹⁶ Pericles’ funeral oration, too, displays clearly the disparity between the contemporary standards of excellence that were applied to men and to women. For in the course of this panegyric, which is a classic example of the importance that the Greeks placed on fame and “being talked about,” Pericles advises the widowed women to display that “female excellence” which accords with their “natural

character." The greatest glory, he says, will be "hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad."¹⁷

Ironically, the claims of respectability meant that the women whom an upper-class Athenian might marry were significantly less likely to have acquired any knowledge of their society and its culture than were those he was free to turn to as courtesans or prostitutes. The rigid distinction between the two types of women, which has of course persisted until modern times, and also the Greeks' basically proprietary attitude toward women, are both well illustrated by the following statement from Demosthenes' account of the lawsuit, *Against Naera*:

For this is what living with a woman as one's wife means—to have children by her and to introduce the sons to the members of the clan and of the deme, and to betroth the daughters to husbands as one's own. Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households.¹⁸

Thus those women who were eligible to become the wives of Plato's contemporaries were valued for their chastity, their frugality and their silence—not for their personalities in any positive sense. The extent to which this objectification could be taken is indicated by Creon's answer when asked if he intends to kill his own son's bride: "Well, there are other fields for him to plough."¹⁹ There is, then, much evidence to show that the women of the higher classes in classical Athens were reduced to one primary function. Lacking any role in those areas of life which were regarded as important by the men, lacking even that aura of mystery that their sex was later to acquire under Christianity and as the love objects of the romantic tradition, they were valued only as the instruments of reproduction of legitimate heirs.

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It may seem strange that in such a climate the emancipation of women should have become a subject of discussion. However, just as in Victorian Britain, where the repression of women had again reached a peak, at the beginning of the fourth century, the status of women appears to have become a live issue in Athens. Aristophanes' comedies, *Ecclesiazusae* and *Lysistrata*, are good evidence that it was one of those current talking points ripe for satire. In addition, there seems to be little doubt that the historical Socrates put forward ideas about women that were far from typical at the time. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, he is depicted asserting that "woman's nature is nowise inferior to man's," albeit with the rather paradoxical corollary that "all she wants is strength and judgment."²⁰ Within Platonic dialogues other than the *Republic*, too, there are several passages in which Socrates proposes a far more androgynous view of human nature, and specifically of human virtue, than was at all usual in the cultural context. In the *Meno*, for example, in the course of an attempt to discover the nature of virtue, he makes the radical assertion that virtue is the same quality in a woman as in a man, not different, as Meno has tried to claim by referring to the traditionally different duties and life styles of the two sexes. Both, says Socrates, need temperance and justice, if they are to be good at their respective tasks, whether the management of the household or of the city. Virtue is therefore a human quality, and is not to be defined differently according to the sex of the individual concerned.²¹ In the *Protagoras*, moreover, Socrates displays his rejection of the prevalent norms about women by praising Sparta and Crete, not only for their ancient philosophical traditions, but for presenting examples of women as well as men "who are proud of their intellectual culture."²²

Nevertheless, there are in the dialogues numerous other examples of extremely misogynic assertions voiced by Socrates, and since it is impossible to separate the ideas of the historical Socrates from those of Plato, it is pointless to try. The important point to note is that, whether originating

from Socrates or not, there was in Plato's youthful environment a trace of radical thought about women, overlying a strong tradition of misogynic prejudice.

The prevailing depiction of women in the Platonic dialogues is extremely deprecating. To a large extent, this representation of the female sex simply reflects either the contemporary degradation of women or the fact that Plato and his companions (and consequently their theory of love) were predominantly homosexual. However, there are also passages in the dialogues that imply more than an adverse judgment against the women of Athenian society, and indicate a general belief on the author's part that the female sex is inevitably and innately inferior to the male. I will examine passages of both these types in turn.

