
FROM TRAGEDY
TO HIERARCHY
AND
BACK AGAIN:
WOMEN IN
GREEK POLITICAL
THOUGHT

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The earliest attempts at a theoretical understanding of politics occur in the city-states of ancient Greece. Women had no place in the politics of those cities. However, the Greek tragedians and philosophers raised questions about the fundamental assumptions underlying political life by introducing women into their writings. Thus, women appear in some Greek tragedies as a counter to the male sense of political efficacy—the sense that men can create through speech and ignore the facts of physical creation entailed in the process of reproduction. A discussion of two tragedies, The Seven Against Thebes and the Antigone, suggests how the failure of male political leaders to acknowledge the demands of the physical and that which is different brings on tragedy. The Socratic response in the Republic is to overcome tragedy by making the male and the female the same. Aristotle attempts to incorporate sexual difference in the theoretical framework of hierarchy. Finally, there is a brief consideration of the role of the pre-Socratic philosophers in setting the agenda for the Greeks' confrontation with the problems of incorporating difference into the political community.

The Greeks introduced the concept of politics to the Western world; their city-states, or poleis, were the arenas in which citizens might act together, sometimes seeking domination over other cities, sometimes creating orderly sets of rules by which they might govern themselves, sometimes finding in their communal actions glory as cities or as individuals. The Greek philosophers, reflecting on the nature of the polis, gave to the city its theoretical meaning as a realm of potential justice as well as of conflict, of human nobility as well as of fatuity. But always this was the world of men; men were the actors, the seekers of glory, the pursuers of power. They were

the ones who debated in the assemblies, who decided on public policies, who gave expression to the values of the city. The women of Greece were not part of that world.

Conceptions of politics and the models employed to analyze political relations still reflect their origins in the masculine world of the polis, with its concern for domination, self-rule, order, and glory. While the Western intellectual tradition may have accepted the practice of the Greek polis as revelatory of the original meaning of politics, the philosophers and playwrights of ancient Athens reflected critically on that world. In particular, they questioned for their audiences the

focus on power and its pursuit, and the centrality of rationality and its efficacy in ordering the chaotic world of experience. To raise questions about the masculine world of power and reason—a world focused on male potency—they turned to the female, for in her difference from the male she revealed a diversity in nature that threatened the physical order and rational control at which the polis aimed. The male in the Greek tragedies seeks a simplicity, a uniformity, a world he can comprehend through the intellect. When confronted with the female, he must face the problem of difference and complexity, for she introduces the issue of reproduction, which underscores the male's dependence on what is other. The female forces the Greek authors to raise questions and reservations about the ancient polis as a realm of domination and simplicity. These authors indicate for us how the female and the questions she raises about the efficacy of reason and the centrality of power and authority must be acknowledged in all understandings of the nature of the political world, and in the attempt to incorporate that world into theoretically simplified structures.

The life of citizen women in fifth century B.C. Athens was a sheltered one, brief and limited primarily to the production of citizens for the polis and sons to carry on the family religion. However, the portrayal of women in the works of the Athenian playwrights and philosophers is far more complex and sophisticated than the facts of women's daily lives might lead us to believe. Though women themselves probably did not attend theatrical performances, the city of adult males saw on stage powerful women—women whose existence, as the poets reflected on the human condition, could not be denied (Gomme, 1937; Just, 1975; Kitto, 1951, pp. 219–34; Lefkowitz, 1981, pp. 4–11; Pomeroy, 1975, pp. 58–60). Into their vision of themselves as human—somewhere between gods and animals—the

poets introduced the female as a constant reminder of the diversity out of which the world was made, and as a constant warning against the attempt to see the world as one, as uniform and therefore subject to simple answers and rational control. The closeting of women in the home did not shut out their existence from the consciousness of the male poets or of the male citizens for whom they wrote.

The aphorism "know thyself," originally engraved on the Greek temple at Delphi, has often been adopted by political theorists of the modern age. Hobbes, for example, uses it to indicate that we must know our passions, those interior motions that drive us into conflict with others. Rousseau recalls the motto in order to underscore our need to discover our origins, what we were before fateful accidents of history took away knowledge of our true selves. Both Hobbes and Rousseau take the motto as an exhortation to discover one's own nature. For the Greeks it had a somewhat different meaning. "Know thyself," *gnothi seauton*, meant to know the limits of human activity or power, to recognize that as human one was not immortal, and more importantly, that one was not omnipotent—particularly that one could not control all through human reason. The female on the Greek stage forced men into an awareness of the inadequacies of the attempt to control all, of the inability of human courage and human intelligence—often expressed through political action—to dominate the natural world through the denial of variability. He who tried to dominate may have gained stature as the hero, but he was the tragic hero, since such attempts at power and at the imposition of simplicity brought only disaster. Women brought the hero back to what we might call a variable, empirical reality; their presence suggested that there was something other than the abstract city the men had created, and for which they fought.

