
THE NECESSITY OF THE FEMININE VIRTUES IN THE FORMATION OF THE CITIZEN

E Marangianou

University of Athens

The present paper aims to accentuate the necessity of feminine virtues in the formation of citizens, and the significance they acquire for a person wishing to participate in public affairs in contemporary society. In so doing, reference is made to examples stemming from the long history of the Greek thought.

To begin with, feminine virtue was of great importance in ancient Greece, as both Plato and Aristotle had observed, despite the fact that, at the time, women did not participate actively as citizens in the management of politics.

Plato, mainly in the *Republic* but also in his other writings, views women as being equal to men, in terms of abilities and virtues, and holds an important position for them. Given that they prove worthy and good, he entrusts them with the government of his ideal republic, along with the male "guardians", thus presenting women with the opportunity to participate actively and on an equal footing in political decisions.

In Plato, politics acquires a moral content; for this reason, its objective is the happiness that derives from moral law and the common interest.¹ According to his teaching, the perfect citizen is the virtuous one. And the perfect ruler is the philosopher (man or woman) who knows virtue very well and accordingly tunes his behavior as well as the behavior of those under his rule.²

Therefore, the woman-ruler who, primarily, is a moral personality, makes the best of the citizens by using persuasion or, if the need arises, violence (compulsory compliance with the law), just as a doctor acts in order to save his patients.³ But how does the morally and spiritually superior woman reach the highest political posts?

Transcending the status quo of his era, the philosopher establishes the equivalence between the two sexes. Contrary to the strong prejudices of the time, he declares that, in reality, there is no substantial difference between feminine and masculine nature. A

woman differs so little from a man as does a bald man from one with hair.⁴ In order to support his point of view, he borrows images from nature that are of indisputable credibility and familiar to all of us. He seems to believe that one can neither ignore nor break such powerful natural laws. All that is left to do is to observe them carefully and to keep abiding by them in human societies.

He specifically mentions that, just like we use watchdogs to guard the herd (female or male indiscriminately) and none of them remains inactive in order to look after the newborn,⁵ women should follow the same occupations as men, given that they have previously been educated properly and in the same way as men. Their education aims at their elevation towards the Good, at the same time maintaining a practical spirit since the objective of their moral completion is the development of the right attitude within society.

Therefore, not only will women be educated in gymnastics, music, arithmetic, geometry, physics, astronomy and philosophy, but they will also be trained in the art of war.⁶ Subsequently, they will be subjected to the necessary tests (fatigue, pain, battles, temptations) in order to confirm their virtue and firmness of character. Finally, they will be placed, on trial, in certain public posts and those of them who will prove capable of governing, when they reach the age of fifty, will become guardians, i.e. governors of the state.⁷

Administrative tasks will, thus, be equally distributed between men and women since capabilities are equally distributed between the two genders.⁸ Souls (excellent, mediocre or bad) are not formed according to gender, but according to natural capabilities and the education received.⁹

Naturally, the women elevated to the supreme posts will necessarily be virtuous and will bring justice and prosperity to their city. Simultaneously, they will mold perfect citizens because the will of women-rulers (as that of men) stems from their communication with Ideas and the Good, while the acts of the citizens constitute the instrument of this will.¹⁰

Furthermore, they will teach citizens that one must live in harmony with himself and with others and, consequently, they must fulfill their own role, the role for which they are destined by nature.¹¹ The state will then resemble a strong and well-fit together cloth, able

to withstand any difficulty whether that refers to internal problems or to external attacks.¹²

Nobody will be rising in revolt, but everyone will be living peacefully in the understanding that true equality is proportionate to the capabilities of each citizen.¹³ In Plato, therefore, virtues - male and female - formulate the notion of citizen utterly and decisively.

