The Republic begins with a reference to the Piraeus, the port area of Athens where people from diverse backgrounds converged to engage in commerce and trade, and to traffic in novel and innovative ideas. For it is here where Socrates enters into a spirited exchange with an assortment of locals and with others who, like himself, had been drawn to the place by the prospect of witnessing the picturesque, if uproarious, local festival in honor of the goddess Bendis. The result of their exchange is a set of conclusions that appears to fly in the face of the foundational beliefs and institutional practices of the established order. Julia Annas’ assessment of the situation is as follows:

The Republic is meant to startle and shock. Plato was not out to conciliate his contemporaries .... He is concerned about a number of issues, and prefers to jolt us into awareness of them and their shocking consequences, rather than keeping the discussion at a harmless level.¹

One such conclusion concerns the unconditional inclusion of women in the affairs of the polis, the public space from which, consistently and decisively, they had long been excluded. Because, in his view, no natural impediments exist to women’s participation in the public life of cities, qualified women ought to be permitted to exercise and to train alongside of the men, so as to be able to cultivate in themselves those talents and skills required of the warriors and protectors of the city, and even of the philosopher rulers. To hold this is not to lay down “laws that are impossible or like prayers, since the law we are setting down is

according to nature. Rather, the way things are nowadays proves to be, as it seems, against nature" (Republic, 456 b). Plato, accordingly, is characterized as an early advocate of the feminist objective of “introducing women into the realm of public power in the best city and having them participate equally in the guidance of such a city.” He is praised “for his foresight, his daring, his willingness to go against custom to suggest the possibility of removing women from the private sphere and placing them in the public world.” But is this feminist reading of Plato’s intentions in the Republic concerning women justified? Does the Republic resonate with the “woman question,” as framed by modern-day feminists?

If there is one thing about Plato that is certain, it is that he was a man whose disillusionment with the Athenian politics of his time, especially following the execution of Socrates by the Athenian oligarchy, ran quite deep. It was his disillusionment with his city that provided the motive force for his construction of a blueprint for a city (which he called the Kallipolis), “in which the just man is not only secure from the hounds baying at his heel but in which that man and others of his kind, hold absolute power.” One of the hallmarks of the Kallipolis, was going to be its political rehabilitation of qualified women and their elevation to the status of integral and productive components of political society.

“Therefore, my friend, there is no practice of a city’s governors which belongs to woman because she’s woman, or to man because he’s man; but the natures are scattered alike among both

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3 Women in the History of Political Thought, p. 46.
4 The “woman question” refers to the “range of issues which concern women’s social and economic oppression and exploitation, historically and in the present; their liberation; their roles in society, in the family; relations between the sexes; sexual equality; and the question of what constitutes women as gender.” For a discussion of this thematic, see Carol C. Gould, “The Woman Question: Philosophy of Liberation and the Liberation of Philosophy,” in Mary B. Mahowald, ed., Philosophy of Woman: An Anthology of Classic and Current Concepts (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 415-452.
animals; and woman participates according to nature in all practice and man in all, but in all of them woman is weaker than man.”
“Certainly.”
“So, shall we assign all of them to men and none to women?”
“How could we?”
“For I suppose there is, as we shall assert, one woman apt at medicine and another not, one woman apt at music and another unmusical by nature.”
“Of course.”
“And isn’t there also one apt at gymnastic and at war, and another unwarlike and no lover of gymnastic?”
“I suppose so.”
“And what about this? Is there a lover of wisdom and a hater of wisdom? And one who is spirited and another without spirit?”
“Yes, there are these too.”
“There is, therefore, one woman fit for guarding and another not. Or wasn’t it a nature of this sort we also selected for the men fit for guarding?”
“Certainly, that was it.”
“Men and women, therefore, also have the same nature with respect to guarding a city, except insofar as the one is weaker and the other stronger.”
“It looks like it.”
“Such women, therefore, must also be chosen to live and guard with such men, since they are competent and akin to the men in their nature.”
“The same.” (Republic, 454e-455d)

Indeed, if male and female “differ in this alone, that the female bears and the male mounts .... we’ll still suppose that our guardians and their women must practice the same things” (Republic, 454 d-e). To deny a woman access to the philosopher guardian class, despite her qualifications, would be a violation of justice. “It would be to deny her the possibility of fulfilling the proper function for which she is qualified by nature.”