It was in the structure of the city that the male showed his most courageous attempt to create by giving birth through institutions, thus ignoring the importance of the female for human reproduction. Many of the Greek tragedies, though, indicate the inadequacy of such assertions of political power when they are not moderated by recognition of the variability of nature—a concept of nature based on physical rather than intellectual generation, which thus arises from diversity rather than from simplicity. The male on the Greek stage who tries to live without acknowledging the female and the diversity she reveals encounters tragedy. The female, even in her varied manifestations on stage, illustrates the dependence of the human being on others. She, as different from the male, but also needing the male, underscores the diversity of the world, and the falsity of any vision of self-satisfied independence, omnipotence, or simplicity. This is not to suggest that all women in the Greek plays are the same; certainly there are many differences among the female characters themselves. Rather, in whatever role they appear, women raise for men the problem of difference. Tragedy, as the Greek playwrights portray it, is not caused by women, but rather by the failure of the hero to recognize man's relationship to a diverse natural world and the need to adapt to that diversity. The male, in the rational construction of political order, thinks he can accomplish too much. Greek tragedies reveal the limits of human rationality and human art. For the Greeks, it is women, absent themselves from the audience of citizens watching the plays, who cause men to know themselves.

In this essay I will consider two very different Greek tragedies, Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes* and Sophocles' *Antigone*, to illustrate some of the themes suggested above.¹ I will then offer some comments on how the philosophers of the

fourth century B.C. unsuccessfully tried to deal with and ease the tensions explored by the playwrights of the previous century. I conclude by returning to the earliest philosophers, the so-called pre-Socratics, to suggest how they laid the foundations for the Greeks' intellectual assessment of the city and the female.

Tragedy: The Failure of Male Omnipotence

Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes*

Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes* is the final play of his version of the Oedipus cycle.² Oedipus has died cursing his two sons, the offspring of his incestuous marriage. His sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, agree to take turns ruling Thebes, but Eteocles then refuses to yield his power. Polyneices, eager to claim his turn, returns to Thebes with an army from the neighboring city of Argos. The structure of the play is simple: the hostile army with Polyneices at its head has attacked; Eteocles presents himself as the calm leader of a besieged city; a chorus of terrified townswomen sing of their fears. Eteocles worries that they will instill fear and disorder among his soldiers. During the middle part of the play a Theban messenger describes the Argive warriors who wait for battle at Thebes' seven gates. At the seventh gate stands Polyneices, and it is at that gate that Eteocles and Polyneices meet and kill one another in the subsequent battle. At the end, Antigone and her sister Ismene mourn their brothers, and a decree enacted by the city council is announced, proclaiming that Eteocles is to be given full burial rites, while Polyneices' body is to be cast unburied outside the city.

As with all Greek tragedies, the story of *The Seven Against Thebes* is embedded in a series of myths that lie behind the action and are subtly referred to throughout the play, thereby underscoring its central

themes. For our purposes, the myth of autochthony, or birth from the earth, gives meaning to the action of the play. Thebes was first founded by men born of dragon teeth planted in the earth—that is, the earth was mother, not the human female. The play begins with Eteocles' appeal to his earthborn ancestor, Cadmus (1; cf. 9).³ He looks towards origins that exclude the female, and thereby denies human motherhood (Caldwell, 1973). In so denying his own origins, he envisions the perfection of a city without women. However, it is a perfection both nature and the playwright deny him.

After reminding us of his autochthonous ancestry, Eteocles portrays himself as a captain of a ship "with hand upon the tiller" (3). As such he urges the defense of the city, equating it with the earth, the beloved mother who nourishes her offspring (15–20; cf. 69). The women, who will make up the chorus, are not perceived as mothers; defending the city is not for the sake of the women within its walls, as it was for the Trojan heroes of Homer's *Iliad* (bk. 6), but for the earth that has replaced the human female.

Into this vision of male exclusiveness intrude the Theban women. They are in a panic, beseeching the gods to save them from the violence raging outside the city's walls. Their screams and their disorderly movement call forth from Eteocles, who has just presented himself as the captain with a firm hand on the tiller, one of the most famous misogynist speeches from ancient tragedy. *Thremmata*, he calls them, vile things (181). Can't you keep still? You endanger the city with your disordered screams. Like the women who complained about the sounds of the approaching army, Eteocles now uses vivid verbs to describe the wailings of the female chorus, howling like dogs, hateful to those who practice moderation (186). Then he implores, "Whether in good or evil times, may I never live with the race of women" (188–89). Women filled with

terror, as are the ones before him, cause evil to the household and to the city (191). Eteocles refuses to acknowledge that without this "evil" there would be neither household nor city. The age of earthborn men is past, despite his invocations and his dreams. If the city is to survive, if the household is to survive, then he must live with the race of women. But Eteocles sees the female only as a danger, because she alerts men to what is other than the city and the earth out of which it grows. Eteocles' reaction to the women is to deny them a place in the city, and to deny that there is anything other than the city. The city is the whole of Eteocles' existence. He believes it would be better if the city could do without women, and creativity could again come from the earth to which he is willing to devote himself. Eteocles' vision is of a city that is one, rather than divided between male and female.

Much of the first third of the play is a confrontation between the fearful females and Eteocles' masculine rejection of their fear. Often this conflict is couched in terms of speech and silence. Eteocles, wishing to live without women, states they must not partake in the counsel of the city; that is, he calls for the women to be silent. They respond by asking him to speak (200–201, 230–32, 261–63). Eteocles, the man with his hand upon the tiller, has and uses logos, while the female, whose shrill wailings spread fear throughout the city, must learn silence. Eteocles, as leader, uses speech to create order by dismissing the feminine passions. The first third of the play concludes with the male controlling both the city and the chorus of women.

