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ARTIGO | ARTICLE

Wearing Virtue: Plato's *Republic V*, 449a-457b and the Socratic Debate on Women's Nature

Cinzia Arruzzaⁱ

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6096-4616>
arruzzac@newschool.edu

ⁱ Eugene Lang College, New School for Social Research – New York – USA.

ARRUZZA, C. (2023). Wearing Virtue: Plato's *Republic V*, 449a-457b and the Socratic Debate on Women's Nature. *Archai* 33, e-03306.

Abstract: In Plato's *Republic V*, 449a-457b, Socrates argues that the guardian class of Kallipolis will comprise both men and women and that women with the appropriate nature ought to receive the same education and fulfill the same tasks as their male counterparts. In this article I argue, against competing interpretations of this claim as dependent either on the necessity of abolishing the *oikos* or on

eugenic principles, that Socrates' argument ought to be understood as a genuine argument about women's natural capabilities and ought to be interpreted in light of the Socratic debate about women's virtues. Moreover, I show that the legal language mobilized, combined with polemical references to Aristophanes, serves the purpose of evoking Socrates' trial, thus alerting the reader to the seriousness of the proposal in question.

Keywords: Women, Virtue, Kallipolis, Aristophanes.

In book V of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates famously puts forward a set of radical policies regarding women and the upbringing of the children of Kallipolis' guardians. These policies are articulated in two distinct but interconnected "waves". The first wave establishes that women with the required natural talent should receive the same education as the male guardians and share in the same activities; the second wave concerns the institution of eugenic "marriage" rules, the production of children, and their communal upbringing.

This section of the *Republic* has prompted wildly divergent interpretations among scholars. One of the matters of contention concerns the logical, argumentative connection between the first two waves. Some interpreters have claimed that there is none (Annas, 1976). Others have argued that the narrative sequence does not correspond to the actual structure of the argument, insofar as the first wave is a consequence of the second and not the other way around. The latter claim has been articulated in different ways. According to some, the inclusion of women into the guardian class and their sharing in the same education and activity as their male counterparts are dictated by the eugenic necessities articulated in the second wave: women guardians ought to be educated so as to produce noble children (Gardner, 2000). Others have argued that insofar as Plato's real intent is the abolition of the private *oikos*, women's sharing in the education and activities of the male guardians is dictated by the necessity either of giving women something to do once the *oikos* is

abolished (Okin, 1979, p. 37-38; Frede, 2018) or of preserving the civic unity of Kallipolis (McKeen, 2006).

In what follows I focus on the status of the first wave. Against interpretations of the first wave as expedient or derivative from the second, I argue that it represents an autonomous argument standing on its own feet. I provide three main bodies of evidence in support of this reading. First, I show that the argument is a distinctive Platonic version of a genuinely Socratic tenet. By this I do not mean that it is possible to identify the arguments of Plato's Socrates' with those held by the historical Socrates¹. Rather, my claim is that in this section of the dialogue Plato's Socrates is expounding on, systematizing, and radicalizing positions concerning women's soul and virtue that were shared in various degrees, albeit with some relevant differences, by several other Socratics. While these views were probably rooted in claims made and attitudes held by the historical Socrates, we have no reliable way of determining the details of the latter's views on women. We can, however, partly reconstruct the main lines of the "woman question" among the various Socratics and, therefore, the way Plato positions himself within this debate.

Second, I show that Plato carefully prefaces the presentation of the first wave with an array of allusions to the context of a law court: these allusions combined with Socrates' frequent references to the dangers of ridicule and laughter recall Socrates' trial and Plato's *Apology*. Attention to this apologetic framing – combined with an overview of Socratic positions on women's virtue – suggests that references to laughter are not meant to flag the unserious nature of the proposal at stake. Rather, the first wave's argument should be

¹ *Pace* Vlastos, 1991, I take the so-called Socratic problem, i.e., the problem of reconstructing the thought of the historical Socrates, to be fundamentally undecidable. While from the various *sokratikoi logoi* one can get a sense of the questions that were at the heart of Socrates' teaching, further delineating the contours of Socrates' thought unavoidably leads to relying on either Plato or Xenophon, depending on one's intellectual taste. For the impossibility of reconstructing Socrates' thought and the necessity of reading the *sokratikoi logoi* as fictional works, where each author is driven by a different intellectual agenda, see Giannantoni, 1971.

taken seriously and as a genuine argument about the soul's nature and the limits of sexual difference.²

Finally, I critically discuss interpretations taking the first wave to be expedient and dependent on the second and show that, in addition to not taking into account the features of the Socratic debate on women, these interpretations are also incompatible with Plato's Socrates' principle of specialization that is crucial to his definition of justice (*Rep.* 433b-e).