The fact that no woman participates in any of the dialogues in person merely constitutes evidence of the prevailing attitudes of the time and the characteristics of Athenian life they produced. It cannot reasonably be said to tell us anything about Plato's own views about women's capacities for intellectual discourse. That the women of the household in which the *Symposium* takes place are not present at the dinner party, but are "inside there," says nothing about Plato except that he chose to set his dialogues realistically in the context of contemporary society. In fact, the high point of the discourse is supposed to have come from the mouth of a woman, the priestess Diotima. Similarly, Plato's characterization of woman as one who spins and works with wool is merely an accurate description of her role in his culture. Moreover, even much of his language that is deprecating to the female sex—such as the use of "womanish" to mean "cowardly"—should be read not as peculiar to Plato, but as current usage.²³

However, Plato certainly shared his fellow Athenians' contempt for the women of his day. He categorizes them together with children and animals, with the immature, the sick and the weak.²⁴ Even the *Republic* is by no means free of such representation of women. Before the revolu-

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tionary idea of including women among the ranks of the guardians is introduced, it is stressed that the impressionable young guardians are at all costs to be prevented from imitating the female sex in what are regarded as its characteristic activities—bickering, boasting, uncooperative self-abandonment, blasphemy, and the frailties of sickness, love and labor. Women, easily deceived by worthless gaudiness, superstitious, prone to excessive grief, lacking in knowledge of what is good for them, and inferior in intellect and in general to men, are no more fit to serve as role models for the chosen youth than are madmen, craftsmen or slaves.²⁵ In the *Laws*, moreover, a significant part of Plato's reason for forbidding homosexual intercourse is that, in addition to rendering the lover unmanly on account of his surrender to his lusts, it obliges the loved one to play the role of the much despised female.²⁶

Although Plato disapproved of the physical practice of sodomy, the entire Platonic philosophy of love, as presented in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, reflects the pervasive homosexual culture of the Athenian upper classes. As Gregory Vlastos has said of the theory of love, "A proper study of it would have to take account of at least three things about its creator: He was a homosexual, a mystic, and a moralist."²⁷ As Vlastos has well demonstrated, Plato's own homosexuality, taken together with his conflicting belief that anal intercourse was "contrary to nature"—a degradation not only of man's humanity but of his animality—explain much of the origin of the idea that the physical aspect of love ought to be conquered and transcended so that the real object of love, which is the idea of beauty itself, can be attained. The Platonic theory of love can thus be understood, in large part, in terms of the need to sublimate unacceptable impulses.

Throughout the two dialogues on love, the love of women is consistently deprecated. It is notable that nobody, including Socrates, makes any objection to the accounts of love of either Pausanias or Aristophanes, and both are biased

heavily against heterosexuality. Pausanias divides love into two kinds—that patronized by the elder, heavenly Aphrodite, “whose attributes have nothing of the female, but are altogether male,” and that of the younger, earthly Aphrodite, “whose nature partakes of both male and female.” The latter controls the passions of the vulgar, who are as much attracted by shallow people as profound, as much by women as boys, and who regard copulation as the most important aspect of the relationship. The former, by contrast, “innocent of any hint of lewdness,” inspires its followers toward male lovers only, “preferring the more vigorous and intellectual bent.”²⁸ According to Aristophanes, whose myth of the originally double inhabitants of the earth underlies his rather comical account of love, the really fortunate men are not those who seek out their lost female half, but those who are halves of what was once a double male, and whose sexual impulses therefore impel them to members of their own sex. Those men who have “the most virile constitution,” the only ones who “show any real manliness in public life,” are those who love boys rather than women, prefer to spend all their lives with men, and marry and beget children only in deference to social custom.²⁹

In Socrates’ own speech, attributed though it is to the wisdom of a woman, the same bias continues to prevail. Although it is a characteristic of heterosexual love, procreation, which is taken as the symbol around which the theory of love is built, Socrates consistently denigrates mere physical procreation—the production of “offspring of the flesh,” in favor of that superior procreancy which is of the mind, and whose adherents “conceive and bear the things of the spirit.” In contrast to love which chooses a woman for its object and raises a family, it is only through love of a male that the lover, through the procreation of thoughts, poetry or law, can transcend the love of a particular individual and come eventually to knowledge of the very soul of beauty.³⁰ Gregory Vlastos implies that the use of the hetero-