During the central part of this play a herald describes each Argive warrior waiting at the gates. Eteocles then sends Theban heroes to meet each one, exhorting them on occasion to fight for their mother—meaning the earth—or recalling their earthborn origins (416, 474). Meanwhile, he ignores the women who live in

the city and comprise the chorus. When Eteocles learns that Polyneices stands at the seventh gate, Eteocles resolves to meet him, setting the stage for their mutual death. The chorus reacts strongly to this killing of brother by brother. There is no *geras*, "no old age" for such a pollution (683). The language is suggestive: "No old age" means the pollution is always present; there is no growth, no generation, for this pollution is the denial of generation. The chorus reaffirms the focus on kinship ties, ties which may be in opposition to those created by the city. By denying women earlier in the play, Eteocles acknowledged only the bonds of the city, where all come from the earth and are governed by his reason. By claiming the earth as mother he avoids the complexity of multiple ties of relationship. Because Polyneices is attacking the land, the city, nurture in a common womb is ignored. Meanwhile, the chorus describes Eteocles as a man eager for a killing "not allowed" (694).

The women plead that he be persuaded by them, though he may loathe them (712). Eteocles allows the women to speak, "but briefly," he admonishes (713). They enjoin him, "Do not go to the Seventh Gate" (714), but though they repeat the warning about the stain of shedding his brother's blood, the words of women have no power over him. "You with speech (*logoi*) do not blunt the edge of the sharpened spear," he rebukes them (715). The chorus now sings of the self-killing (*autoktonos*) which will occur when the brothers meet (734). The chorus sees the bond between the two, but Eteocles, as leader of his city, will not allow such ties to muddy the clear distinctions between friend and foe. The simplicity of the definitions of the city cannot, for him, be undermined by the diversity of natural ties.

A messenger enters to report that the city fares well, but the brothers have been joined in the earth, in their common

grave. At this point Antigone and Ismene enter to mourn the deaths of their brothers; they describe the common sufferings of the family of Oedipus, this closest of all families, which Eteocles and Polyneices both wished to ignore. The unity which Antigone and Ismene in their mournful song affirm, however, is torn asunder at the final appearance of the messenger, who now reports the decree that will impose distinctions between the brothers. He says, "It is necessary for me to proceed to announce what has seemed best and was approved by the council of this city of Cadmus" (1005-1006). This is the formal language of the assembly. They have met and they have spoken. "It was decreed," the messenger reports, "to bury Eteocles for his loyalty to the land (*chthonos*) with the beloved tomb of the earth (*ge*)" (1008). The city also passed a decree concerning the corpse of Polyneices: it is to be thrown outside the city's walls, where, unburied, it will be fodder for the birds and dogs. This is the punishment for he who warred against the Cadmean land (*chthonos*). Through their speech (1020, 1025), the men of the Cadmean city have separated the brothers.

Antigone rejects this artificial distinction and announces that if no one else is willing to bury Polyneices, she herself will bury him, accepting whatever risk may come from burying her own brother (1026-29). She is not ashamed to disregard the speech of the city, for she is concerned with the community (*koinon*), the wondrous community (*deinon to koinon*) that exists between herself and her brother, who had grown (*pephukamen*) in the self-same womb, child of the same suffering mother and ill-starred father. She is eager to share (*koinonei*) his miseries (1033). In defiance of the city's sense of its own potency, she says, "Let it be decreed by no one (*me dokesato tini*) that hollowbellied wolves will eat his corpse" (1035-36). Against those man-made decrees she stands as a woman: "I,

although I am a woman, shall devise this" (1038). When the messenger warns that the city will be forced in these things, Antigone ignores, even mocks, his threats, and in her turn orders that he limit his speech (*me makragorei*) (1053). It is speech on which the city is based. She acts on the basis of bonds of kinship, not the bonds created by the words of assemblies.

The chorus of Theban women watching the interchange between Antigone and the messenger is torn in two directions, capturing the tension of the preceding action. Half of the chorus denies the decree and sides with Antigone. They acknowledge the problem in the justice of human decrees: it has no consistency over time, whereas the ties of the family appear natural and eternal, always to be respected. The other half of the chorus bends to the city's decree, accepting the unity between justice and the speech of the city, and thus the distinction between brothers that the city can impose. The play leaves us with no happy conclusion. Though Thebes still stands, the brothers are dead and the women are divided. Eteocles, fulfilling the curse of Oedipus, pollutes the city by shedding his brother's blood. Eteocles' misogyny, based on his rejection of what is other and his desire to see the world as simple and orderly, had been necessary for him to face his brother in battle. After his death the city, now dependent on its own reason, continues to deny the diversity of ties offered by women. Aeschylus's play ends unresolved, and we learn from Sophocles' *Antigone* that the tragedy continues.

Sophocles' *Antigone*

Sophocles wrote the *Antigone* partially in homage to the work of his predecessor, Aeschylus, for the play begins where *The Seven Against Thebes* leaves off.⁴ In Sophocles' version, though, it is not the counsel of elders, but Creon, brother to Jocasta and uncle to Oedipus's children,

who decrees that the body of Polyneices shall not be honored with the rites of burial. Sophocles' play begins as Antigone announces her plan to defy Creon's orders: She will bury the body of her brother and asks for Ismene's aid. Ismene resists, pleading with Antigone not to attempt the burial, for women are weak and have not the strength to fight against the decrees of the male in the city. Ismene equates speech and power. Antigone scorns such an equation. Neither Creon's speech nor his physical resources threaten her. She envisions forces which transcend the speech of the city. These are the gods of the dead, who stand as an affirmation of the limited strength of the political world that Ismene, with her focus on the present, fears.

