

Michael S. Kochin, *Gender and Rhetoric in Plato's Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. x + 164.

Michael S. Kochin (K.) interprets the project of *Laws* (*Leg.*) by reading the *Republic* (*Rep.*) in the light of *Leg.* and its concerns. K's work introduces a valuable perspective from which the *Rep.* and the *Leg.*, far from being considered as political manifestos, appear as rhetorical examples and, in a way, as manuals of rhetoric. From this point of view, K calls attention to 'Plato's rhetorical problem' (p. 2), which arises from Plato's stance that 'men and women have distinctive occurrent aspirations and desires, (...) even though the natural standard for human excellence is the same for both sexes' (p. 2). Thus, Plato's effort at persuasion in these works is tailored to his masculine interlocutors. By means of a gendered rhetoric, Aristotle's master proposes to move the political community toward a unified standard of human excellence.

The contemporary reader who is interested in these problems will benefit greatly from K.'s brief, but fine work. K maintains that from the *Laws* and the *Republic* we learn that we must comprehend the proper grounds and limits of persuasion in tackling some of the current problems related to gender justice. Even if Plato's theories (some of which nowadays, of course, may be absurd) could not be applied in a current context, K. asserts that Plato's contribution should not be ignored. It is useful, in particular, for facing the problem 'of living together as male and female citizens who deliberate together and share --without legal regard for sex-- in ruling and being ruled' (p. 3). Plato's works make us realize that 'any serious attempt to address questions of gender with speeches that ought to persuade must address human beings in the actual complexity of their desires' (p. 131). Paying attention specifically to Plato's thesis that the unequal treatment of women is bad for men, may yield rich results. Thus, throughout the six chapters of the work, K. surveys what he regards as the main characteristics of Plato's rhetoric that would be relevant to our concept of 'gender justice.' Even if Plato's view is alien to our norms and desires, and precisely for this reason!, K. intends to clarify our current situation by examining the horizon of Plato's rhetoric --and this I would consider his most important contribution. K. avoids the excesses of 'professional' jargon, and his style is clear and accessible. He makes thorough use of the relevant bibliography. Elaborate indexes (*verborum et locorum*) complete the work (p. 137-164).

I have pointed out that K. does not see the *Rep.* and *Leg.* as political manifestos exclusively. Indeed, he argues that the political theory addresses, specifically, that which persuades and which ought to persuade. The art of rhetoric, for its part, invokes conventional understandings of the good and the just, so as to get through to the moral agents that represent one's audience. The critical approaches to justice and happiness, however, must result in new understandings, for citizens to use in their reciprocal persuading. Any political theory that 'has points of application in present conventions, such as Plato's theory had [...], has the potential to transform rhetorical practice' (p. 2). K. believes that 'rhetorical analysis is substantive political theory' (*ibid*), in so much as speeches and arguments turn out to be at the core of politics. Both the *Republic* and the *Laws* show the connection between politics and rhetoric because both contain discussions of the art and aims of arguing about political issues.

In Chapter 1 (p. 8-24), K. surveys gender relations as a double rhetorical problem. There he compares the masculine status of the 'rhetorical situation' (RS), which results from contemporary moral theories and social sciences, with a more inclusive approach, from the point of view of the broad extension of 'gender justice.' This extension can be reconstructed on the basis of Plato's central exemplification of a typical rhetorical situation. K. explains the solution to the rhetorical problem as an attempt on Plato's part to defend philosophy as the best life against the ordinary Greek conceptions of the manly life. The rhetoric of gender that Plato created and used can aid us too, K. argues, in understanding our new rhetorical term 'we', that only very recently --in some cases-- has ceased to mean 'we men,' according to K, and come to mean 'we men and women.'

K. distinguishes the assumptions of the RS from the ground of the post-Kantian axiological theories and the political sciences that can account for only a politics of interest groups. In this type of science, individuals supposedly enter politics with fixed preferences about the policies that affect their interests. By contrast, the RS that K. has in mind is also far from the Habermasian assumption of the ideal speech situation; since the RS 'assumes that considerations of justice or of rights are not "trumps" in deliberation, but that compromise with interests and desires is always necessary and can be both morally and prudentially credible' (p. 11). In Plato's context, individuals of both sexes enter into the RS 'in order to form their preferences about collective action and organize themselves into a body capable of acting collectively' (*ibid*). Together, they enter 'in order to persuade and be persuaded about the existence of a

common that includes them and thus of a common good' (*ibid*). The RS itself, however, is not egalitarian, but agonistic. Different speeches compete with each other for the attention of the many who listen, and frequently spar. In short, the RS points not to the individual's subjective preferences, but to 'the goods and evils the speeches present to us, but also to the motives and qualities of the speaker' (p. 12).

