Plato’s Thesis of Male Superiority and Female Guardians in the Ideal City

Abstract: Plato claims in the Republic that women’s biological role is irrelevant to certain of their abilities, thereby allowing them to perform tasks traditionally allocated to men alone. In particular, the role of Guardianship (i.e., Rulership) is available to women in Plato’s ideal city. However, this appears to conflict with his thesis that men are superior to women at every task. I call this the Thesis of Male Superiority and argue for an interpretation of it that supports Plato’s claim that there are to be female Guardians in the ideal city. In particular, I argue that this thesis should be interpreted as claiming that the best women are as gifted as only the second-best men, not that there are more talented men than talented women. I argue that this interpretation accords with Plato’s breeding program for the Guardian class and his contention that female Guardians are to be given lighter tasks than those given to the male Guardians. I consider and reject the objections that Plato explicitly rejects this interpretation at the end of Book VII and that one would not expect souls with a Guardian’s nature (or manly souls) to occupy a roughly equal number of female and male bodies.

I. Introduction

Plato is widely held to be the first feminist (Anna 1976). He claimed in the Republic that women’s biological role is irrelevant to certain of their abilities, thereby allowing them to perform tasks traditionally allocated to men alone (454d-e). In particular, the role of Guardianship (i.e., Rulership), which, as we will see, requires a great deal of talent, is available to women in his ideal city. So, if this occupation is open to women in the city, then it seems that Plato held the abilities of women in very high regard. However, Plato’s apparent feminism seems to conflict with certain disparaging remarks he makes about women. For example, he

1 Of course, a thorough investigation of the extent to which Plato was a feminist must also examine whether he thought that, in the ideal city, women could take up the other occupations in which men could specialize. I am sympathetic to the position endorsed by C. D. C Reeve (1997) that Plato did indeed hold that women in the ideal city could take up these other occupations. Reeve notes Plato’s remark at 433d that there ought to be women among the producers, rulers, and ruled. Reeve also points out Plato’s mention of female carpenters and female physicians on 454d. Lastly, Reeve notes that perhaps nursing was also a craft open to both women and men (131). In any case, this is beyond the scope of this paper.
describes those who plunder corpses as “womanish” (469d). However, in this paper, I will focus on a particular disparaging remark that Plato makes about women, namely, his thesis that men are superior to women at every task\(^2\). This paper will focus on the tension between this remark and Plato’s inclusion of female Guardians. If his inclusion of female Guardians cannot be vindicated, then the claim that Plato was the first feminist will be severely undercut. I will argue for an interpretation of Plato’s Republic that supports Plato’s claim that there are to be female Guardians in the ideal city.

In section II, I will further delineate the scope of my argument. In section III, I will explain how Plato reaches his conclusion that there ought to be female guardians in the ideal city. In sections IV and V, I will argue that Plato’s claim that men are superior to women at all tasks

\(^2\) There is disagreement over whether Plato thought that men are superior at every task or whether there are a few exceptions. For example, Catherine McKeen (2006) holds that, for Plato, men are superior to women at even cooking and weaving (534), whereas Arlene Saxonhouse (1976) counts these tasks as exceptions (199). I will not take a stance on this issue in this paper. For simplicity, however, I will ignore these possible exceptions.

\(^3\) There are a number of views on Plato’s passing misogynistic remarks that one may take. For example, Brian Calvert (1975) tackles the inconsistency between these remarks and Plato’s apparent gender egalitarianism by drawing our attention to different “level[s] of enquiry at which the discussion is cast.” It is only at a meticulous philosophical level that Plato endorses the equality of women (243). Gregory Vlastos (1989) holds that in these remarks, Plato denigrates not the female Guardians but the (admittedly) large number of women who are less impressive (17-8). Nicholas Smith (1983), in addition to suggesting a similar possibility, argues that because such slurs were so entrenched in Plato’s everyday environment, “even the most principled feminist might well lapse into them thoughtlessly” (470). Smith also argues that even if Plato were a misogynist, it is possible that he recognized that “equal opportunity and status in political and social processes” must overshadow his reflexive contempt for women (470). Moreover, Sarah Pomeroy argues that, for Plato, the female Guardians are to be the property of the male Guardians (33). According to W. W. Fortenbaugh (1975), koinonia, which Plato uses to describe female Guardians, involves in this context partnership rather than ownership (1). Also, according to C. C. W. Taylor (2012), because the guardians do not own any property or have private lives, female Guardians are not the possessions of male Guardians. My arguments in this paper will be compatible with each of these other views.
ought to be interpreted as saying that the best women are on a par with only the second-best men. In section VI, I will consider and refute two possible objections.