At this point we must note the following:

a. In developing his political theory, Plato does not usually use expressions that include adjectives or nouns of the feminine gender, except for the passages in which he refers to women's capabilities and education. This could be attributed to the familiar grammatical rule stipulating that the masculine gender is predominant over the feminine gender or to the fact that the philosopher considered it superfluous to talk in more detail about a subject to which he had previously referred so clearly.

b. This whole system is merely a theoretical formation which, despite its rigid logic, was never applied in ancient Greece. Nevertheless, according to certain scholars such as K. Georgoulis, "*the Republic* is not an utopian book, but a revelation of the foundations that base every human society", that is "the placing of man in a society of ideas".¹⁴

There is another Platonic text regarding women's contribution to the formation of the citizen: Socrates' initiation, by Diotima, to the mystery of *eros* which is described in Plato's *Symposium* (210a-212a). If we accept that:

a. the priestess of the Platonic dialogue is the perfect incarnation of virtues;

b. the elevation of the initiated from the material world to the kingdom of ideas constitutes a progress that reveals the true philosopher; and,

c. philosophers are the only proper citizens in a society; then we reach the conclusion that the virtuous woman leads the man to fully develop his personality and, consequently, to function perfectly as a citizen.

Aristotle, at this point, diversifying his views from his Master's, distinguishes female from male virtues and admits the women's

limited but decisive role attributed to them by the society of the time, that is the formation of virtuous men inside the family, a role they assume either as wives or as mothers. Nevertheless, the philosopher does not hesitate to stress the enormous significance of family as a political unit, since this constitutes the origin of the city. Thus, women, being the foundation of family, contribute to the formation of responsible and good citizens.

In the first book of his *Politics* he mentions, specifically, that those who cannot exist separately i.e. the man and the woman, should necessarily live together. The purpose of their living together is to have children, and he rules while she is, by nature, ruled in order for them to survive.¹⁵ Subsequently, he describes the creation, by the couple, of the family, the formation of the town by the families and, finally, from towns, the creation of the city.¹⁶ Aristotle, in this passage clearly expresses his opinion about the role of women in society and, consequently, in the molding of citizens. He notes, in particular, that the city's origin can only be the family; its core is again necessarily reduced to the couple that decides to live together under the same roof: the man and the woman.

Men and women coexist to such an extent that they cannot live without each other. As a consequence, women constitute a necessary prerequisite for the existence of men and, furthermore, the existence of the family and the city. However, there cannot be any family or city without moral foundations or, at least, some rules of conduct, which are acceptable by the majority of their members and refer to the sphere of ethics. We can, therefore, say that the woman constitutes not only the biological core of the family and subsequently the state, but also the origin of their moral and political substance, especially if she is virtuous, thus positively influencing the moral development of her husband and children.

Therefore, according to the Aristotelian viewpoint regarding the family, the man exercises power in general, while the woman takes care of the details as far as the management of the home is concerned. In any case, the virtue of a woman differs from that of a man since their roles differ as well.¹⁷ Thus, the notions of prudence, bravery or justice are not the same for men and women but the virtue of the man is destined to rule, while that of the woman is meant to serve.¹⁸ He is obliged to rule and his wife has to obey him.

At this point we must, however, note that the philosopher, influenced by the convictions of his era, does not accept the idea of a

primitive natural equality between the two sexes, such as the one expressed by the sophists Hippias and Antifon, or the one introduced by Plato. Specifically, in his *Politics* he expresses the view that the male is by nature better, more hegemonic and thoughtful compared to the female.¹⁹ Elsewhere, he adds moreover that the man's superiority is not confined to the natural level but extends to cover the moral level as well. He has to exercise authority and the woman must obey him. Only in such a way can both of them can reach virtue.²⁰

Nevertheless, female virtues play an important role in the formation of the citizens because the virtuous mother raises her children, tomorrow's citizens, with moral values. And no one can be unjust or mean when the principles of their upbringing are based on Good.

In the post-classical Greek thought, as well as during the Byzantine period, the concept of female virtue must be viewed in a universal context. In the views of the Stoics and Christianity the woman is considered as being equal to the man as regards the ability to acquire virtue, despite the differentiations of their emotional worlds. And exactly because of this particular sensitivity, the woman, as a Byzantine citizen, does not only raise great spiritual and political personalities (as have been the Fathers of the Church or certain emperors, such as Constantine the Great), but she also engages herself in charity. She, thus, realises to the most important among all virtues, that of Love and softens the feebleness, inadequacy and, injustice of state authority.

