Plato on Women

Sir, – Gregory Vlastos (NB, March 17–23) is more honest than most admirers of Plato in making admissions about Plato's very low opinion of women. He concedes that Plato was "virulently anti-feminist . . . in his personal attitude to the women in his own contemporary Athens". Later on he adds that "on the emancipation of women within the framework of his own society Plato's position would be not only conservative but reactionary". He also notes that Plato was "unambiguously anti-feminist" as regards "the position of the great majority of free women" in the society imagined in his *Republic*" – all the free women except the small "Guardian" class, in fact. On the other hand, Professor Vlastos is deeply impressed – too much so, I would say – by the fact that Plato was "unambiguously feminist" as regards the position of those women who were to be numbered among the small ruling élite, the "Guardians": those "brilliant exceptions", as he calls such women.

He then reveals what he sees as the reason for these remarkable discrepancies in Plato. He says that when Plato is making hostile remarks about women, of the kind Vlastos himself cites from the *Republic*, Plato makes no reference to women's *phusis*, their "nature" (something inherent and unchanging, of course, in Plato's eyes), "as there would have been if his [Plato's] point had been that those bad 'womanish' traits were inherent in femaleness as such". From this Vlastos concludes that the passages hostile to women should be read "as reflections on what Plato thinks women are now, . . . deformed and misshaped by the society which has reared them". We can thus understand Plato's "woman-denigrating remarks . . . as voicing what Plato thinks most Athenian women grow up to be in their present habitat".

Like nearly all admirers of Plato, Vlastos pays scant attention to Plato's *Laws*, which he mentions only twice. That work contains numerous derogatory remarks about women (I could mention some ten), and in particular one which seems to me to inflict fatal damage on the argument of Vlastos which I have just outlined: *Laws* VI. 781b. There, woman's nature (*phusis*) is specifically said to be "*worse* than that of men, in respect of *aretē*" (in capacity for virtue, or excellence) – a stronger distinction, I think, than any we find in the *Republic*, although differences between men and women are sometimes referred to there. But – and this is the essential point – in the *Laws* (as in the *Republic*) women are to receive precisely the same upbringing and education as men, so far as this is possible, extending even to military pursuits, and to having their own common messes (*sussitia*, VI. 780–1 etc). It is not, therefore, an inferior Greek upbringing and education which make the women of the *Laws* inferior to men in virtue: they are that by their very nature, their *phusis*. Believing as he did that most women are generally inferior to most men in everything (*Rep* V. 455c–e), Plato may have expected that only a few "token women" would actually reach the higher grade of Guardians, who were to be "rulers" (III.414ab). But it is anyway difficult to see how his breeding regulations could work for the Guardians as a whole, since there would each year be some thirty available age-classes of males (25–55) against only twenty of females (20–40: see V.460e).

Vlastos also fails to bring out the material fact that women in many other Greek States had a much better position than in Classical Athens. (At Sparta they owned nearly two-fifths of the land, according to Aristotle, *Politics* II.1270a23–5.) I think I was the first to emphasize this, in *Classical Review* 1970; the matter has now been dealt with more fully, for example by David Schaps, *Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece*, 1979. I see no reason to think that Plato will have had in mind only the very restricted rights of Athenian women.

G. E. M. DE STE CROIX.
Evenlode, Stonesfield Lane, Charlbury, Oxfordshire.

TLS no. 4,488
April 7-13, 1989
p. 382

EXCERPT.

Plato on Women

Sir, – G. E. M. de Ste Croix (Letters, April 7–13) is mistaken in thinking that he was the first, in 1970, to emphasize the significance of Aristotle's statement, in *Politics* 1270a, that Spartan women owned nearly two-fifths of the land.

I made the same sort of emphasis in several of my works before 1970, initially in *Aristocratic Society in Ancient Crete* (1955) at page 243.