On women's virtue: the Socratic debate

Attention to the Socratic debate on women helps us see that the *Republic's* first wave articulates a serious and independent argument about women's soul. It is not possible to reconstruct here the details of such a debate, which concerned not only virtue and the soul, but also women's education, the educational role of eros, the figure of Aspasia as either an educator or a corruptor, the role of marriage, and the proper organization of procreation. I will rather confine myself to addressing a few passages and testimonies specifically concerning the identity of the virtue of men and women and the question of women's potential for virtue and their teachability, insofar as they have an immediate bearing on the interpretation of the first wave of *Republic V*. It is quite uncontroversial, indeed, that several Socratics argued or made their fictional Socrates argue that virtue is one and the same for men and women. Diogenes Laertius famously credits Antisthenes with the claim that "the virtue of man and woman is the same" (DL VI.12). This claim is part of a cursory summary of doctrines and sayings ascribed to Antisthenes, several of which concern the teachability of virtue and the requirements for acquiring it. As Antisthenes deemed virtue to be teachable, it is possible that his claim that virtue is the same for men and women was also connected with the view that women can be taught just as well as

² For a discussion of Plato's thought on women that considers the Socratic debate, see Blair, 2012.

men. Yet, there is no way to know for certain. Antisthenes is credited by Diogenes Laertius with having written a book entitled *Περὶ παιδοποιίας ἢ περὶ γάμου ἐρωτικός* (On Procreation and Marriage: a book on eros). Unfortunately, however, we do not know much about the contents of this book, and the tenets and sayings about marriage attributed to Antisthenes do not show any trace that his view on the identity of men's and women's virtue entailed revisionist views concerning women's education.³

Statements concerning women's potential for education to virtue are, instead, present in Xenophon's Socratic texts. The most explicit and articulated are to be found in Socrates' interactions with Antisthenes in the *Symposium* and in Ischomachus' fairly patronizing discussion of the education of his young wife in the *Oeconomicus*. In the *Symposium*, Socrates puts forward revisionist views about women's potential for education: that these views should be considered as anti-conformist can be gathered from the fact that in these passages Socrates explicitly uses empirical evidence to challenge those who may still question women's natural equality with men or their potential for acquiring skills and virtues. This view, in other words, is not uncontested.

At 2.9, after observing the feats of a girl acrobat, Socrates argues that the girl's performance is evidence of the fact that a woman's nature is teachable: he, then, concludes inviting his fellow symposiasts to set about to teach their wives whatever they wish. According to the manuscript tradition, in this passage Socrates claims that women's nature is not inferior to that of men, except for thought and strength (*γνώμης δὲ καὶ ἰσχύος δεῖται*). The term *γνώμης* is rather odd in this context, for it is not perfectly consistent with Socrates' optimism that husbands can teach their wives whatever they wish (*ὅ τι βούλοιν' ἂν αὐτῇ ἐπισταμένη χρῆσθαι*): a lack or deficit of *γνώμη* would likely preclude teachability of at least some subjects. While it is in principle preferable to retain the manuscript tradition whenever

³ Antisthenes seems to have considered marriage especially from the viewpoint of eugenics. See DL VI.11; Meijer, 2017, p. 114; Prince, 2015, p. 237-238.

it is possible, in this case Lange's conjecture replacing γνώμης with ῥώμης (physical strength or vigor) is preferable (Prince, 2015, p. 69). Physical strength may or may not set some limitations to what a woman can accomplish even if properly trained, but at least her natural intellectual ability to learn is not in question.

Socrates further insists on women's ability to acquire skills and virtues a few lines later, at 2.11-12, where – observing with some trepidation the dancer's somersaults in and out of a hoop with upright swords – he argues that this performance is evidence that ἀνδρεία is teachable, given that the dancer obviously displays it despite being a woman. While Socrates' main claim here – against those who may doubt it – is that courage is teachable, the fact that he is using the evidence of a brave woman to make this point also clearly entails that women can in principle learn it. Antisthenes is Socrates' main interlocutor in both these passages. In response to the first of Socrates' observations, he asks polemically why, then, Socrates does not educate his own wife, Xanthippe, notoriously the most difficult of women (2.10). In the second passage, he uses Socrates' observation about the teachability of courage to make a disparaging joke about the Athenians and their politicians' lack of bravery (2.13). In neither case does he explicitly agree with Socrates on women's teachability or seriously engage with this view, but this may be due to Xenophon's characterization of Antisthenes as a polemist.