The tragedy moves on inexorably as Antigone performs the burial rites, is caught, confronts Creon, and is sent to certain starvation in a cave outside the city. Choosing immediate death and union with those who are beloved to her—i.e., those who have died—she hangs herself. Creon's son Haemon, Antigone's betrothed, follows Antigone to her death, whereupon Creon's wife also commits suicide and Creon, who at the beginning of the day was the firm and certain ruler in a city just recovering from a traumatic war, is shattered; he has learned the importance of custom and respect for the gods that in his arrogance he had originally ignored by passing a decree denying the importance of kinship.

Near the beginning of the *Antigone* there is a powerful and justly famous choral ode in which the chorus of Theban elders sings about the "wonders" of man. The translation "wonders" does not, however, capture the tension of the term *deinos*, a word that entails terror as well as wonder. It is precisely this ambiguity which embodies the tragedy of the play, for the wonders of man include all the actions of man's intellect, whereby he has

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been able to conquer the natural world around him, but which in turn may destroy him.

Many the wondrous things, and none is more
wondrous than the human
who walks upon the earth . . .
And she, the greatest of gods, the earth—
ageless she is, and unwearied—he wears her away
as the plows go up and down from year to year . . .
He controls with craft the beasts of the open air,
walkers on hills . . .
Speech and windlike thought
and the feelings which are part of rule in the town
he has taught to himself.⁵

(332–56)

The portrait is of man the creator against nature. Only death has he been unable to conquer.

The choral ode's optimism about man's capacity to rule matches precisely Creon's vision of himself as the leader of Thebes. He views law as a human creation that springs forth from human speech. Throughout the play there are references to Creon's "orders." Antigone begins the tragedy by asking her sister whether she has heard the "announcement" (*kerugma*) (8; cf. 32, 192, 446). Ismene had accepted Creon's speech as law, and therefore as equivalent to power. Creon's son Haemon views the political as speech as well, asking his father to listen to what the people are saying as they whisper in the corners of the city. Only Antigone denies the efficacy of human speech, scornfully dismissing the spoken decrees of the city's leader. The laws she follows are worthy of respect precisely because they are unwritten and unspoken by men. As such they have always been, and were never the creation of the human intellect. Thus, they are similar to nature, which always exists, but which Creon in his sense of potency feels he can dismiss, and which the chorus praises man for conquering. The uncreated, unwritten laws of the gods stand as a counter to the spoken decrees of the city that Creon rules.

Antigone, though, in denying the efficacy of speech, denies any form of

creativity. Her name itself captures her stand: *anti-gone*, against birth. As Antigone becomes devoted to the world of the dead, unmoving and unvaried, she herself is transformed into a male in both the language she uses to describe herself and that used by Creon to refer to her (Pomeroy, 1975, p. 100). In her focus on what has always existed—i.e., on what cannot be created through human efforts and human speech—she fails to understand her own dependence on that which is other; the city and the male. She focuses on a nature that always is, that never comes into being or grows. She herself denies the prospect of marriage, unmoved by Ismene's pleas that she think of her forthcoming marriage to Haemon. Marriage entails creation; the piety Antigone espouses is an anti-life piety, and like the male Homeric heroes, she becomes the warrior whose glory can be achieved only at the moment of death, in the denial of life and of change.

Creon, in turn, thinks too much of creativity and power. Furthermore, his is a creativity of speech against nature rather than within nature, as abstracted from the creative powers of the family as Antigone's piety. Creon's assertion of male potency is set off by his pride in his masculinity, a masculinity he constantly feels is threatened by Antigone's resistance. She has denied his capacity to make and enforce decrees, to create and order the city. "I am not a male (*aner*), but she the male if she rules in this thing," he says (484–85); and later in his discussion with Haemon he asserts, "While I am alive no woman (*gune*) shall rule over me" (525; cf. 670). Throughout the play Creon and Antigone stand in opposition to one another. Their opposition brings on the tragedy, which would not occur were Antigone to yield to the pleas of her sister to allow male potency full expression of itself (in terms of both Creon's decree and the prospective marriage with Haemon), or were Creon's attempts at self-assertion

to yield to Antigone's denial of the capacity for human creativity. Antigone, rejecting creativity, relies only on what is, and thus must turn to death itself, while Creon, looking only at what comes into being, ignores—according to Antigone—the demands of what is.

While Antigone may alert the audience to unchanging laws which exist above the city, and to the paltry role of human speech, her presence must be supplemented by Ismene, who, while submitting herself to the power of the city, continues trying to remind both Antigone and Creon of the processes of birth—that is, of the dependence of both on the diversity of nature, which each wishes to deny. During the confrontations between herself and Antigone and between Antigone and Creon, Ismene asks Creon, "Will you kill the bride of your own son?" (568). Creon's vulgar response, "There are the arable fields of others," reveals his refusal to acknowledge the particularity of Antigone (Benardete, 1975, p. 23). For Creon, Antigone differs no more from other women than money-grubbing prophets differ from one another (1055). Creon's mind perceives uniformity and simplicity, while Ismene tries to remind him of the unique harmony between Haemon and Antigone (570). The two protagonists of the play, each defending opposing visions of certainty, destroy each other. Ismene preserves her own status as a female, standing between Antigone and Creon reminding them of marriage and family, yet unable to move the adamant will of either as each focuses on her or his own vision of the simple and uniform.