TLS no. 4,490
April 21-27, 1989
p 423

1. The first principle for selecting poetry is that it should not misrepresent the nature of gods and heroes. That rules out most existing poetry; examples Plato gives are: Cronos castrating his father Ouranos; Hephaestus tying up Hera his mother, and being flung out of heaven by Zeus his father for helping her when she was getting a beating; Homer's battles of the gods. Plato is obviously concerned with the moral effects of such stories (378b,e), but that is not the main reason he gives at this stage for rejecting these stories; his real objection is that they do not represent the truth about gods. There are two truths in particular he wants to preserve:-

a) Assuming that god is good, he can only be the cause of good things, not of everything. Plato is not against the gods being said to punish men so long as it is made clear that this does men good, but he will not allow e.g. the Trojan War to be described as the actions of gods simply deciding that they want to harm or destroy certain men.

b) God can not change form or appearance. This is developed into the idea that god can not deceive men, since in the myths a god's motive in changing form is normally for the purpose of deceiving people. The argument for this view is that if god is perfect, any change must be for the worse.

(Plato admits here (382 c-d) that he is not completely against the use of myths; "We don't know the truth about the past but we can invent a fiction as like it as may be." He relates it to the need to use falsehood sometimes as "preventive medicine" against enemies, or when a friend tries to do something wrong from madness or folly).

2. Plato's second principle is whether stories of gods and heroes encourage bravery, stated quite explicitly at 386a. He would therefore ban a whole series of passages in Homer which might encourage fear of death, whether accounts of disembodied souls and descriptions of Hades, or laments for loved ones. (At the end of this section (388e-389a) Plato says he would also ban stories that provoke violent laughter, on the grounds that violent laughter invites a violent reaction (388e) - presumably from those being laughed at. However, this looks more like avoiding conflict than promoting bravery).

3. The third main principle concerns self-control:"for the mass of men does not self-control largely consist in obedience to their rulers, and ruling their own desire for the pleasures of eating, drinking and sex?" (389d-e).
So while rulers may decide that they need to use falsehoods, other citizens may never tell lies as this would damage the state. Nor should passages in Homer be allowed which show insubordination or impertinence from the rank and file; similarly excluded are stories of Odysseus' desire for food, Zeus' desire for sex or characters who are mercenary or grasping.

4. Plato now (392b) explicitly mentions justice and says poetry should be banned if it says unjust men are happy, just men wretched, wrong doing pays if you can avoid being found out, and justice is good for someone else but to one's own disadvantage. Nothing else can be said positively about the content of poetry until justice has been defined. Plato then appears to change the subject by moving from content to form.

The aspect of poetic form that concerns Plato is what he calls mimesis (imitation, representation, enactment). He objects to mimesis in poetry on two counts . a) It fragments the character. To play several parts, as an actor or reciter, conflicts with the principle that one man should stick to one job if he is to do it well (394e) b) It lowers the character if a man acts the part of a woman, a slave, a coward, a madman, a manual worker or animals or natural forces (395d-396b), since there is a danger of "catching the infection in real life." (395c-d). Despite principle a), however, he is prepared for his Guardians to practise mimesis of characters who show the qualities of courage, self control, piety and freedom of spirit. It may be inconsistent, but he doesn't like Guardians acting other people or roles, while he doesn't mind them acting out the display of virtues.

The first of the four virtues listed in Book 4 is wisdom, which in the state is identified with the Guardians' knowledge, and in the individual with the rational element's knowledge of 'what is best for each of the three elements and for the whole made up of them?

Knowledge turns out (Books 5-7) to be knowledge of the forms, and the ultimate form is that of the Good. Just as the sun is the cause of both growth and visibility in the physical world, so the Good is the source of reality and truth as well as intelligibility in the world of the mind.

The forms are eternal and unchanging. The person who has knowledge of the form is not going to be deceived by appearances.

