

Plato's "Guardiennes"

Plato's logic in his Republic leads to the conclusion that most of his "guardians" should be women.

In a justly famous passage in his Republic(452-57), Plato argues that women should play all the same roles in his ideal society as men. They differ from men only in their bodies, he says, while their souls have the same three "parts" as men's, and are kept healthy in the same way, by having their reason rule over their passions and their appetites. There is therefore no reason in principle why they should not compete for all the social roles, up to and including "guardian" or ruler, and "auxiliary" or soldier.

While I admire Plato for writing this passage, it is not very convincing. After all, the difference between men and women is the most significant variation among human beings that there is. If people are to contribute to society based on what nature seems to have fitted them for (370c), surely men and women should generally have different roles, allowing for occasional exceptions. And any division of human nature into "body" and "soul" must admit the many intimate interconnections between the two, as even Descartes does, and conclude that men's and women's souls are probably generally somewhat different too. While there are exceptions, in general men are much easier to make into soldiers than women are.

Plato's problem is that he also wants to propose eugenics, the art of breeding superior humans, so his ruling classes must intermarry only with each other. I have a suggestion that might accomplish both his goals while staying closer to common sense (i.e., what most people think). The ruling class of the ideal society should consist of (older) women—his preparation for ruling takes until age 50 anyway—after they have completed their child-bearing (and studying) years, while their male partners fulfill the "auxiliary" (military) role. (The Greeks actually contemplated a version of this idea: see Aristophanes, "The Parliament of Women.") Have any historical societies used such a system?

It is plausible that women would make the best "guardians" anyway. In addition to rationality and altruism (devotion to the common good), they would presumably bring a nurturing nature to the task of caring for their inferiors. Having raised their superior children, they would be ready to handle the squabbles of the masses. Maybe they could create a better "matching" system for the upper classes than Plato did (459e), too, and show a little more appreciation for the social role of the arts (595-602). Maybe they could even re-write the Myth of Mother Nature and the Metals (414d) so that it is essentially true instead of a "noble lie"--

whatever that is!

Not only would it make Plato more consistent to make the guardians mostly (older) women, it would make his central political thesis in *The Republic*—that rulers should be selected for their qualities, not elected—more plausible as well. If the guardians were women, maybe critics would not be so quick to assume that a platonic regime would be a totalitarian nightmare, in which Socrates would never want to live.

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