It would appear, however, that to a large extent Xenophon did agree with the Socratic principle that women can learn virtue. The most extensive discussion of this point is in the *Oeconomicus*, 7.7-8.23, where Ischomachus describes at length the education of his young wife and engages in a bit of anthropological theory about men's and women's natural predispositions and their complementarity. Ischomachus' view is that the god granted equally to both men and women memory and attention as well as the capacity to practice self-control, which in Xenophon is the foundation of all the other virtues (Dorion, 2009). There are also natural differences, though, which are grounded in the god's intelligent design: men's bodies and mind are more capable of endurance (7.23) and men also

have a greater natural predisposition to courage (7.25), while women are more prone to fear (7.25) and their bodies are weaker (7.23). These natural differences enable men and women to work as partners as a complementary couple, with a specialization of occupations which sees men engaged outdoors and women indoors, in the activities of procreation, rearing of children, and household management.

The notion that men and women ultimately need to have at least some of the same virtues to tend to their respective tasks, is also to be found in Plato's *Meno*. At the beginning of the dialogue, Meno – an eager student of Gorgias – gives a definition of what constitutes virtue for a man and for a woman: for the first, virtue is the good administration of public affairs, and the ability to harm enemies and benefit friends, as well as to fend off any harm that could come to himself; for the second, virtue is the proper administration of the household, the preservation of the husband's properties, and submission to the husband. Meno concludes that “for each of us there is a proper virtue for each action, each age and each function” (*Meno*, 72a2-4).⁴ In the ensuing discussion, Socrates opposes this multiplication of kinds of virtues, by forcing Meno to recognize that ultimately the different tasks he has enumerated all presuppose and require the same virtues regardless of age, sex, or status. Both the management of the household and that of the city demand justice and moderation, hence “both, man and woman, need justice and moderation if they are to be good” (73b3-5).⁵ Socrates' argument in this passage shares some similarities with Ischomachus' discourse in the *Oeconomicus*: there, too, Ischomachus insisted on the fact that household management requires qualities such as memory and attention that the god has dispensed equally to men and women, although these qualities are then put to work in different tasks and separate spheres.

⁴ For the Gorgianic inspiration of this position, see El Murr, 2020.

⁵ That this was a rather controversial view is attested by Aristotle's critical remarks against it in *Politics* 1.13.1260a20-23.

All these texts taken together show that at least some of the Socratics shared the view that women are naturally endowed with the same natural predispositions as men and can therefore be taught the same virtues. Xenophon's Socrates and Ischomachus are careful about clarifying where natural differences lie – bodily strength, strength of the mind, and courage – whereby these differences ground a sexual division of labor and marriage as a partnership. We do not find a reference to such natural differences in Plato's *Meno*, although the sexual division of tasks between administration of the city and of the household is not challenged. One possibility is that Socrates' main intent here is to defend the notion that virtue is one and the same, rather than to challenge Athenian social arrangements. Hence, he meets Meno midway by accepting that women's proper job is the administration of the household.

On the contrary, in the first wave of the *Republic* the tenet that women's nature endows them with the ability to acquire the same virtues as men is put to work to justify a critique of the existing exclusion of women from education and military and political activities. If women have the same natural predispositions as men, at least as far as the soul is concerned, then what could possibly justify social arrangements that confine them to one single task, namely that of household management and procreation? Surely, differences in reproductive organs do not have much to do with the skills required to govern a city.

Seen in this light, the argument of the first wave is part and parcel of a Socratic debate about women's nature, their potential for virtue and their teachability. It must also be noted that in none of the texts analyzed above is the tenet of women's equal natural predisposition to virtue derived from revolutionary ideas about abolishing the *oikos*. To the contrary, both Antisthenes and Xenophon seem to have held rather conventional ideas about what marriage is for and the proper role of women in it, and yet to have insisted that women have the

same virtues as men or that they do not have an inferior nature.⁶ In the *Republic*, Plato's Socrates articulates a similar doctrine concerning women's soul and virtue but follows its logic to its ultimate consequences⁷: if virtue is one and the same for men and women, then only individual, not gendered, predisposition matters when it comes to determining the proper job of each person. In further support of my reading of the first wave as an argument standing on its own feet and radicalizing a Socratic tenet, I will now turn to an examination of its apologetic framing.