II. Preliminaries

First, I will take Plato at his word. Specifically, I will avoid the Straussian interpretation that interprets Plato’s apparent gender egalitarianism as mere satire. Such an interpretation ought to be a last resort, after we have determined that Plato could not seriously have held the views on women expressed in the Republic. However, it is precisely the consistency of certain claims made in the Republic that will be at issue in this paper. We must examine the consistency (or lack thereof) of Plato’s views before resorting to a Straussian interpretation.

Second, for reasons of space, I will confine my attention to the Republic.

Third, I will take the views that Socrates expresses in the Republic as Plato’s own views. John Cooper (1997) distinguishes between a “chronological grouping” of Plato’s dialogues and his own “thematic grouping.” Both the “chronological grouping” (xii-xiii) and “thematic grouping” (xvi) attribute to Plato the views expressed by Socrates in the Republic. However, nothing will hinge on this. This paper will concern the consistency of some of the views expressed in the Republic, regardless of whether Plato actually held those views.

III. Female Guardians

As Julia Annas (1976) (270), Gerasimos Santas (2010) (114-5), and Gregory Vlastos (1989) (22) point out, Plato did not subscribe to a rights-based conception of Justice. Instead, Justice involves maximizing the well-being, functioning, and goodness of the city as a whole. This in

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4 According to Annas, the fact that Plato was not concerned with women’s rights weakens the claim that he was a feminist. Santas and Vlastos, on the other hand, appear to be more sympathetic to this claim.
turn will be achieved by each citizen specializing in the occupation for which they are most naturally suited. Following Catherine McKeen (2006), I will call this the Principle of Specialization.

The occupations available in Plato’s ideal city can be divided into three groups: Producers (who include such workers as farmers and craftspeople) (415a); Guardians, who rule the city (414b); and Auxiliaries, who sustain the Guardians’ convictions and serve as their assistants (414b). As I will explain shortly, the Principle of Specialization motivates Plato’s inclusion of female Guardians.

Susan Moller Okin (1979) argues that Plato’s abolition of the private household and traditional family in the ideal city drives his inclusion of female Guardians. However, as Nicholas Smith argues, such an abolition does not entail the liberation of the female Guardians. Women in the ideal city could still have served as “breeding partners and nurse-maids” (471). Thus, to see why Plato claimed that some women are to serve as Guardians, we must turn to his explicit comments about female Guardians.

Plato holds that although there are natural differences between women and men, these differences are irrelevant to the question of which occupations they are to pursue. Although “the females bear children and the males beget them,” this should not prevent women from serving as Guardians. Similarly, being bald-headed or long-haired does not determine how good of a cobbler one will be (454c-e). Just as female watchdogs guard alongside male watchdogs and receive the same education, there are to be female Guardians who likewise receive the same education as the male Guardians (451d). This follows from the Principle of Specialization

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5 See 370a in the Republic, where Plato first introduces this principle.
because there may be women with a Guardian’s nature (452e-453c). In spite of all this, Plato claims that men are superior to women in every occupation (455c-d). I will call this the Thesis of Male Superiority. In the next two sections, I will argue that this thesis should be interpreted as claiming that the best women are as gifted as only the second-best men.

IV. Plato’s Thesis of Male Superiority

Brian Calvert (1975) points out that there are two interpretations of Plato’s claim that men are superior to women at all tasks. It may mean that

(TMS1) the best women are on a par with only the second-best men (235) or

(TMS2) that there are more talented men than talented women (237).