Plato's analysis of psychic conflict, which consists of the division of desires in contrast to the unity of virtue, is the subject of Chapter 2 (p. 25-36). The process of the internalization of law that pulls at desires, empowers the law's speeches to turn our soul toward the good. Yet, naturally, such a process also can put the law into our soul as it is, with all its defects. Plato holds --in K.'s interpretation-- that the excessively masculine ideals portrayed in actual law are 'are already present within us as an obstacle to our psychic reformation' (p. 6). Plato's Socrates, in contrast, defends 'true' justice, as the good pertaining to the soul, thereby challenging his interlocutors' received conception of the good and the manly.

K. remarks that Socrates' injunction to refrain from committing unjust acts, as entailed by justice in the *Rep.* (442e-443b), does not rest on real arguments at the level of the individual (p. 35). The *Laws* do not yield a more robust account either of the connection between justice as the psychic health of the individual and justice as abstaining from wrongdoing toward others. K. believes that 'by understanding the life of injustice as referring specifically to the life of manly injustice, which reaches its individual extreme in tyranny' (p. 36), we will have a better grasp of why the Platonic position on justice entails abstention from injustice.

Thus, in Chapter 3 (p. 37-59), K. regards the analysis of manliness in the *Rep.* as a decisive move in the vindication of the life of justice against the life of the tyrant. In order to accomplish this, K. has to show how the occasional use of sexist language is 'a concession to the limitations of his audience (...).' The force and totalizing range of the Greek ideal of masculinity empower Socrates' reappropriation of what we would call patriarchal sentiments in an antipatriarchal cause' (p. 41). So, the connection between the unjust and tyrannical life will rest on what K. considers the alleged manliness of the life of injustice. He sees this position in the allegations (*Rep.* 359b) with which Glaucon reconstructs and carries to an extreme a position like that of Thrasymachus (p. 46). The basis of Glaucon's stance (as well as Cephalus' and Adeimantus') is precisely the citizens' ordinary education, which Socrates contrasts with

the education of the guardian-warriors of his model of the polis (*Rep.* II-IV). Thus K. exposes what he considers to be Socrates' criticism of a heroic conception of masculinity. Yet, the education that Socrates proposes for the guardians in these passages of the *Rep.* fails, when it meets the challenges of his interlocutors. They object that the guardians' psychic harmony could serve an unjust domination over others, and, secondly, that the guardians' justice arises not from their knowledge that 'justice is good' for themselves, but from their being 'deceived and constrained' (p. 58). For this reason, the model city of *Rep.* II-IV also fails when it has to confront the theses on justice of Thrasymachus *et alii*.

So then K. takes his time in reconstructing the arguments for the equality of men and women, and for the abolition of the family (Chapter 4, p. 60-86). He attempts to show how Socrates can overcome the difficulties inherent in his view of justice for the guardians only by radicalizing the criticism of the manliness on which the defiant theses about justice rely, and by 'showing the ideal human type in the philosopher-ruler, who may be either male or female' (p. 59). K. is inclined to accept that Socrates' apology for communism is predicated on a radical selfishness that denies the inherent goodness of family ties.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 87-111), K. resolutely turns his attention to the *Laws*. Indeed, Plato's apparent change of view --according to K., a contradiction (p. 7)-- from the *Republic* to the *Laws* with respect to equality between men and women, demands an interpretation which K. does not postpone: the regime of the *Laws* requires the sovereignty of law, and law must discriminate against women because of 'the general failings of women in a patriarchal regime' (*ibid*). In the formulation of the laws for Magnesia, Plato not only takes into consideration the natural characteristics (802e7) of man (*andreía*; e9) and woman (*kósmion* and *sóprhon*; e10), but also reflects that, even if each sex needs a differentiated education (795d), both orientations should aim at--at least-- the same warlike ends (805d-806d). Here too Plato does not shrink back from the idea that women share in warlike activities as well as magistracies (785b).