Into this world of conflict between Antigone and Creon, which neither Haemon nor Ismene is able to resolve, comes the seer Teiresias, one who knows the ways of the gods and interprets auguries and sacrifices for the leaders of Thebes. He is an intermediary between the gods and men. He also is an inter-

mediary between the male and the female, for upon killing the female of a pair of coupling snakes he was himself transformed into a woman for part of his life. Teiresias thus understands the perspective of both the male and the female, and his role as an intermediary between gods and humans is in part dependent on this double vision.

Unlike Antigone, Teiresias does not deny the value of the city. Rather, he assists in its guidance. When Teiresias first appears, Creon comments that previously he has never deviated from Teiresias's advice. Teiresias responds that therefore Creon has kept the ship of state upright (993-94). But unlike Creon, Teiresias is unwilling to depend entirely on human reason for such guidance. Human intelligence must accept diversity in the world—the gods of the dead as well as the gods of the living, the male as well as the female—and not attempt to transform that diversity into simplicity. Teiresias offers Creon the means of escape from the tragedy about to befall him, but Creon is arrogant in the power of his own intellect and capacity to understand human motivations: "The race of seers all love silver" (1055). Refusing to accept the advice and vision of the prophet, a male turned female and back again, Creon must endure the tragic destruction of his world, a destruction reason is unable to prevent.

The *Antigone* and *The Seven Against Thebes* suggest, in very different ways, how women stood as threats to the masculine image of potency in ancient Greece, reminding men of what they must escape in order to found and preserve the city: the fundamental diversity of nature, which did not yield easily to the imposition of rational simplicity. For Eteocles there was the chorus of Theban women. For Creon there is Antigone, though she herself may want the same simplicity as he, and thus stands as a worthy opponent. Nevertheless, she threatens Creon

with her status as different, as set apart from the city which should be, as Creon sees it, seamless. For Creon and Eteocles, the simplicity each desires depends on the denial of the female. Tragedy reveals that such denial is destructive of the polis, which could not survive without reproduction—the process of birth that depends on the commingling of opposites.

Let me now turn to the next century. The problem of women for the polity is always present, raising questions about male rationality and the attempt to create a city that does not depend on what is other. Both Plato and Aristotle try to respond to the threat of women and the tragedy that results from ignoring them.

The Philosophers' Response

Callipolis:

Socrates' Escape from Tragedy

The Socrates of Plato's *Republic* is famous—perhaps infamous—for his condemnation of poetry. In the metaphysical critique of poetry in Book X, Socrates describes the poet or artist as being three removes from what is real. In the moral critique of poetry in Books II and III, the gods are shown to be less than divine in their immoral lives. Behind both critiques is a rejection of poetry because it encourages men to see the multiplicity of the world of men and gods (Nichols, 1983a). In Book X Socrates the artist portrays specific—i.e., diverse—objects, rather than uniform or simple ideas—e.g., the idea (or form) of a chair. Artistic representations distract us from simplicity and make us focus on the particular. The critique in Book II is that the epic poets make the gods appear diverse rather than uniform and simple. For example, Socrates asks Adeimantus whether he supposes that “the god is a wizard able treacherously to reveal himself at different times in different *ideas*, at one time actually changing himself and passing his own

form into many shapes” (380d).⁶ They both conclude, “The god would least of all have many shapes” (381b). Similarly, the recitation of poetry must be excluded, for in the process of reciting poems or acting on stage, men may “undertake seriously to imitate in the presence of many . . . thunder, the noises of winds, hailstorms, axles and pulleys, the voices of trumpets . . . even the sound of dogs, sheep, and birds” (397a). Even laughter disappears, since it is a mode of changing from one form to another—i.e., an acknowledgment of diversity within the world and, worst of all, within a man himself (380c).

Art and the human expression of art is variable and diverse. In Socrates' Callipolis, as he calls this most perfect of all cities, there is to be no changing, no variability. No tragedies, no epics, no comedies will disturb the beautiful unity of the city. However, to achieve this condition of perfection—of completion and wholeness—of which his treatment of poetry is but one manifestation, it is necessary that Socrates conflate the situations of the male and female members of his perfect city. The differences between them must be ignored. Any differences that have defined male and female in the past are to be attributed to convention rather than nature. The natural world, in Socrates' understanding of it in this dialogue, pursues the uniform, not the diverse. It is the conventions of society which have accentuated differences.

This portrait of a natural world of uniformity rather than diversity is what Socrates tries to enforce when in Book V he suggests, “We'll suppose that our guardians and their women must practice the same things” (454d–e). The life of the female in the guardian class in Socrates' city is to be as little different from that of the male as possible. The activities surrounding the distinctive characteristics of the female body—namely, the processes of giving birth—are to be eliminated as

much as possible. Making this point, Socrates asks Glaucon, "Do we believe the females of the guardian dogs must guard the things the males guard along with them and hunt with them, and do the rest in common; or must they stay indoors as if they were incapacitated as a result of bearing and rearing the puppies, while the males work and have all the care of the flock?" (451d). The state of pregnancy is ignored and once the child is born to a woman, that child is placed in a pen along with other babies. The mother laden with milk will nurse a child, at intervals determined by her other activities, but she will not know her own child, nor will the care of the child be hers (460c-d). It is, as Glaucon remarks, "an easy-going kind of child-bearing for women guardians, as you tell it" (460d). The processes of birth appear as brief as the moment of conception—hardly to be noticed at all.

