Mary Townsend
The Woman Question in Plato's Republic
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Reviewed by Arlene W. Saxonhouse, 2018

Arlene W. Saxonhouse is the Caroline Robbins Collegiate Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies and an adjunct professor of classics at the University of Michigan, where she teaches political theory. She is the author of *Women in the History of Political Thought*; *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought; Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists*; *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*; co-editor of *Thomas Hobbes, Three Discourses: A Critical Modern Edition of Newly Identified Work of the Young Hobbes* and author of numerous articles and book chapters on ancient and early modern political thought.

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Women are key to the reading of Plato's *Republic*, according to Mary Townsend in her challenging new book. Not only are women the key to understanding the dialogue, they are at the heart of the dialogue's agenda. Townsend's own agenda initially is to "liberate" women from the periphery and the shadows of the dialogue and of political life and to place them at the center of Socrates's proposals regarding both politics and philosophy. The liberation of women in the dialogue, though, is not simply to offer a roadmap for bringing women out from the shadows and into an engaged role in politics. It is ultimately the necessary step in Plato's perhaps misguided (in Townsend's reading) effort to give priority of place to philosophy in our lives. Women's liberation as it occurs in the *Republic*, as Townsend understands it, is for the sake of something higher than the opportunity for women to engage in political life. Women's liberation becomes essential for the pursuit of--indeed coronation of--the philosophical life. It is for this that Townsend ends up criticizing Plato; in his enthusiasm for elevating philosophy and bringing to it the best women, he fails to adequately understand the need that cities--indeed, that we all--have for families and children, for the fundamental elements of human existence.

Townsend's book pursues this argument through a meticulous investigation of multiple themes--from hunting to wildness to shadows to eros and *thumos* (spiritedness)--concluding that Plato ultimately betrays (not her word) women by a "willingness to do whatever is best for philosophy at the expense of ordinary life" (170) and failing to recognize the impossibility of forgetting the family and childbirth/rearing, as is done, for example, in Socrates's presentation of the first, the "true," city of Book 2. Women are, in her reading, both necessary for capturing the necessity of philosophy's hold on the life well lived as well as the restraint on the abandonment of political life. In the end, she argues, "philosophy seems to have the better half of the bargain," with Socrates "distort[ing] the human community past recognition in the service of this end" (186-87). Hers is a radically new reading of the dialogue that takes aim at--and at the same time appreciates--what she argues are Plato's larger goals. These goals surface only to the degree that the reader follows all the ways that women and all that is associated with them appear throughout the dialogue.

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It is sometimes (often) a challenge to read and comprehend the argument of this book. The graceless prose, long convoluted sentences, and the much-too-frequent, less-than-careful proofreading often hide or make it difficult to parse the serious challenges that Townsend presents for traditional readings of the dialogue, which may--or may not--celebrate Socrates's apparent willingness to turn females into potential philosophers and rulers. Further, the argument about what women's role is and what Plato's goals are shifts as the book proceeds. For those readers interested in questions of gender in Plato, most attention is usually devoted to the first of the three proposals in Book 5 of the *Republic* (often--per Socrates's language--referred to as "waves"). That is the one defending the inclusion of women among the guardian-rulers in the city Socrates and his interlocutors propose to found. But it is clear that although the apparent feminist agenda of that first wave or argument may speak to many modern-day readers, for Townsend, Socrates's apparent agenda there does not even begin to scratch the surface of women's role throughout the dialogue. Indeed, Townsend, who finds women everywhere in the dialogue, goes so far as to claim at one point (148) that the *Republic* was written *for* women, bringing them (along with philosophy) out of the shadows. By the end of the book, she claims that the dialogue was written not "for" women, but in order to reveal philosophy as the highest human endeavor, to present the beauty of the philosophical soul, and to secure its place in our lives.

The "woman question" in the *Republic* has surely evoked its share of interest: from Aristotle's critique of Socrates's proposals in Book 2 of *Politics* to the multitude of contemporary writers who have turned to Socrates's proposals in Book 5, whether to garner arguments justifying the inclusion of women in the world of politics or to show the absurdity of his proposals as a way to undermine the whole project of the city found in the dialogue. Most studies of the "woman question" in the *Republic* focus primarily on the first wave of Book 5, arguing for the inclusion of women among the warriors and guardians and then on the second wave, which argues for the community of wives and children necessitated by that inclusion. Townsend, in contrast to all such readings, largely ignores the details of the second wave on the community of wives and children; instead, she considers more worthy of attention the first wave, on inclusion/equality of women, and the third wave, which has Socrates arguing that the city he proposes can come into existence only if its rulers are philosophers. However, the novelty of her work is to go well beyond these well-worn sections of the dialogue to focus on a female who is not defined by the capacity either to rule or to give birth, but who is the wild huntress "redirecting" (83) an only partially tamed eros toward philosophy and rule.