(There are clear echoes here of the argument against Cephalus (331c) that one should not necessarily tell the strict truth to a madman. Plato repeats the point shortly afterwards (389b) saying that rulers only may make use of falsehood, and only for the good of the State. This is a clear anticipation of the 'magnificent myth' ('noble lie') of Book 4).

Courage in the soldier-class is presented (429e-430a) as the product of education, which involves inculcating opinions about what ought or ought not to be feared.

Plato's treatment of self discipline in Book 4 is most clearly anticipated by this passage in Book 3. Self discipline in the state means agreement on the part of all classes about who should rule, and therefore obedience by the subjects to the rulers. Individual self-discipline is presented (442c) in exactly the same terms, but less plausibly, so it is not surprising that Plato uses more of a commonsense notion here, namely restraint of appetites for food, drink and sex. He adds restraint of grasping or mercenary desires - exactly the non-physical aspect of 'appetite' also included in the Book 4 treatment of the soul.

It was Thrasymachus, Glaucon and Adeimantus in Books 1 and 2 who thought injustice made you happy, and paid if you could avoid being found out, since justice was another's interest and injustice your own.

There has already been a hint in Book 2 (371e-372a) that justice in the state might be something like the principle of one man one job, and in Book 4 it turns out to be the principle of one class one job. So the objection that mimesis fragments the character reflects Plato's concern for justice in the state.

Another way of describing justice in both state and individual is that it is the state of affairs when all the other virtues are in place. So to get the Guardians to 'catch' the other virtues by acting them out will perhaps promote justice too.

PLATO AND POLITICS: The Seventh Letter

The Seventh Letter, attributed to Plato, was written either by Plato himself or by someone well informed about his life and thinking. This extract is from near the beginning.

When I was a young man I expected, like many others, to ıbark, as soon as I was my own master, on a political reer. The condition in which I found public affairs was this. :ople were dissatisfied with the existing constitution, and a volution took place, as a result of which power was concen- ıted in the hands of fifty-one men.[1] Eleven were in charge the city and ten in Piraeus – each of these bodies had the pervision of the market and municipal affairs generally – hile the remaining thirty assumed supreme control of the hole state. Some of them were relations and acquaintances mine and invited me at once to join them in what seemed ı obvious career for me. Naturally enough, in view of my)uth, I expected that this government would bring about a ıange from corrupt to upright administration, and I watched ith the keenest interest to see what they would do. I found at it had taken these men no time at all to make the previous)vernment look like an age of gold; among other things they :nt for Socrates, an older friend of mine, whom I would not :sitate to call the best man then living, and sent him with a ımber of others to arrest one of the citizens and bring him to :ecution. Their purpose in this was to involve Socrates in 325
ıeir actions, whether he liked it or not, but Socrates, so far om obeying, was prepared to risk everything rather than 326
articipate in their infamous deeds.[2] So when I saw all this ıd several other momentous events of the same sort I was isgusted and withdrew myself from the prevailing wicked- ess. Shortly afterwards a total revolution put an end to the ıle of the Thirty, and once again, though more gradually, I egan to feel a desire to take part in public life. Things were till unsettled, and even under the new government many ıings took place which one could not but condemn; it was ot surprising that in a time of unrest some men seized the pportunity of taking an excessive revenge upon their nemies. Nevertheless the restored exiles behaved with great moderation. But it so happened that some men in power brought my associate Socrates before the courts on a wicked charge, to which Socrates least of all men should have been liable; they accused him of impiety, and the court condemned and put to death the man who, when the party now prevailing was outlawed and in exile, had refused to participate in the wrongful arrest of one of its own adherents.

