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Feminism in Book V of Plato's Republic

Sarah B. Pomeroy,

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FEMINISM IN BOOK V OF PLATO'S REPUBLIC*

In *Republic V* Plato describes the status which the female guardians will enjoy in his new state. His proposals, revolutionary as they appear at first glance, especially in comparison with the prevailing anti-feminist trend of Classical Greek literature, have caused scholars to hail Plato as a believer in the equality of the sexes. Thus, Frances Cornford in the most popular English translation of the *Republic* titles the section from 445B-457B "The Equality of Women".¹ Less assertively, in the definitive English scholarly edition of the Greek text James Adam expresses his belief that Plato is attempting "to improve the position of women in Greece."² Moses Hadas, in a popular survey of Greek literature agrees with the interpretation that in the *Republic* "women are essentially equal to men."³ In agreement with the foregoing influential modern scholars is Sir Ernest Barker, who titles his discussion of women in the *Republic* "the emancipation of women."⁴ Thus the accepted interpretation of *Republic V* is that Plato was proposing the equality of men and women in his ideal state.

I should now like to offer an alternative theory: first, Plato did not intend that women be equal in status to men in the *Republic*; second, the diction he employs in discussing the question of women indicates that he is incapable of seeing women as equal to men.

All students of Plato know that the philosopher proposes that the guardian class hold all property communally. It is not generally realized that the female guardians are included in the 'property', to be thus shared. In eight pages of Greek text he refers to the female guardians nine times as communal property. He twice describes the communal holding of women as 'koinonia', a term used in Athenian legal documents to describe the joint ownership of property.⁵ (449d ταύτην ἢν λέγεις κοινωνίαν γυναικῶν τε καὶ παίδων) 450c (τίς ἢ κοινονία τοῖς φύλαξιν ἡμῶν παίδων τε κέρει καὶ γυναικῶν ἔσται). Three times he describes the women as common property 'koina', (449c ὡς δὴ καὶ περὶ γυναικῶν τε καὶ παίδων παντὶ δήλῳ ὅτι κοινὰ τὰ φύλαξιν ἔσται; 457c-d Τὰς γυναῖκας ταύτας τῶν ἀνδρῶν τούτων πάντων κείσας εἶναι κοινὰς; 457d ὡς αὐτὸ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν κοινὰς μὲν τὰς γυναῖκας εἶναι, κοινούς δὲ τοὺς πατέρας) Twice he refers to the possession, 'ktesis', of women (451c παίδων τε καὶ γυναικῶν κτήσας; 453d περὶ τὴν τῶν γυναικῶν καὶ παίδων κτήσιν). Two times he refers to the women as the property of the male guardians, using the Greek possessive genitive (454e τοὺς τε φύλακας ἡμῶν καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας αὐτῶν; 457a ταῖς τῶν φύλακων γυναιξί). For Plato, at least, there was no essential connection between private property, the monogamous marriage, and the inferior status of women. Even with communal property and group marriage, the female guardians are not to be the equals of the male guardians.

The female guardians must be the possessions of the male guardians because Plato could not conceive of women living without male tutelage. For this reason he tends to classify the female guardians with the children, likewise held in common. In seven of the nine passages quoted in the preceding paragraph, the possession of women is considered simultaneously with the possession of children (449c, 449d, 450c, 451c, 453d, 457c-d, 457d). Clearly Plato could not, or did not wish to, free himself from the Athenian prejudice which treated women legally as perpetual minors.

The holding of human property is seen exclusively from the viewpoint of the male guardians for Plato at no time presents the predictable consequence of wife-sharing -- that is, the sharing of husbands. That the women are actually possessions of the male guardians is abundantly clear from their mode of selection. The male guardians are chosen first, then appropriate women are to be selected to be given to them (456b Καὶ γυναῖκες δὴ αἱ τοιαῦται τοῖς τοιοῦτοις

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A Historical Commentary on Polybius, Vol. 1: Commentary on Books 1-6, they also talk about the texture typical for certain genres ("texture of marching March", "texture of waltz", etc.), and here we see that the unitary state turns the organo-mineral hurricane.