Calvert argues that TMS2, but not TMS1, is compatible with Plato’s endorsement of female Guardians. Due to the utmost importance of the Guardians to the functioning of the ideal city, only those with the most potential to be a Guardian ought to rule (236). As Catherine McKeen, who makes a very similar argument, says, the ideal city depends on the Guardians “for defense against external enemies as well as for internal law enforcement and policing” (537). Therefore, on TMS1, no woman ought to be a Guardian. Calvert claims that TMS2, on the other hand, is compatible with some exceptional women having as much Guardian potential as the most gifted men and, therefore, with Plato’s endorsement of female Guardians⁶ (237).

But this argument assumes that there will be enough men of the highest caliber to fill up the Guardian positions. This, however, need not be true. If there is a lack of men of the highest caliber, then Plato will have to assign the second-most gifted citizens to Guardian positions.

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⁶ Without drawing the distinction between TMS1 and TMS2, Julia Annas (1976) also claims that there is tension between the Thesis of Male Superiority and the inclusion of female Guardians.
These assignments will still be in the service of maximizing the good of the city. So, TMS1 is in fact compatible with Plato’s endorsement of female Guardians. The women to which TMS1 refers would serve as Guardians if there are not enough Guardians of the highest caliber.

Admittedly, there is no guarantee that there will be female Guardians. It is possible that there will be enough men of the highest caliber to fill up the Guardian positions, in which case there will be no need to draw from the second-best citizens. However, there is no guarantee that there will be female Guardians on TMS2 either. It is to a large extent a matter of chance how the children in the ideal city will turn out. As Gregory Vlastos (1989) says, Plato’s inclusion of female Guardians is not motivated by affirmative action (22). Indeed, if, as TMS2 claims, there are more gifted men than gifted women, then it will be even less likely that there will be female Guardians.

My argument against interpreting the Thesis of Male Superiority along the lines of TMS2 helps resolve another ambiguity in Plato’s discussion of female Guardians. According to Catherine McKeen (2006), Plato’s Principle of Specialization admits of two different interpretations:

(PS1) Each citizen of the ideal city should specialize in the occupation in which they are most naturally gifted, where they are more gifted in this occupation than the other citizens of the city.

(PS2) Each citizen of the ideal city should specialize in the occupation in which they are most naturally gifted, where they are more gifted in this occupation than they are in the other occupations available in the city (536).
McKeen favors PS2 on the grounds that otherwise, all or most Guardians would be men, given that men as a whole are better at rulership and military than women as a whole (536). Note that McKeen’s argument relies on TMS1 here. Women will be excluded from Guardianship only if they are compared with men who, by TMS1, are more gifted than them in rulership and military. McKeen notes that PS2, however, is also problematic, albeit less so. On PS2, it is probable that less gifted women will be assigned Guardian positions over more gifted men. These women will be Guardians not because they are qualified but because they are better at rulership and military than they are at the other occupations available in the city. Again, due to the upmost importance of the role of Guardianship to the well-being of the city, this may turn out to be catastrophic. However, even if catastrophe is avoided, Plato’s proposal that the best are to rule7 is undermined (536-7).

In light of this dilemma, one might be tempted to give up TMS1 in favor of TMS2. Again, however, this will not be necessary. There is in fact no tension between PS1 and TMS1. If all the Guardians of the highest caliber are men, yet there is a scarcity of such Guardians, then the ideal city will have to draw from its second-best citizens, who may be women. As per PS1, assignments of Guardian positions will be based on comparisons between individuals; therefore, in line with Plato’s conception of Justice in the city, the human resources of the ideal city will be used to maximize the well-being of the city. So, both McKeen and Calvert fail to consider the possibility that there will not be enough citizens of the highest caliber to fill up the Guardian positions.

7 See 347a-348b in the Republic, where Plato talks about motivating the best people to rule.
I have objected to Calvert’s argument for interpreting the Thesis of Male Superiority along the lines of TMS2. In the next section, I will provide two arguments for interpreting this thesis along the lines of TMS1 instead.

V. Two Arguments for TMS1

G.E.M. de Ste. Croix (1989) and Catherine McKeen (2006) (545n9) argue that Plato’s Thesis of Male of Superiority is in tension with his breeding program. McKeen notes a number of points of conflict. First, if (as per TMS2) there are only a few female Guardians compared to male Guardians, then it is unclear how enough children with a Guardian’s nature will be produced. Furthermore, not all children with Guardian parents will possess a Guardian’s nature.8 Also, the breeding period for women is only 20 years; the breeding period for men is 30 years.9 Finally, disease, war, and nutrition pose the threat of population shortage10 (545n9).