The consequences of this conflation of the male and the female in the guardian class are many (Elshtain, 1981, pp. 29-35; Okin, 1979, ch. 1-3), but for my purposes here we must see how it overcomes the ideas of the tragedies of the fifth century. The oppositions between male and female, physical and intellectual, nature and art, and the many and the one, are denied precisely by eliminating the family, the female, and the physical from the city. The tensions thus disappear. But by doing this Socrates creates a city which is a static moment in time. Like the gods he seeks to create in Book II, it has no motion, no capacity for change, and no capacity for self-regeneration. Callipolis is the creation of human speech, the speech of the dialogue engaged in by Socrates and his friends as they talk through the night in Cephalus's house. This speech has no relation to human bodies, which grow, change, give birth, and die—or even eat. The dinner promised (328a) is never served to these men, who devour only words (354a).

When Socrates tries to deal with the question of the regeneration of his city, all sorts of problems and internal contradictions arise. He tries to make prohibitions against incest, but as Aristotle would point out later, the prohibitions do not work. As Socrates goes on and on with his proposals for the proper modes of reproduction, Glaucon notes that the city's rulers must rely on a certain residual eroticism to make the plans work (458d). This is because they have previously eliminated any focus on the body, which could turn a guardian from the whole of which he is a part to an individual body with passions capable of erotic arousal. Furthermore, Socrates' claims concerning the equality of the male and the female are undermined when women are handed over as prizes for the men who are most valorous in battle.

In Book VIII Socrates traces the downfall of the monistic ideal he has envisioned through speech, in the prayers of men who are bound to the cave and to the fundamental variety of the natural world of physical beings (592a-b). The city's failure comes precisely from the incapacity to understand fully the process of regeneration—an incapacity to control, through mathematical knowledge, the seasons and the ways of sex. Because of their failure to combine adequately their mathematical knowledge with the exact movements of the seasons, the guardian rulers arrange for births not propitious for the preservation of the city; decay thus sets in (546a-d).

As the city declines from the aristocracy of Callipolis to the reign of a tyrant, women become distinct from men and their peculiar characteristics become more and more important. In the timocratic regime, the wife, having values different from those of her husband, complains to her son that she is not married to one of the rulers, and that because of her husband's lack of ambition she is at a disadvantage. Her son, she hopes, will do

better (549c-d). The point of complete deterioration is when the male has become the female in the description of the tyrant. He is one confined for the most part to his house, where "he lives like a woman, envying any of the other citizens who travel abroad" (597b-c). The circle is completed and we are back again at the conflation of male and female, only here it is the male ruler who becomes the female, not the female ruler who becomes the male. In this respect the similarity in Plato's work between the best, Callipolis, and the worst, tyranny, is striking, and perhaps suggests the inadequacies of both the attempt to impose the male view as the totality of existence and the attempt to make the female dominant. Both lack the capacity for regeneration, and thus both die ignoble deaths. Tyranny is for Socrates the end of the descending regimes. We must wait several centuries for Polybius to turn the decline into a cycle where degeneration can also lead to rebirth.

Socrates' city fails because men do not have the capacity to abstract from nature and make all simple. His desire to create in speech what is abstracted from the physical is evident in his attempt to destroy the boundaries between male and female. Socrates tries to escape the tragedy depicted by the playwrights by obliterating that which brings on tragedy, but he errs as the tragic heroes did by overemphasizing the efficacy of logos. The human body calls him back into the cave, to the tragic fall of his beautiful city to the petty issues of reproduction. The heroic city Socrates has created has a deathlike quality. There is no creativity, no art, no birth; it is a world in which neither male nor female exists, in which the masculine model of rational omnipotence has reigned to create a vision of monist simplicity from which variable poetry, among other things, must be excluded. In a sense, such a city calls forth its own tragedy, for it is a denial of itself.

Callipolis becomes a wasteland—a beautiful city which survives only in the speech of its creator.

**Aristotle:
The Failure of Hierarchy**

In the first six chapters of Book II of the *Politics*, Aristotle explicitly rejects Socrates' conflation of male and female, accusing him of turning his city into an individual and ignoring the impious consequences of his proposals (Dobbs, 1985; Saxonhouse, 1982). In contrast, Aristotle tries to deal with observed diversity in the world, not through denial, but through separation and hierarchy. Aristotle recognizes the relation between logos, mind, and the world of the senses, and thus acknowledges variety. He tries valiantly to resolve the problem of diversity by imposing hierarchy, rather than by ignoring or conflating differences. Yet because he is committed to a hierarchy that ensures the rule of the best, he leaves us dissatisfied with what hierarchy can achieve, for while it orders relations among humans, it is not always possible for humans to ensure that its ordering is just. Tragedy thus reappears, as Aristotle recognizes the limits of human reason and reveals the inadequacies of the political world. Tragedy on stage arose from men's discovery that they could not achieve the perfection of the gods. In Aristotle's politics the tragic surfaces not with the violence that we see on stage, but with the acknowledgment that the best is beyond human endeavors. Aristotle attempts to deal with this human failure to achieve divine status not with mournful laments or resignation, but through accepting the second best and acknowledging its limited satisfactions (Zuckert, 1983).