Love for our fellow-man is realised mainly through female charity and makes the ideal republic real. If, according to the teaching of Christianity, looking at the face of each of our fellow-men we see a brother and we treat him accordingly, then we would have accomplished the perfection concerning the concept of citizen. And women, with their psychosynthesis and the influence they exert as wives and mothers, can lead the whole state towards the Good. Even nuns, these models of Christian virtue, have often engaged actively in charities.

In forming her virtue, the Christian woman follows the example of living according to the norms of heaven, where exists a perfect, in virtue, bliss. However, she is not dissociated from the earthly situations, within which she functions as a social unit, mainly within the family.

In the universality of our times, which shares many common characteristics with the post-classical Greek antiquity, the virtuous woman, eventually being an active member of the political community, has the potential to take up moral action and to fulfil the role of the citizen. The existence of this potential is the result of:

a. her access to higher education, where she can obtain special knowledge that is linked with the improvement of social and political reality;

b. information, thanks to the various communication media, about social groups or individuals that are in need of aid. The same media can, also, easily organize missions or ways to offer aid, unknown in the past, such as raising a significant amount of money through television or the radio and channeling it to the victims of earthquakes, floods, wars, sickness, etc.;

c. the way that movement is facilitated nowadays. For instance, if a part of the country has suffered a disaster, women, that usually enjoy more free time than men, can hurry to the place of disaster (some times long before the state assumes any action) in order to offer their assistance.

In this context, it should be noted that the basic virtues ensuring the cohesiveness of the state (justice, mutual assistance and mutual respect as well as communication between citizens) are the same for men and women and it is equally possible for both to develop these virtues nowadays. For this reason, women's contribution to the socio-political life and to the shaping of relations between the citizen and the state can, today, be considered extremely important.

Notes

1. Plato, *Protagoras*, 352 b-d; *Gorgias*, 466 e, 499 e; *Menon*, 88 a-c; *Republic*, IV 431 a-d, IX 586 a-b; *Laws*, III 688 a-b. J. LUCCIONI, *La pensée politique de Platon*, Paris, P.U.F., 1958, p. 113. A. J. FESTUGIÈRE, *Les trois "protreptiques" de Platon*, Euthydème, Phédon, Epinomis, Paris, J. Vrin, 1973, p. 98.
2. Plato, *Republic*, V 473 c-d.
3. Plato, *Politicus*, 296 a-d; *Laws*, IV 712 a, 722 d - 723 a; V 733 d sqq, VII 817 b sqq., IX 875 d.
4. Plato, *Republic*, V 451 d - 455 a.
5. Ibid. V 451 d.
6. Ibid. II 377 c sqq., III 414 b, VII 523 b - 540 c.
7. Ibid. VII 517 c-d, 540 b. J. LUCCIONI, *La pensée politique de Platon*, p. 182-183.
8. Plato, *Republic*, V 455 d-e.
9. Ibid. VII 540 c.
10. Ibid. VII 517 c-d, 540 b. A. FESTUGIÈRE, *Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon*, Paris, J. Vrin, 1967, p. 164-165, 364, 369, 454.
11. Plato, *Republic*, III 594 sqq., IV 423 b - 441 a. J. LUCCIONI, *La pensée politique de Platon*, p. 135-136. K. BOUDOURIS, *Soul and Republic (in Greek)*, Athens, 1970, p. 58.
12. Plato, *Republic*, VI 501 b; *Politicus*, 305 e; K. BOUDOURIS, *Soul and Republic*, p. 66-73.
13. Plato, *Laws*, VI 757 c-d.
14. Plato, *Symposium*, Foreword by K. Georgoulis, edited by Zacharopoulos, Athens, p. 15.
15. Aristotle, *Politics*, I 1252 a 26-31.
16. Ibid. I 1252 b 13-31.
17. Ibid. I 1260 a 19-22.
18. Ibid. I 1260 a 23.
19. Ibid. I 1254 b 14-15, 1260 a 13-15.
20. Ibid. I 1260 a 23.