This objection becomes even more pressing when we consider C. D. C. Reeve’s point that, for eugenic purposes, the most gifted women in the ideal city will frequently be pregnant.11 Because prolonged pregnancy would debilitate and even endanger such women, their opportunity to become Guardians will be undermined (140). With women in the city already in such a precarious situation, a comparative lack of talented women (which is what TMS2 amounts to) would further reduce the chance that there will be female Guardians.

However, these concerns are potentially devastating only if Plato held TMS2. That is, the objection assumes that Plato held that there will be more gifted men than gifted women. This is

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8 See 460a-c in the Republic.
9 See 460e in the Republic.
10 See 460a in the Republic.
11 See 459d-460b in the Republic.
what causes the imbalance of numbers of male and female Guardians. However, if the Thesis of Male Superiority is interpreted along the lines of TMS1, then we are free to hold that there are about as many gifted women as there are gifted men and the objection largely dissolves. It is true that de Ste. Croix, McKeen, and Reeve’s concerns do not completely go away on TMS1, but they are mitigated if Plato holds that there are about as many gifted women as there are gifted men.

Second, TMS1 better accords with Plato’s contention that the female Guardians are to be given lighter tasks than those given to the male Guardians (457a). If there are no women among the class of Guardians of the highest caliber, then it makes sense why Plato held that the female Guardians will be given lighter tasks. Of course, it does not follow that each female Guardian will be given lighter tasks than each male Guardian because some male Guardians will not be of the highest caliber. The claim is only that, on average, female Guardians will be given lighter tasks than male Guardians.

Calvert himself acknowledges this passage from the Republic. However, he claims that this shows only that Plato was unaware of the difficulties of his position. If there are female Guardians of the highest caliber (which, again, Calvert thinks Plato must believe if there are to be female Guardians at all), then it is unclear why they should be given lighter tasks (237). However, given my rejection of the motivation for TMS2 in section V, we are now free to take the more charitable position I described in the paragraph above.

VI. Objections and Replies

One might object that the following passage from the Republic is incompatible with TMS1. After describing the education of the Guardians with Socrates, Glaucon says, “Like a sculptor,
Socrates, you’ve produced ruling men that are completely fine,” to which Socrates replies, “And ruling women, too, Glaucon, for you mustn’t think that what I’ve said applies any more to men than it does to women who are born with the appropriate natures” (540c). One might object that this suggests that, contra TMS1, Plato believed that the female Guardians are, on average, as talented as the male Guardians.

But this passage comes after a description of the Guardians’ education and is meant to indicate only that the female and male Guardians are to receive the same education. This part of the Republic concerns the education of the Guardians rather than their tasks. After all, if this passage refers to the Guardians’ tasks, then it would conflict with Plato’s claim that the female Guardians are to be given lighter tasks. In any case, this passage does not definitively conflict with TMS1.

One might, however, press this objection by arguing that the education of the Guardians is appropriate for only the citizens of the highest caliber. Specifically, the Guardians are to learn to access the Forms, abstract unchanging, eternal entities that provide knowledge. As Socrates puts it,

Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race (473c-d).
Does Plato really think that Guardians of only the second highest caliber can access the Forms and acquire knowledge? If they cannot, then giving them the same education as the Guardians of the highest caliber is pointless.

To reply to this, we must first understand what Plato means when he claims that one individual is more talented than another. According to Socrates,

Is this what you meant by one person being naturally well suited for something and another being naturally unsuited? That the one learned it easily, the other with difficulty; that the one, after only a brief period of instruction, was able to find out things for himself, while the other, after much instruction, couldn’t even remember what he’d learned; that the body of the one adequately served his thought, while the body of the other opposed his (455b).