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The revolutionary character of Plato’s proposals concerning women comes to even greater focus when considered against the fact that, with the possible exception of cameo appearances at religious festivals, the their absence from public life in classical Athens was total. Up until the moment they were given away in marriage, daughters remained under the absolute control of their fathers; on their wedding day, that control passed on to their husbands. Barred from the agora, they were not privy to discussions concerning the political affairs of the city. Barred from the symposia, they had no participation in properly philosophical activity. What little formal education they received was in the form of training in housewifely tasks and in the management of minor household expenses. In relation to Athenian culture, they remained outsiders; it is not even clear they were welcome at the theater. Compounding their loss of the riches of Athenian cultural life, was their distance from the full regard and protection of Athenian law. They were given away in marriage without their prior consent, and what property they brought into the conjugal union came immediately and completely under the control of their husbands. Propertyless, denied education and access to culture, and exploited mainly for her reproductive capacity, the Athenian woman’s only hope for meaning in her life was tied to the authoritative dominion over her of a man. Annas notes: “Seldom have the sexes been so segregated in every aspect of life or women relegated to such a marginal and passive role.”

Because, as a matter of social policy, Plato was interested in eliminating from the Kallipolis such a clear instance of injustice, his work has been described as “feminist or at least consistent with feminist principles.” Gregory Vlastos concurs with this view, asserting that “in the ideally best society... the position of the women in its ruling elite, the so-called guardians is unambiguously feminist”. For within this elite, rights systematically denied to women: the right to education, vocational opportunity, unimpeded social intercourse, legal capacity, right to sexual choice, private ownership, and political rights were guaranteed. Vlastos continues:

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7 An Introduction to Plato’s Republic, p. 182.
So if we are looking for feminism there is only one place where we do not need to invent it: in the legislation for the guardians in the Republic. Among all of Plato's writings and among all the writings which have survived from the classical age of Greece, that work alone projects a vision of society in whose dominant segment the equal rights of human beings are not denied or abridged on account of sex.\(^\text{10}\)

There are those, however, who strongly object to the claim that Plato was in any way feminist. Julia Annas, for instance, maintains that Plato's proposals concerning women in the fifth book of the Republic is irrelevant to contemporary feminist debate.\(^\text{11}\) This view is shared by Elizabeth Spelman, who speaks of "the sad irony in the description of Plato as the first feminist philosopher."\(^\text{12}\) An objection frequently raised to the characterization of Plato as feminist is his unflattering and unfriendly estimation of women as somehow, even in the things of rulership, inferior to the men. So while Plato says women are to be allowed to provide men with colleagueship upon every register of the affairs of the city, he also presents them as by nature weaker, and less philosophical than men. "It is hardly a feminist argument to claim that women do not have a special sphere because men can outdo them at absolutely everything."\(^\text{13}\) Saxonhouse, too, chides Plato for making the claim that women are not superior to men except in such unimportant areas of endeavor as weaving and cooking\(^\text{14}\):

Do you know of anything that is practiced by human beings in which the class of men doesn't excel that of women in all these respects? Or shall we draw it out at length by speaking of weaving and the care of baked and boiled dishes - just those activities on which the reputation of the female sex is based and where its defeat is most ridiculous of all? (Republic, 455 c-d)

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 142.


\(^{13}\) An Introduction to Plato's Republic, p. 309.