Socrates on Trial: Riding the Waves of Laughter

Book V of the *Republic* opens with some turmoil. Just when Socrates is about to leave his presentation of the ideal city behind in order to address the corrupt cities and corresponding kinds of men, Polemarchus and Adeimantus become unruly. They feel Socrates is cheating on them as he is trying to elude an important issue he had promised to address (499c2-5): the common possession of women and the production and education of children within the ideal city, first mentioned at 423e5-424a3. Adeimantus and Polemarchus' request that Socrates now expound upon this vexed question before moving to analyzing the corrupt cities is immediately backed by Glaucon and Thrasymachus (450a). Forced to bow to Adrastea and to comply with his friends' request, Socrates' response to Adeimantus' query crucially does *not* begin from the organization of

⁶ Blair (2012, p. 49) claims that the topic of the community of women was present throughout the history of Socratism and was not an invention of Plato, but she does not provide any reference in support of her claim. While I agree that it was not an invention of Plato, as it could be found in fifth-century literature, I am not aware of any textual evidence that may justify the claim that this view was supported by other Socratics before Plato. Some confusion may have derived from the projection back onto Antisthenes of radical views later developed by the Cynics.

⁷ *Contra* Frede, 2018, who argues that Plato was probably driven to reflect on the place of women by the practical necessities of organizing Kallipolis based on a strict separation among the three classes.

the common possession of women and of the production of children. Rather, Socrates announces that after the completion of the male drama, i.e., the presentation of the nature and education of the male guardians of the beautiful city, it is now time to present the female drama. This requires going back to the beginning, to that analogy between male guardians and watchdogs that inaugurated the discussion of their education in books II and III.

In book II the analogy with pedigree dogs was introduced to make the point that it is possible to find in nature living beings that are at the same time gentle and aggressive (375a-e): these are the watchdogs, who are gentle and loving to those whom they know but aggressive against external threats. This analogy foreshadowed that optimal combination of spirit and reason that Socrates deems necessary for the ideal guardians of the ideal city. Insofar as nature offers examples of animals that are both gentle and aggressive, it is in principle possible, i.e., not against nature, to find comparable natures among human beings. Similarly, the mention of female watchdogs at 451c-e is meant both to remind Glaucon and the other interlocutors of the previous discussion and to draw attention to the fact that even in animal species with sexual dimorphism such as dogs, one does not expect males and females to specialize in different tasks. Rather, males and females are trained equally, and difference in size or physical strength is not deemed to be a sufficient criterion for the assignment of different functions. The close association between guardians and watchdogs, therefore, serves the purpose of showing that it is in principle possible that the same applies to human beings, i.e., that sexual dimorphism among human beings does not license or necessitate the assignment of women and men to different tasks, and divergent political and social roles. The analogy forces Glaucon, moreover, to reflect on how unreasonable it would be to keep female watchdogs at home instead of employing them in the guard of the flock together with the male dogs: if it would be unreasonable in the

case of dogs, is it not the case that it is unreasonable in the case of human beings too?⁸

[Socrates:] Or [should we think that] we should keep the women at home, as if they were powerless because they give birth and raise puppies, while the males must work and have the entire care of the flock? – [Glaucon:] Everything should be in common; except that we should treat the females as weaker while the males as stronger (451d6-11).⁹

The watchdog analogy is not an argument, nor is it intended to be one. In fact, after opening a space for imagining that a common education and shared activities and roles are possible, in the following lines Socrates does provide a fully-fledged argument in support of his policy, which is articulated in two parts: the first addresses the question of the feasibility of the proposed policy (452e-456c), the second its desirability (456c-457a).

The argument for feasibility is framed as a response to an objection Socrates raises on behalf of an unnamed opponent (453b1-453c3). Based on this objection, assigning the same education and the same tasks to men and women would be in violation of the principle of specialization according to which each should only do the job that pertains to his or her own nature. In response to this objection, Socrates reminds his interlocutors of the difference between dialectic and eristic: his unnamed opponent's objection is eristical because it does not operate the necessary distinctions when addressing the sameness and difference of female and male nature concerning ruling and guarding the city.¹⁰ Males and females only differ in their reproductive functions and their bodily strength, but this difference is inconsequential for the issue at stake, i.e., whether

⁸ As Blair (2012, p. 97) argues, the reintroduction of the analogy offers the reader's imagination a picture to hold during the argument that follow.

⁹ All translations from Greek are mine.

¹⁰ According to El Murr, 2020, the target of Socrates' polemics against antilogy and eristic in this passage is Gorgias rather than Protagoras, whose views on women may have been close to those held by Socrates. Based on the *Meno*, in fact, it is possible that Gorgias held the view that men and women have different virtues.

some women have the necessary natural predisposition to being raised and educated as guardians and to ruling and guarding. To further prove this claim, Socrates puts forward a somewhat odd argument that – as far as the administration of the city is concerned – women do not have any specific sphere of activity pertaining to them *qua* women (455a9-d5), to then conclude that there is no activity concerning the polis that belongs to either women or men alone. Hence, based on the principle of specialization, people with the required natural predisposition – be they men or women – will need to receive the same education and fulfill the same role within the city (455d6-e1).