This would allow women to select (753b4 ff) the guardians of the law (*nomophulax*; 752e), and nothing in Plato's text suggests that women could not be selected as well. If they were to qualify to become one of the ten oldest members from amongst the law's guardians, they would also take part in the so called Nocturnal Council (751d7 ff., but there could be other ways as well for women to participate, cf. p.130). Nonetheless, referring to their political rights, K. remarks that the women in Magnesia

are ‘literally second-class citizens,’ because ‘they are, in fact, excluded from principal offices of the city and, most importantly, from the Nocturnal Council of *Leg. XII*’ (p. 89). The reason for this exclusion, in K.’s view, is that the context in the *Laws* differs significantly from that of the *pólis* of the *Republic*. Given that Plato in the second best city proposed by the *Laws* still acknowledges the existence of private family (and does not propose a community of men and women); and the law’s sovereignty, ‘the laws must exclude even the few competent women from high public office because of general weakness and secretiveness of women as a class’ (p. 111; cf. too p. 116).

In the final chapter (112-130), K. studies the relations between manliness and the desire for wisdom, on the one hand, and between the gendering of the virtues and the psychology of deviance and impiety, on the other hand. Thus the author tries to account for the fundamental reasons behind the failure of Magnesia’s regime to emancipate women. This failure --according to K.-- lies not in the lack of a philosophic ruler, but mainly in a moral problem. Indeed, the regime of the *Laws*, K. argues, fails to unite manliness and moderation in a single human excellence.

As stated already, occasionally Plato seems to appeal to misogynous prejudices. K observes, in one of his sharpest contributions, that the position in the *Rep.* 469d –according to which Plato resorts to invoking manliness- ‘can only be rhetorical, because he has evacuated manliness as conventionally understood of its essential component, aggressive war’ (p. 40). Therefore, one should distinguish Plato’s rhetorical allusions to women as generally conceived in ordinary Greek culture, from his own notion of femininity, which he wants to rescue from those conceptions. ‘The general method of Plato’s critique of the Greek ideal of masculinity in the *Republic* is to turn male prejudice against itself’ (*ibid*). However, K. does see in *Leg.* 944d evidence that ‘the laws of Magnesia despise women as inferior’ (p. 125). In this passage, Plato speaks about a human being exchanging the male sex for the female sex as punishment for having behaved cowardly in war. The idea of the sex change as an expiation of cowardliness is also present in the cosmogonic context of the *Timaeus* (90e), which accounts for a plausible (*eikós*) origin of women and female animals in general (91d5-6), and for their physical and biological conditions and functions. In both cases, however, such a devolution towards the female character does not necessarily entail woman’s inferiority with regard to courage (*andreía*): perhaps because of moderation –a woman’s virtue in the *Laws*—or because of another

characteristic Plato may have had in mind, the lost courage could possibly be recuperated. If this were not the case, it would lead to the, strange, I would say, outcome that Plato was concerned with punishment only as retaliation and not as a way to recuperate the lost virtue. Perhaps, in Plato's view, the point is not that women are (or are not) less brave than men, but that women seem to stand for some necessary means (such as moderation) by virtue of which the lost virtue of courage can be retrieved (as Plato understood that virtue; *Rep.* 430b; *Leg.* 633c8). This perspective may hold regardless of Plato's claim that women's nature is weaker than men's in many respects (*Rep.* 451e1; *Leg.* 781a).

Moreover, the dethroning of *andreía*, as it was conventionally defined at that time (a convention in which K. finds the support for his interpretation of Plato's rhetorical use of sexist positions), does not seem –I think– something exclusive to the *Republic*, and occurs in the *Laws* too. Strictly speaking, the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* degrades only *andreía* (630b; 631c), as opposed to a greatest (compound) virtue, 'loyalty in the hour of danger, what we should call perfect justice' (630c5-6). If this is the case, then in the *Laws* as well conventional manliness is excluded from war, and the apparent misogynous position of 944d is –contra to K's view– consequently no more than another one of Plato's rhetorical exercises that provides his interlocutors with a plausible idea in order to turn a certain prejudice against itself.

K. concludes his work with an insightful survey of the relations between Plato's choice of the rhetoric of gender justice and our own options or possible courses of action, when we try to propose solutions to problems of gender by means of discourse. This brief overview serves only as an introduction to a work of great depth and interest that deserves our respect and future study.

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