Behind Aristotle's political philosophy lie the twin principles of hierarchy and teleology. According to Aristotle both give order to the natural world. Teleology assures that, undisturbed, the natural

growth of animals and plants is in the direction of what is best—that is, toward the most complete expression of its particular form. This is the highest form a living creature can attain, in which, as Aristotle would say, it fulfills its nature and reaches its end: e.g., the colt becomes a horse and the acorn an oak. Motion is purposive. Related to this is hierarchy, which for Aristotle ensures the priority (the authority) of the better over the inferior. On the most basic level, Aristotle claims, this means the authority of the soul over the body (1.5.1254a31).⁷ If the soul does not rule, the individual lives a disordered life, in opposition to nature, a condition harmful to the individual (1.5.1254b5–8). Simply put, the mind must rule over the body or the body will not be fed. Hierarchy gives both meaning and a means of survival to the natural world, for it establishes what is best and allows what has come into being to continue to exist. This model is transferred in Aristotle's political work to the social relations within the community, where the better must rule over the inferior, and, according to his first assessment, the master should rule over the slave and the male over the female.

Aristotle's claim concerning the inferiority of the female is based on a variety of assumptions, and is derived from his discussion of the female in his biological works. The female of any species comes into being as a defect of nature, the result of the absence of adequate heat at the moment of conception. Thus, those eager for sons are well advised to conceive when the wind is not blowing from the north, or when the couple is at the height of passion (*Generation of Animals*, 2.1.732a6–7; 3.1.765b10ff., 766a30ff.; 3.2.767b8ff.). Yet while the female may be a defect of nature, she is necessary to keep the species in existence, and Aristotle acknowledges the mutuality of the sexes in the process of production, an acknowledgment Ete-

ocles wished to deny and Socrates to minimize. However, though she may be necessary, she is nevertheless defective, and consequently, in a hierarchical world must be under the authority of the male, who is not defective. The principles of teleology and hierarchy are for Aristotle clear. It is the application of these principles to the world around us which ensures, according to Aristotle, an orderly society in which the inferior accepts the authority of the better, and each individual moves towards that end prescribed by his, her, or its nature.

However, Aristotle was an observer, one who did not wish to deny the power of sight. "We see," begins the discussion of the *Politics*. To write the *Politics* he studied 150 constitutions and their histories. They revealed a world that is not orderly, a world often convulsed by revolutions and political conflicts, as Book V of the *Politics* so vividly records. These conflicts arise because the criteria for determining the hierarchy of better and worse have never been carefully articulated, and men disagree. The criteria, as Aristotle understands them, must refer to what is unseen, what is in the soul. To place those who are better in positions of authority over those who are worse, we must know who is better and who is worse. How are we to do this? Political systems establish such criteria through speech—wealth, birth from citizen parents, education at certain universities or colleges, membership in a certain religious group. But these criteria are external and not based on Aristotle's concept of a natural hierarchy. While hierarchy is Aristotle's attempt to deal with diversity, he sees a fundamental problem with the concept, precisely because our sight does not always reveal who is better and who is worse.

Aristotle reveals the problems with this principle of hierarchy as applied to the political community in Book I of the *Politics*, almost immediately after he has

presented it. He turns from generalizations about the growth of a polis to a discussion of the parts of the household, and particularly the master/slave relationship. There are two kinds of slavery: one is conventional, the other according to nature (1.3–5). Conventional slavery, having no basis in nature, is founded only on the principle of conquest, which for Aristotle has nothing to do with better and worse (1.6.1155a25–32). Only corrupt societies—those not based on nature—use conquest as grounds for enslaving people and keeping their children as slaves. Though most slaves are the result of such conquests, this is not, in Aristotle's understanding, sufficient justification for slavery. In a corrupt society such as Athens we find slaves according to convention, but not according to nature—that is, men who are not slaves by nature, but who because of particular circumstances are kept as slaves. The problem is that we cannot see or know the soul, that which, more than the body, defines the natural slave. "It is not entirely easy," Aristotle remarks with due reserve, "to see the beauty of the soul as of the body" (1.5.1255a1).

Though the rule of the worse over the better is not likely to occur in the relations between the male and the female, where the differences between bodies are more apparent than between the bodies of the natural ruler and the natural slave, on occasion a superior female is subject to an inferior male. Though according to Aristotle this is against nature, it can happen. Aristotle does not state that all men are better than all women, only that this is natural; yet, he argues, we cannot be assured that nature is in control at all times. Nature does not always arrange that the child of a slave is slavish, nor that the soul of the female is always inferior to that of the male. To treat all those who live in conquered cities as slaves or all those born female as lacking in sense is to fail to recognize the diversity of nature.

The classic example of this is the story of Tecmessa, the wife of Ajax. In Sophocles' play the *Ajax*, when Tecmessa tries to calm Ajax down, urging him not to put on his armor in his present state of rage, she is told by her husband that silence is beautiful in women. Ajax in his madness proceeds to kill all the cattle of the Greeks, thinking that he is killing the Greek heroes themselves. The attempt to silence Tecmessa was a sign of Ajax's failure to see the wisdom in her soul, which outshone his own, though clearly his body—that of the great warrior—was more beautiful than Tecmessa's defective (because female) body (Nichols, 1983b, pp. 181–82).