The more gifted an individual is in a task, the more quickly and easily they will learn the skills required to perform it. It does not follow that the less gifted Guardians cannot learn to access the Forms. So, it is not pointless to give the Guardians of the second highest caliber the same education provided to the Guardians of the highest caliber. If anything, the female Guardians (and the other, male Guardians who are not of the highest caliber) ought to receive a more rigorous education to compensate for their lesser amount of talent.

The discussion in Susan Moller Okin (1979) of the importance for Plato of environment and education versus innate characteristics sheds light on this. Okin argues that, for Plato, one’s environment can shape their nature. She points out that Socrates claims on 424a that “good education and upbringing, when they are preserved, produce good natures, and useful natures, who are in turn well educated, grow up even better than their predecessors” (53). In fact, Okin
takes this one step further and argues that Plato placed greater importance on education and environment over innate attributes. As Okin says, the following quote from Socrates on 377a-b supports this interpretation: “You know, don’t you, that the beginning of any process is most important, especially for anything young and tender? It’s at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it” (54). Okin’s discussion here suggests that a Guardian does not have to be of the highest caliber to access the Forms and thereby acquire knowledge. To put the point in contemporary terms, for Plato, nurture outweighs nature.

One might also object that I owe an explanation of how Plato can hold that there are approximately as many female Guardians as there are male Guardians, given the Thesis of Male Superiority. To explain this objection, I must first turn to Plato’s views on the soul. Gerasimos Santas (2010) (116) and Nicholas Smith (1983) (473) argue that, for Plato, the soul is sexless. As Santas says, according to Plato, a soul can transmigrate from a male body to a female one (and vice versa). If so, then it is only bodies that are sexed, not souls (116). Elizabeth Spelman (1988), however, contends that Plato’s picture is more complicated than this. Spelman draws a distinction between a female body and a womanly soul and argues that, for Plato, there is a “fittingness of one kind of soul to one kind of body.” The sex of one’s body reveals the gender of the soul that one has or ought to have. For example, there would be a mismatch between a female Guardian’s female body and her manly soul (100-1).

The discussion in Morag Buchan (1999) of Plato’s Myth of Er can be used to flesh out this point. Buchan notes that according to this myth, souls choose what they will be reincarnated as from certain lots. After describing this process, Socrates says, “And there was

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12 See 617d-e in the Republic.
a similar choice of lives for women\textsuperscript{13}.” The use of “similar” as opposed to “same” suggests that women and men select from different lots. Furthermore, the different choices that the souls make reflect either different kinds of excellence in the souls or different degrees to which excellence is present in the souls\textsuperscript{14}. So, because women and men select from different lots, either excellence in women and excellence in men are different or it is present to a greater or lesser degree (38-9).

So, in light of this, one might object that Plato cannot hold that there are roughly equal numbers of male and female Guardians. Given the Thesis of Male Superiority and the details of the Myth of Er which Buchan points out, one would not expect souls with a Guardian’s nature (or, to use Spelman’s terminology, manly souls) to occupy a roughly equal number of female and male bodies. In other words, one might worry about the unlikelihood that there would be approximately as many female Guardians as there are male Guardians.

I confess that this is a genuine problem for TMS\textsuperscript{1}. However, TMS\textsuperscript{2} presents a similar problem. Recall that the supporter of TMS\textsuperscript{2} is free to hold that the best women are on a par with the best men (as I explained above, Calvert thinks this vindicates Plato’s inclusion of female Guardians). However, the more gifted the soul, the less likely it is that it will be housed in a female body, and the female Guardians are more gifted on TMS\textsuperscript{2} than on TMS\textsuperscript{1}. So, supporters of TMS\textsuperscript{2} must deal with the unlikelihood that some of the most gifted souls in the city would belong to female bodies, whereas supporters of TMS\textsuperscript{1} must explain why there are so

\textsuperscript{13} See 618b in the Republic. It is worth noting that, whereas Buchan uses Desmond Lee’s translation, George Grube’s translation is “And the same for lives of women” (my italics). To make the objection I am considering as strong as possible, I will follow Buchan in using Lee’s translation.

\textsuperscript{14} See 617e in the Republic.
many gifted souls housed in female bodies. Thus, Plato’s remarks on the Myth of Er cannot be used to adjudicate between TMS1 and TMS2.
Works Cited