So when I saw this and the kind of men who were active in politics and the principles on which things were managed, I concluded that it was difficult to take part in public life and retain one's integrity, and this feeling became stronger the more I observed and the older I became. Nothing could be done without friends and loyal associates. Such men were not easy to find among one's existing acquaintance, for affairs were no longer conducted on the principles practised by our ancestors, and new friends could not be acquired with any facility. Besides, the corruption of written law and established custom was proceeding at an astonishing rate, so that I, who began by being full of enthusiasm for a political career, ended by growing dizzy at the spectacle of universal confusion. I did not cease to consider how an improvement might be effected in this particular situation and in politics in general, and I remained on the watch for the right moment for action, but finally I came to the conclusion that the condition of all existing states is bad – nothing can cure their constitutions but a miraculous reform assisted by good luck – and I was driven to assert, in praise of true philosophy, that nothing else can enable one to see what is right for states and for individuals, and that the troubles of mankind will never cease until either true and genuine philosophers attain political power or the rulers of states by some dispensation of providence become genuine philosophers.

1. Plato was born about 427 B.C. and the revolution which placed the hirty in power took place in the summer of 404.
2. Socrates was sent with four others to arrest a certain Leon of Salamis, ut ignored the order. cf. *Apology* 32C.

References to Athens and Democracy in the Republic

425e - 427a Plato refers to cities that spend all their time making and correcting legislation, thinking that they can sort out all their problems that way. They lack the restraint to give up a vicious way of life (425e) and no cures are any use unless they give up their self-indulgent life (426 a-b). Plato's use of the medical analogy suggests the theme of justice, which he is about to show depends on self-discipline (among other things). This society is described in terms comparable to those used for democracy in 557c etc. - superficially attractive and self-indulgent.

They will detest anyone who tells them the truth - that legislation is no use to them, they will resent any such advice, and the proposer of radical constitutional change is threatened with death; c.f. the treatment of the philosopher in the ship analogy 488b, and in the cave analogy 517a.

The sort of figure who receives honour from them leaves them to their own mismanagement, but flatters them, gives them pleasure and anticipates and fulfils their wishes. This is in line with what Plato himself has said about politicians who use oratory to flatter the people in Gorgias, and with what Aristophanes and Thucydides say about the demagogues who come after Pericles.

Laws are important in a democracy because they can protect people from exploitation. Plato is saying that they can be dispensed with if proper education has produced wise rulers.

488a - 489a The Simile of the Ship

The City is represented as a ship. It has a captain, or owner, who is larger and stronger than the crew, but rather deaf, short-sighted and limited in seamanship. He represents the demos, and is not unlike the figure Aristophanes portrays in Knights. The crew, i.e. leading politicians, quarrel with each other over who should navigate the ship; this leads to fighting between factions, with the winners laying out the captain with drugs or drink, taking control of the ship, helping themselves to anything on board, and indulging in a drunken pleasure-cruise. This also resembles Aristophanes' Knights with slaves and sausage-seller vying for the people's favour, and is very similar to Thucydides' analysis in II:65.

The crew are particularly ready to admire the man who is most adept at controlling the captain. This is reminiscent of Thrasymachus' claim in 344 b-c that people will admire the man who succeeds in robbing the whole body of citizens and reducing them to slavery, and it anticipates Plato's account at the end of BK. 8 of how the tyrant emerges as a popular leader in a democracy.

The context of this analogy is a claim by Adeimantus that in real politics philosophers are either useless or dangerous. Therefore the whole point of the analogy is to bring out the importance of knowing the art of navigation - an issue which does not arise in either Aristophanes or Thucydides. The crew are not only ignorant of that art, but claim that it cannot be taught and are prepared to kill anyone who says it can; they even deny that is exists. Plato envisages a 'true navigator' who does possess the relevant knowledge, and claims that on such a ship he is bound to be regarded as a useless 'word spinner and star gazer', (assuming that is, that he has not yet been put to death for talking about the art of navigation).

493 a-c The Simile of the large animal

Plato has just been claiming (492 a-c) that it is not so much the sophists who corrupt young politicians, (surprisingly in view of how he treats Thrasymachus), as the demos when they are together in assembly, law courts, theatre etc. He goes on

Plato, Poetry and the Ideal State

Plato claims (e.g 376e-377b) that the kinds of stories children are told are important for the way their characters develop. So he goes on to specify which kinds are and which are not suitable for their education, and why. What we then get seems on the face of it to be a digression on the content of education and the nature of poetry; it is said to be intended for the Guardians (including what are later called Auxiliaries), but otherwise it looks like a general theory of education that does not particularly belong to the Republic. This is a misleading impression. There are important connections which Plato does not spell out.