Insofar as the proposed arrangement is not contrary to nature and would rather fulfill natural potentials, its feasibility is demonstrated and Socrates can move on to the second, much briefer, chunk of his argument, which concerns the issue of the proposed policy's desirability: the policy is desirable insofar as it optimizes the city's resources rather than wasting them by confining gifted women to household tasks (456c10-457c3).

The argument for desirability concludes with a polemic addressed to the wits who are all too quick to laugh at what they do not know or are not familiar with:

Then, the guardian women must strip off their clothes, since they will wear virtue instead of clothes, and they must share in war and in the rest of the guardianship of the city and do nothing else. But the lighter parts of them must be assigned to the women instead of the men because of the weakness of their sex. And the man who laughs at naked women training for the sake of what is best is “plucking the unripe fruit” of laughter from his wisdom and doesn't know, as it seems, either what he's laughing at or what he's doing. In fact, this is the finest of present and future sayings: that the beneficial is beautiful, while the harmful is ugly (457a6-b4).

This polemical conclusion is not the first reference to those who may find Socrates' proposals ridiculous. Allusions to the possibility of ridicule and to what constitutes a legitimate target of laughter can

be found when Socrates first resists his friends' request to discuss the common possession of women and children (451a1-4), when he first refers to the fact that people may find most of his proposals laughable because contrary to custom (452a7-8), especially the notion of having women – including elderly ones – exercise naked in the gymnasium (452a10-b3), and, again, when he claims that one should not fear the vulgar jokes of the wits (οὐ φοβητέον τὰ τῶν χαριέντων σκώμματα, 452b6-7).¹¹ At 452c4-d2, Socrates begs these very wits *not to do their proper job* (μὴ τὰ αὐτῶν πράττειν, 452c5) but to be serious and consider that not so long ago even the Greeks thought it ridiculous to be seen naked, and that the wits of the time likely made a comedy (πάντα ταῦτα κωμῳδεῖν, 452d1) of the Cretans and the Spartans who first created the gymnasiums.¹² This reference to the scurrile jokes of professional wits, who make a comedy of whatever they find contrary to custom without further reflecting on its merit, is primarily a reference to Aristophanes.¹³

In fact, many have noted the similarities between Socrates' proposals and Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*, but what to make of these similarities is the matter of a centuries-old controversy.¹⁴ First, there is the problem of chronology: was Plato inspired by Aristophanes' comedy or *vice versa*? In 1883, Chiappelli summarized the terms of the controversy surrounding the relation

¹¹ Changes in clothes and introduction of nakedness flag profound social change. On this point, see Pappas, 2015, p. 45-46. See also Thucydides on the introduction of athletic nudity: Th. I.6.2-6.

¹² On the relevance of this passage for the broader problem concerning the persuasion of the money-makers of Kallipolis, see Pappas, 2015. This passage, in fact, shows that the public has in principle the capacity for reaching an informed agreement by learning to look with their mind's eyes rather than merely pausing at what their sensible eyes see.

¹³ *Contra* Halliwell, 1998, p. 225, who claims that in book 5 nothing proves that Plato knew the *Assemblywomen* and that references to the fear of laughter are not sufficient evidence.

¹⁴ Aristophanes' comedy, in fact, contains several of the topics addressed by Socrates in Book V: community of goods (vv. 590-594, 697-610, 673-692); community of women (vv. 611-634); community of children (vv. 635-650); and common meals (vv. 715f.).

between *Republic V* and the *Assemblywomen*, which saw scholars divided among three fronts: those who thought that Aristophanes is parodying either Plato's dialogue or a lecture on the same topic to which the comic poet happened to listen; those who thought that Plato is responding to Aristophanes' comedy; and those who argued that they both depend on a common source or on a milieu of discussions on the topic of women and communism. The terms of the debate have not changed much ever since and it is, in my view, doubtful that a clear-cut conclusion can be reached.¹⁵ Second, on the assumption that Plato had Aristophanes' comedy in mind, there is the problem of the nature of this reference: is it meant to flag the ironic, even comedic, character of book V's proposals, or is it part of a Platonic polemics against the comic poet?

Within the limited scope of this article, I confine myself to arguing that the various references to the fear of laughter combined with the numerous references to the context of Socrates' trial – which I will discuss below – do suggest that Plato had Aristophanes' comedy in mind when writing book 5. This observation, however, is not a solution to the controversy, as it does not exclude the possibility that Aristophanes knew of Plato's ideas on the subject either by listening to his lectures in the Academy or through mere intellectual gossip. Furthermore, as I will argue, the nature and intent of the first wave's argument should be interpreted by paying attention to the apologetic character of its framing. More specifically, I take the first wave to be one of those passages from the dialogues that directly or indirectly address Socrates' trial and respond to the charges brought against him.