This wild female huntress appears at the very opening moments of the dialogue. She is the Thracian goddess Bendis whose celebration initially draws Socrates and Glaucon to their evening in the Piraeus. And it is Bendis, right at the beginning of the dialogue, who sets the tone for the rest of the dialogue. With Bendis in mind as female, Townsend plucks from the dialogue the many references to hunting--whether it be the "troops of hunters" in Book 2 (67) or the hunt for justice in Book 4 or for the Good in Book 6--and connects all those hunting references to the female, and thereby, because of the peculiar characteristics of Bendis, to the persistent theme of wildness. In the focus on the female goddess and her association with wildness, Townsend suggests that this initial reference to the goddess gives the dialogue as a whole an "atmosphere of a wild hunt." The "dramatic atmosphere" of the dialogue is enhanced by the horse races in

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Bendis's honor mentioned by Polemarchus as occurring later as "the evening grows wilder." In this way, the festival of Bendis morphs into lawless revelry, making it so that "it's not too much of a stretch to imagine that the wilder activities of the earlier evening may have contributed to [Socrates's] rebellious mood" (71). This wildness, which forms the background for the whole dialogue courtesy of the female goddess, or rather the challenge of what to do about the wildness, becomes "the question of the *Republic*" (72).

As the above example suggests, Townsend makes many interpretive leaps; the leap that takes us from Bendis to hunting and women and Socrates's "rebelliousness," and the suggestion that *the* question of the dialogue is what to do about wildness, is only one of such extended efforts at developing the interconnectedness--or what Townsend calls the "interwovenness" (xiv)--of the multiple themes that run through the dialogue. Each reference to the hunt connects back to women through Bendis and then to wildness and eros and the taming role of thumos. Townsend begins from the premise that "Plato's work is not a system but a cosmos" (xii), and her *Republic* becomes a multicolored cloak of interconnected themes radiating initially from the female who marks the first words of the dialogue. The complexity of this "interwovenness," however, is at times a challenge to untangle, and it is what makes the argument often difficult to follow.

Townsend initiates her reassessment of the "woman question" by rightly wondering why in the world Socrates even deals with women in the dialogue. Nothing compels him to do so; in the re-enactment of the beginning of the dialogue in Book 5, Polemarchus, Glaucon, and Thrasymachus ask only about the "common possession" of wives and children, not what it is that the women do. Socrates is the one who chooses to begin to respond to their challenge by addressing the education of women and thereby return to the theme of the hunt and wildness that began the dialogue. This Socratic move enables Townsend in characteristic fashion to trace the movement of the dialogue from the dogs of Book 2 who barked at the unknown to the hunting dogs of Book 5 who are actively seeking their prey, motivated by both eros and the thumotic or spirited drive for victory. This, in turn, connects for Townsend with the hunt, with the wildness of the "Bendidian women" (76), with philosophy as practiced by women who need to be brought out of the shadows. From the lawlessness of the wild, the women must be initiated into the laws of the city where eros is tamed and subjected to the power of thumotic regulation. The reader must puzzle over and accept these many interpretive leaps before moving on with Townsend's argument.

Nevertheless, let us consider the major issue that will catch the attention of readers attracted to a book that has "The Woman Question" in its title. What is the relation between gender and rule? The familiar readings of the *Republic* suggest that there should be no relationship, that the performance of rule should be like shoemaking where bodily differences do not matter. Of course, the story is more complicated than that, and Plato's Socrates making his proposals has a multitude of other issues lying behind his shocking--at least to the young men with whom he is conversing--proposal. For Townsend, the proposal goes well beyond the political question of rule to the value of philosophy in human life, and the dialogue thus becomes not a work on the "woman question," but what we need to understand about the nature of women in order to understand the priority that philosophy should have in our lives. This is where the hunting goddess dominates, for it is not her participation in the art of rule over that city that draws forth Socrates's shocking statements, but her hunting and wildness, and through that connection the

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contest between eros and thumos. The "interwovenness" of the characteristics of the huntress connects her to philosophy, explaining both the activity of philosophy and why the female must be "liberated," released from her hiddenness in the shadows so that she can contribute to the practice of philosophy.

Plato's elevation of philosophy throughout the dialogue means, Townsends argues, that philosophy must have the best of everything, and women become part of this argument because giving philosophy the best of everything means "includ[ing] the best female students, unencumbered by traditional familial and civic responsibilities" (xx). Thus the *Republic*'s demand for the liberation of philosophy must be accompanied by the liberation of women. In other words, the title of her book is somewhat misleading given the subordination of the "woman question" to the larger issue of the needs of philosophy. Though the claim at one point is that Plato, as noted above, wrote the *Republic for* women, the conclusion is that he wrote it *for* philosophy, and the liberation of women is instrumental for philosophy's victory. It is Townsend who finds fault with this instrumentalization of women's liberation, not the philosopher.

Townsend's book captures in a multitude of ways that have not previously been proposed the pervasive presence of the female in the *Republic*, forcing the reader of the dialogue--and of her book--to acknowledge that women indeed ought to be brought out of the shadows, though what they are to do once they have been so released and what they can become given their wildness remains subject for debate. Any reader of Townsend's book will have to be willing to make a large number of theoretical leaps and to find in single phrases allusions to a host of connections to earlier and later moments in the text if one is to accept her arguments leading to the conclusions about the connection between the liberation of women and philosophy and philosophers. Townsend writes in her Introduction that she does not necessarily expect to persuade all her readers; rather, she intends to engage and provoke. Here, she succeeds admirably.