A. It is an education into belief only, not knowledge. The distinction between the two is not made until later in the Republic, but it then becomes clear that acquiring knowledge involves "grasping" the forms, and that can only take place in the final stage of education, outside the Cave, so to speak, and after the mathematical studies. The difference between true belief and knowledge is that the person with knowledge can give the reason for holding the belief. At 402a Socrates says that one will rightly condemn anything ugly "when he is still young and can not understand the reason for so doing, while when reason comes he will recognise and welcome her as a familiar friend because of his upbringing" So literary education precedes and prepares the way for knowledge, but presumably those who are later separated off from them as Auxiliaries will too. The Auxiliaries need, like the spirited element of the soul, to "fight on the side of reason"; therefore they also need to have the true belief about matters of right and wrong that literary education will provide.

not only Guardians
er who will get this
t stage of education,

B With the hindsight that comes from having read Book 4, one can see that Plato's various principles for choosing and rejecting types of poetry are in fact designed to develop the qualities of character (or soul) he outlines there. Plato does give a clue to this effect right at the beginning (376c) when he suggests that a study of the Guardians' education might help in the "enquiry into the origin of justice and injustice in society.'

On following sheet, left hand column is the four virtues in Plato's exposition of poetry & the harm it can do, & right hand picks up references elsewhere.

The Arts in Plato's Republic Book 10

1. In Books 2 & 3 Plato had not yet introduced the theory of forms; having now done so, he uses it in two ways: [(a) ontological argument, (b) epistemological)
(a) Art is at 'third remove' from reality. God made the form; a craftsman makes the object, e.g. a bed, with his 'eye on the form'; an artist merely copies the object, and from one angle. The form of bed is real, our actual bed is a copy of reality, and a painting of a bed is a copy of a copy.

(b) In discussing how a poet lacks knowledge, Plato changes to a different argument. True knowledge is possessed by the user of an object, who understands its function. He advises the craftsman, who has true belief. The artist or poet has neither.

[Plato seems in (b) to be envisaging some sort of practical knowledge not based on the forms. Had he applied this to the ship analogy in Bk 6 he could have come up with the thoroughly democratic view that the passengers had true knowledge of their destination, and needed to be consulted on the matter by captain and crew.]

Plato's model for mimesis in Bk 3 is poetry, and he has to make the other arts conform to a theory not originally designed to account for them. In Bk 10 the model is painting, in particular trompe l'oeil painting, and now poetry has to be made to fit in. This leads to two inconsistencies:
(i) In Bk. 3 it is the performer (not the poet) who imitates; in Bk 10 it is the painter.

(ii) The Bk 3 mimesis allows for the possibility of mimesis of the good man in the education system. The Bk 10 theory cannot allow good mimesis to exist.
Therefore in Bk 10 Plato has banished the arts from the ideal state altogether.

2. Plato claims that since art deals with illusion, it therefore appeals not to the rational part of the soul, but to what he calls the lower part. So too, he claims, does poetry. This raises problems for his theory of the soul:- (i) It is difficult to see what connection there might be between being subject to optical illusion and being subject to passionate emotion, and therefore how one part of the soul can be involved in such diverse things. (ii) It is almost as if Plato has now adopted a bipartite theory of soul: the rational element and the trash element.

3. The mimesis theory of Bk 10 treats the arts as trivial and therefore rubbish. In Bk 3 they were potentially valuable, but also potentially harmful, i.e. important, if dangerous.

4. Plato's final argument reverts to a concern with poetry (605c-608b). It is now important and dangerous again, because it encourages desires that ought to be suppressed.