¹⁵ As emphasized by Adam (1902, p. 354-355), debates about the community of wives and children circulated already in fifth-century Athens and were by no means unique to Plato. The undeniable parallelisms between the *Assemblywomen* and Plato's *Republic* are no sufficient reasons for supposing that Aristophanes' comedy was inspired by Plato's *Republic*: the contrary is at least equally possible. As Beltrametti (2000, pp. 248-249) argues against Thesleff, 1997, one should avoid adopting the questionable assumption that comedic imagination is always derivative of philosophical discourse.

In the *Apology*, Plato's Socrates famously singles out Aristophanes' *Clouds* as an example of those earlier charges that had poisoned the minds of Athenian citizens against Socrates well before Meletus decided to bring formal charges (*Apol.* 18a-c and 19c-d).¹⁶ Socrates' claim here is that these early charges were the most effective for they have shaped Socrates' fellow citizens' opinion of him since their childhood and adolescence, at an age when one most readily believes what one is told. Becoming a target of comedic laughter, then, can be a dangerous business.

In fact, the *Republic's* section under investigation significantly contains several references to threats, dangers, and fear. Moreover, the interaction between Socrates and his interlocutors is couched in legal language evoking the context of a law court. At 449c2-3, Adeimantos accuses Socrates of leaving off an important topic of discussion *out of fear* (ἀπορραθυμεῖν ἡμῖν δοκεῖς) and at 450c9-d2, Socrates mentions his fear (ὄκνος) of touching upon these subjects.¹⁷ The conversation is framed from the very beginning as happening in a law court, with Adeimantos and Polemarchus discussing with each other whether they should acquit (ἀφῆσομεν) Socrates of the charge of robbing them of an important part of the argument, and ultimately deciding not to let him go (449b6-c2). A few lines later Glaucon and Thrasymachus add their own vote to the conviction: Socrates must speak:

Include me, Glaucon said, as sharing in this vote.

¹⁶ Allusion to Aristophanes' *Clouds* can be found in the ship of the city metaphor in book VI: at 488e and 489c Socrates claims that the true captain of the ship will be mistakenly considered a good-for-nothing stargazer (μετεωροσκόπον, 488e3; μετεωρολέσχας, 489c6), an image that closely recalls the swingling Socrates from the *Clouds*. This suggests that the apologetic framing from the beginning of book V governs the whole discussion of the three waves, including the defense of philosophical natures against false representations of philosophy.

¹⁷ Further references to fear, courage and encouragement can be found at 450d5-6; 450d9; 451a1; 451b3.

Actually, Socrates, Thrasymachus said, take this as the deliberation of all of us (450a3-6)

If we keep in mind Polemarchus' use of the verb ἀφιέναι, Adeimantus' charge that Socrates is 'robbing' them of the argument, the polemical reference to Aristophanes as well as the various passages mentioning fear or the lack thereof, it appears quite plausible that the general undertone of this and similar passages is a legal one referring to the context of a law court.¹⁸ In fact, the term ψῆφος in conjunction with τιθέναι¹⁹ and the standard phrase ταῦτα δεδογμένα can equally refer to the counting of votes in the Assembly and to lawcourts deliberations. Moreover, Socrates' response to Thrasymachus and Glaucon further emphasizes the legal framework: "What have you done, I said, by *arresting* me (ἐπιλαβόμενοι μου)!"²⁰

The culmination of this cluster of allusions to the context of a trial with its connected dangers can be found in a crucial exchange between Socrates and Glaucon, a few lines later. When Glaucon reassures him that he should not fear (μηδέν... ὄκνει, 450d3), for his interlocutors are neither ill-judging nor incredulous or hostile, Socrates retorts that this is no encouragement at all (ὦ ἄριστε, ἦ που βουλόμενός με παραθαρρύνειν λέγεις, 450d5-6):

Your encouragement (ἡ παραμυθία) would be fine, if I were confident that I know the things I am talking about. One who knows the truth about the dearest and most important things can speak with firmness and audacity among smart and dear friends. But to make speeches when one is not confident and is still investigating, as I am doing, is fearful and dangerous (φοβερόν τε καὶ σφαλερόν). What I fear is not to incur in the charge of being ridiculous (οὐ τι γέλωτα

¹⁸ Halliwell, 1998, p. 134 notices the legal undertones of these passages but he does not make much of them in terms of their import for the interpretation of the first wave.

¹⁹ See for example the use of the term ψῆφος in *Apol.* 36b2 in reference to the votes cast in Socrates' conviction.