The problem for Aristotle, the scientific observer of animals and constitutions, known for his empiricism, is precisely the limits of observation; namely, that we cannot see the soul, though this is where we must look if we are to understand goodness. Observable criteria such as wealth, birth, or sex are used by politics to establish worth and hierarchical order. But hierarchy in the city is according to convention, not nature, and thus, while it may be convenient for ordering the social world, is not best.

Plato's Socrates, along with Creon and Eteocles, assumed the capacity of the logos to overcome the problems presented to them by the sexual dimorphism of the human species. The male heroes of the tragedies tried to deal with women by denying them, ignoring their demands and assuming the priority of the creative logos. Socrates tried to eliminate the female by fusing the male and the female. Aristotle accepted the existence of the female, and offered a theoretical construction, hierarchy, that could incorporate in the social structure the diversity of natural and human forms. However, in his investigation of the problem he found that the theory, the logos, resisted application because of the limits of human observation. Sight, which had told

Aristotle so much about the workings of the natural world, was of no use in elaborating accurate criteria of virtue, which could not be seen.

In Book III of the *Politics* Aristotle leads us away from problems of sexual differentiation, which had been critical throughout the first two books, and into the world of citizens, in which the polity makes men equal. He eschews the permanent hierarchies he had tried to find and justify in nature. Yet always behind Aristotle's theories of democracy and oligarchy, stability and revolution, are the questions he has raised about slaves, the subordination of women, and what we can really know about the better, the worse, and the foundations of justice. The artificial equality of citizens in a polity is a practical solution, but one which means the failure of Aristotle's theory, for such equality denies what he would understand as the rule of the best.

Conclusion

Early Greek philosophy of the sixth and early fifth centuries confronted the question of unity and diversity. The philosophers saw a world of variety—a world of animals, humans, plants, stones—beneath which they searched for a source that could unify it all. Some of the early philosophers turned to an underlying substance such as fire, water, or air, explaining that the diversity we see around us derives from the varied forms of that one fundamental element.

This understanding of the world forced these so-called nature philosophers in many cases to deny their senses. The senses did not offer us knowledge of the fundamental elements at the base of the world we observed. The senses perceived a world that was constantly changing. In contrast, the mind was able to look behind the diversity and find unity and order (Snell, 1960, ch. 7). The mind, indeed, was able to show the fallibility of

the senses, as in the famous paradoxes of Zeno: An arrow, for example, could never reach a target. In order to do so it would have to travel half the distance to the target, but since there are an infinite number of halves, which the arrow could never cross, it never reaches the target. And yet, the eyes see the arrow hit the target, a fact which the mind knows is impossible, because it knows the arrow can never reach the end of infinity. Therefore, according to the logic of the time, the senses are unreliable and fallible. The eyes see motion and change, whereas in fact there is none.

In the conflict between the mind and the senses, the mind was declared the winner. The males of fifth-century tragedy also declared the mind the winner. They sought simplicity and unity as they ruled over the city. They hoped not to need to deal with a world which might turn them away from the priority and unity of the city, but in so doing they had to deny women, difference, and human reproduction, and thus act much as the philosophers who said that the arrow could not hit the target. Socrates, in *The Republic*, also tried to deny the senses in his abstraction from body and consequent willingness to equate the male and the female. Only Aristotle tried to retain a vision of the world as multiple, and to be valued precisely for its variability. His vision leads, however, to a hierarchical structure that must fail when applied to political life, since for him, as for the other Greek philosophers, the unseen becomes more important than the seen. Again, the tragedy comes from the inadequacy of the human intellect, which cannot transform what is variable and multiple into simplicity, and can neither demand complete silence of women who fear an invading army nor transform the female into the male, as Socrates tries to do. In their diverse roles throughout the corpus of Greek literature, women give the lie to the male's dangerous and tragic love of his

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own imagined potency, creativity, and intellect, and reveal the potential limits of the masculine political perspectives that we have inherited from the Greeks.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1985 annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association, as well as at Carleton, Reed, Rutgers, the University of California at San Diego, and the University of Washington.

1. The selection of plays has been determined in part by the desire to study carefully plays I have not discussed before (cf. Saxonhouse, 1980, 1984). *The Seven Against Thebes* will receive more extensive treatment, since political scientists are likely to be less familiar with it than with the *Antigone*. For other treatments of the Greek plays also focusing on the significance of the female, though not always from the same perspective as mine, see Euben (1982), Foley (1981), Pomeroy (1975, pp. 97–119), and Zeitlin (1978).

2. The ideas in this section owe much to Benardete (1967), and Orwin (1980).

3. The numbers in the parentheses here and throughout the discussion of the plays refer to the lines of the Greek texts. The Oxford Classical Texts are used for all Greek authors, unless otherwise indicated. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

4. Particularly helpful in this section were the discussions of the *Antigone* in Knox (1964), and Benardete (1975). Other readings of this tragedy that focus on its significance for those concerned with women in political theory include Elshtain (1982) and the critique of Elshtain by Deitz (1985, pp. 26–30).

5. Apart from the first and last sentences, the translation is that of Elizabeth Wychoff in Grene and Lattimore (1960). See also Segal (1964) for a full discussion of this passage.

6. I cite Plato according to standard Stephanus pagination. I have used Bloom's translation.

7. I cite Aristotle according to the standard reference form, including book and chapter. Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the *Politics* and all translations are my own.

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