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sexual image of procreation somehow tempers the hostility to heterosexuality and to women that seems to be inherent in the theory. He concludes that at the climax of the whole philosophy of love, where the idea of beauty is at last encountered face to face, "the homosexual imagery is dropped" and "what started as a pederastic idyl ends up in transcendental marriage."³¹ It is not made clear exactly what Vlastos means by this. However, if he is implying, as he seems to be, that there is any inclusion of heterosexuality in the theory of the higher type of love, his conclusion is unfounded. In spite of Plato's use of an image that, as Vlastos says, has "a heterosexual paradigm," it is clearly only the symbolic version of procreation—that of the spirit, which is only achieved in homosexual love—that is thought worthy of philosophical treatment. As Socrates asks, "who would not prefer such fatherhood to merely human propagation?"³² Just as Plato uses an image with an originally heterosexual application here, so he uses the image of the craftsman weaver throughout the *Statesman*. In neither case, however, is the reader justified in transferring to the real subject of discussion any of the qualities of the metaphorical subject except those that are explicitly intended to be so transferred. The heterosexual aspect of the one image, therefore, is no more legitimately transferred to Plato's real sphere of concern, than is the manual labor aspect of the other. It is quite clear, despite Vlastos' suggestion, that Plato's vision of love as a pathway to philosophic joy entirely excludes women. Given the Athenian social structure and the position of women within it, however, this can hardly strike us as surprising. Since, in a culture as intellectual and civically conscious as that of the Greek aristocratic man, it was virtually impossible for any real intimacy to develop between him and a woman such as the women were forced to become, Plato's belief that only love between men could be of the most elevated type is quite understandable. Given the contemporary context, then, it is no wonder that the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* demonstrate

such a preference for homosexual over heterosexual love, and so strong an affirmation of the ethical superiority of the former.³³

It can reasonably be argued that in all the above instances, the contempt expressed or implied toward women is not by way of judgment on the entire female sex, past, present and future, but is rather aimed at the Athenian women of Plato's time. There are, however, several significant passages in the dialogues which indicate belief in the general inferiority of any female human being at any time. The most outstanding passages of this sort are, ironically, contained in the *Timaeus*, the dialogue whose dramatic date is the very day after the *Republic*.³⁴ Here, the origins of the human race are recounted, in a manner very reminiscent of Hesiod. "Human nature," we are told, "was of two kinds, the superior race would hereafter be called man." The original creation consisted only of men,³⁵ and those who conquered their passions and lived virtuously during their stay on earth were allowed to return to the happiness of the stars from which they came. For any who failed on earth, however, by being cowardly and unrighteous, the punishment was to be reborn as a woman. Thus, according to Plato's myth, was woman created. Not only was she derivative from man, as in the Genesis myth, but she was derivative from those men who were wicked failures. If no improvement ensued after this punishment, it was followed by the penalty of rebirth as one of the lower animals, "some brute who resembled him in the evil nature which he had acquired." The only way for a soul so debased to regain "the form of his first and better state" was through demonstrating the victory of his rational over his irrational part. Thus we are presented with a hierarchy of goodness and rationality, in which woman is placed midway between man and the beasts.³⁶ In the *Laws*, too, women are asserted to be twice as much disposed toward evil as men, and therefore in need of special discipline.³⁷ Moreover, the wish to reenact the creation myth of the *Timaeus* is ex-

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pressed in the *Laws*, in the form of the proposal that, were such a process possible, the most suitable penalty for a man who has displayed his cowardice by flinging away his shield is for him to be transformed into a woman.³⁸

Such passages as these, in which the assertions are not restricted to any time or place, certainly imply that Plato believed women to be, inevitably and regardless of circumstances, inferior in reason and virtue to men. Some scholars have explained such statements as "lapses." Cornford, for example, says that sometimes "Plato slips into a popular way of speaking about women," and Levinson says it is "as if for the moment he had forgotten his more advanced beliefs."³⁹ But Plato was not the kind of thinker we can readily believe forgot his beliefs, especially on a subject to which he devoted a considerable amount of attention in some of his major dialogues. Nevertheless, there is a distinct gulf between Plato's general attitude to and beliefs about women, which reflect much of the highly misogynic Greek tradition, and the radical proposals for the equality of the female guardians, which are set out in Book v of the *Republic*. It is only by examining these latter proposals in the context of the overall aims and structure of the ideal society that we will be able to find them intelligible.