²⁰ Emphasis mine. The verb ἐπιλαμβάνειν in mediopassive form and constructed with a noun in genitive usually means 'to arrest someone' or to "lay hands on someone".

ὀφλεῖν), for that would be childish. But if I fall off the truth, I will not only fall myself but draw my friends along regarding things about which it is most important not to be mistaken. I bow to Adrasteia for what I am about to say, for I suppose that to kill someone involuntarily is a lesser crime than to mislead him about fine, good, and just institutions (*Rep.* 450e8-451a7).

It is only after Glaucon frees Socrates from potential charges that Socrates begins in earnest his discussion of sexual difference and equality in relation to the task of guarding and ruling the ideal city:

Well, Socrates, if we suffer something out of tune from your speech, we'll acquit you from the charges as in a homicide case: you are pure and have not deceived us. But take courage (θάρρησας) and speak.

I will – I said – for, as the law says, even in the case of involuntary homicide someone who is acquitted from the charges is pure (451b1-6).

Socrates' bowing to Adrasteia further alludes to the trial, as the goddess Adrastea was commonly associated with the necessary dispensation of rewards and punishment. As in the *Apology*, in this passage we find combined the theme of comedic laughter and that of the charge of corrupting the youth brought against Socrates. Socrates clarifies that for all the jokes of the wits, who resist reforms and novelty out of conformism and unreflective attachment to old habits, what he fears the most is not that he may end up being covered in ridicule. Rather he fears harming his friends out of his own ignorance about the matters at stake. This concern is well placed, for if Socrates' proposals and arguments are wrong, this means that they are violating the principle of specialization that is key both to his definition of justice and to the creation of a just city in speech (but more about this later). This would entail misleading his friends on the issue of justice, a serious charge, indeed. Glaucon reassures Socrates not by claiming that his proposals are certainly correct but by claiming that they will not bring charges against him, for – even if Socrates is wrong – he still would not be deemed guilty of a crime, as deceiving his friends

would not be a voluntary action. One may wonder why Glaucon's reassurance as the possible injured party should be sufficient: after all, one can be the victim of a crime without even recognizing to be one. Yet, besides the reference to the Athenian law about involuntary manslaughter, in the *Apology* we do find a similar defensive argument. At 33d-34b Socrates appeals to the jurors asking them why – if it is true that he is guilty of corrupting the youth – none of the young men who used to consort with him, and not even their close relatives, are bringing charges against him, and why, on the contrary, many of them are sitting at the trial among his supporters.

If I am correct that this section of the *Republic* is couched in legal language and makes references to Socrates' trial, then it is time to clarify the import of such a reading for the interpretation of Socrates' proposal concerning women's education and activities. First, this apologetic framing makes it in my view impossible to read the first and the following waves as ironic, unserious, or hyperbolic.²¹ On the contrary, by adopting this legal language and having Socrates refer to the risk of ridicule and laughter, Plato is also warning the reader that these proposals are meant to be taken very seriously despite their anti-conformism. Second, the apologetic frame is also meant to provide a defense of Socrates against possible charges of leading the youth astray with these anti-conformist views. As such, this section of the dialogue should be read together with Plato's response to Aristophanes' comedic caricature of Socrates in the *Apology*.

The justice of the first wave

Contextualization of the first wave within the Socratic debate and analysis of its apologetic framing should be sufficient to show that the first wave is not just expedient and derivative from the abolition of the *oikos*. Yet, there are also conceptual reasons why the reading of the first wave as expedient cannot stand, lest we make Plato's Socrates utterly incoherent. As already mentioned, at 453c Socrates

²¹ Pace the "ironic" reading of book V in Saxonhouse, 1976.

has an unnamed opponent accuse him of contradicting himself and violating his own principle of specialization and definition of justice. In the subsequent lines, he sets out to push back against this accusation and demonstrate that there is no contradiction involved. Keeping this in mind, interpretations that implicitly or explicitly make Socrates' argument contradictory with his principle of justice strike me as frankly untenable. Notwithstanding, interpretations that see the first wave as merely expedient do just that: they convey a reading of the first wave that makes it incompatible with the principle of specialization, and therefore with justice as defined by Socrates.

As already mentioned, one line of interpretation is to claim that the real reasons behind the equal education of women guardians are eugenic. According to Catherine Gardner, for example, women need to be educated as guardians to make sure that they will produce the appropriate offspring. In this sense, then, the specific function of women guardians is in continuity with the traditional and oppressive role attributed to Athenian women in sexual reproduction and child-rearing. It must first be noted that the first wave does not just entail women's education, but their sharing in the very same activities as men, guarding and ruling. At the end of book VII Socrates reminds Glaucon, who had forgotten about it, that women with the appropriate natures will be rulers:

And ruling women, Glaucon – I said; for you should not think that what I have said applies to men more than to women, at least to those among them who have been born with befitting natures" (*Rep.* 540c5-7).

But even if we were to leave this aside and take it that only education is at stake here, on Gardner's reading we would need to accept that, after expounding upon the dangers of conferring a philosophical education to unworthy natures (490e-491a), Socrates allows women devoid of the necessary natural talent to receive not just military and musical training, but even complex training in the

various mathematical disciplines and dialectics articulated in Book VII. This simply can't be.²²

Analogously, the view that takes the first wave to be a consequence of the abolition of the *oikos* and to be responding to the necessity of giving women guardians something to do once the *oikos* is eliminated (Frede, 2018) fails to meet the coherence requirement that Socrates sets for himself at the beginning of this discussion. If women guardians engaged in the activities of ruling or guarding without having the necessary natural predisposition, this would necessarily introduce injustice in the ideal city by violating the principle of specialization.²³

As these readings encounter an array of intractable problems one may wonder whether there is any advantage in rejecting what I would call a “straightforward” interpretation of the text, *i.e.*, an interpretation that takes at face value Socrates' argument about the absence of relevant sexual difference when it comes to the administration of the city. I take it that, in rejecting this straightforward interpretation, these readings try to respond to some oddities in the text, which make it difficult to take Socrates' argument as a genuine argument in favor of sexual equality. On the one hand, there is the problem of the tension between Socrates' arguments in the first wave and his numerous disparaging comments about women parsed throughout the dialogue. The discrepancy between these comments and the visionary program of the first wave, though, can be easily solved by keeping in mind that the ideal women of the ideal city are quite different creatures from those living under less than ideal circumstances, who have acquired corrupt habits and whose

²² McKeen, 2006 also correctly notes that Gardner mistakenly takes breeding and pregnancy to be *technai* in which one can specialize.

²³ McKeen, 2006 sees the problem but solves it by misconstruing the principle of specialization. In her interpretation the task or function assigned to people is the best among whatever something they can do rather than being determined by their unique ability to do it well or better than others. For a critique of this interpretation, see Harry and Polansky, 2016, p. 265-267. See also Brennan, 2017, for an excellent reconstruction of the terms of women guardians' inclusion that is at odds with McKeen's take.

natural potential has been perverted rather than realized. After all, Socrates has very disparaging comments to make about the citizens of non-ideal cities in general, not just women.²⁴

On the other hand, the argument for the absence of sexually separate spheres of competences does, indeed, appear to be odd. First, Socrates concedes to Glaucon that women as a sex are weaker than men, and this raises the problem of what strength is supposed to mean here: is it only bodily strength or is strength of the soul also implicated?²⁵ Secondly, Socrates argues that there is no separate sphere of competence of women *qua* women as far as the administration of the city is concerned, where one would expect him to argue that there is no separate sphere of competence of men *qua* men (Annas, 1976). Why is Socrates constructing the argument for women's inclusion in such a way? These are genuine puzzles but solving them goes beyond the scope of this article. It suffices to notice here that responses to these puzzles that make the first wave expedient and a mere offshoot of dependent on the second raise more intractable problems than what they intend to solve, insofar as they make Socrates contradict himself on the very overarching topic of the dialogue, i.e., justice.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to demonstrate that the argument of the first wave should be taken as a genuine and serious argument for the abolition of sexual difference insofar as the administration of the city is concerned. The first wave is, indeed, Plato's re-elaboration of the Socratic tenet that men and women have the same virtue, a tenet

²⁴ Commentators have noted that, when making these disparaging comments about women, Socrates usually does not refer to their *physis*. See, for example, Levin, 1996.

²⁵ According to Townsend, 2017, Socrates is conceding to Glaucon, who first introduces the qualification that women are weaker than men (p. 35). She, however, concludes that Socrates has not established sexual equality insofar as women are given the status of lesser men (p. 38).

embraced by Plato's Socrates in the *Meno*, and that we find also in Xenophon's Socratic writings and in sayings attributed to Antisthenes by the tradition. As such, the first wave is not logically dependent on the abolition of the *oikos* nor is it merely expedient. While much has been left unexplored, given the limited scope of this article, re-contextualizing Plato's intervention within the Socratic debate on women's virtue and re-establishing the plausibility of a straightforward interpretation of the text that takes Socrates' argument at its face value, can offer a more fruitful basis for addressing the problems and oddities of the text that remain to be explained.

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Submitted in 26/06/2022 and accepted for publication 14/10/2022



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