Saxonhouse scores Plato for ignoring women’s unique biological qualities: “Clearly the female is superior to the male of any species in her ability to bear children, even those women less skillful in this task do it better than any man .... If one’s phusis is defined by that which one does better than anyone else, then Plato has disregarded the phusis of the female.”\(^{15}\) She accuses Plato of overlooking women’s indispensable part in the preservation of the city through their procreation of the succeeding generations. The price they pay for their inclusion in political life is the sacrifice of their role as the female of the species. In such a city they will not only be weaker but also remain inferior to the men forever. Indeed, the equality of men and women in the Kallipolis is mere illusion. Modern readers of Plato are well aware of “how deeply undemocratic and anti-egalitarian his views in general are.”\(^ {16}\) The only women given access to the public space are women guardians. Nothing is ever said about the women in the class of producers. In that class, their subjection and confinement presumably goes unchecked. What is more, Plato’s proposals concerning women are manifestly utilitarian in character. They are admitted into the public sphere and given the same responsibilities as the men, not as a matter of political right, but as a matter of greater benefit to the state. Plato is concerned about the terrible waste of human resources which results from the exclusion of women from the public space. Annas writes: “No modern feminist would argue that women should be able to do men’s jobs when this will result in greater benefit to the state, and otherwise stay home. The moment it could be shown that the state did not need the extra women public servants, there would be no ground for letting them have the job.”\(^ {17}\) The fortunes of women in the Kallipolis are not really secure. Should the state succeed in devising other and more efficient means to attain its goals, women could very easily end up being thrust back into the enclosures of the home. Plato has no concept of woman’s personal worth and dignity. Plato is not interested in the liberation of women from oppressive social structures. His effort to try to upgrade their status is a farce. Women in public life far little better than mere cogs in the wheel of the state.

\(^ {15}\) Ibid.

\(^ {16}\) “Hairy Cobbler and Philosopher-Queens,” p. 87.

\(^ {17}\) An Introduction to Plato’s Republic, p. 315.
They are means to the ends of the state, and “as the vision of that end fades, so does Plato’s interest in those means. Plato the feminist is a myth.”

One consideration that is important to bear in mind when reading the Republic is that above all it is meant to be “a work of theory and artistry, and the product of an imagination that moves towards daydreaming.”

“Come now,” I said, “let’s make a city in speech from the beginning. Our need, as it seems, will make it” (Republic, 369c).

“Now, then, we suppose we’re fashioning the happy city—a whole city, not setting apart a happy few and putting them in it. We’ll consider its opposite presently, just as if we were painting statues…” (Republic, 420c).

This is an invitation to us to view the Republic in terms of Plato’s attempt to enunciate his utopian vision of society. The trouble is, a hermeneutic reconstruction of that vision is not without complications. James Rurak issues a caveat:

Today many argue that realistic social thought should reject utopian visions, that they are a waste of time. Frustration over the fact that since the time that Thomas More first coined the term no ideal society has yet existed is not the major basis for such an opinion. Rather, it is the result of a many-sided argument, which holds that utopian thought retards the movement toward the realization of humane societies. Either utopia is seen as antithetical to other more “cherishable” values, e.g., diversity, or it is thought that the road to utopia entails actions which cancel out its potential value, or else it is feared that the means of maintaining order in utopia need be too powerful to allow for freedom. In addition, it may be argued that since no utopia pleases everyone, i.e., one person’s utopia is another’s inferno, even if the other problems were solvable, utopia cannot underwrite social reform.

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18 Ibid., p. 321.
The value of a utopian vision, however, lies, not in the prospect of its actualization, but in its ability to advance a better understanding of current social reality. It lies in the challenge which it presents to conditions conventionally regarded as inevitable. It unsettles our persistent habit of clinging to the status quo. Plato's vision in the *Republic* is such a utopian vision. His proposals concerning women must be understood in the context of that vision. Plato had set down the non-negotiable parameters in the business of establishing justice and promoting harmony. His startling proposals — like the community of wives and the practice of regulated breeding for reasons of eugenics — will also have to be viewed from this standpoint. Diana Coole puts it this way:

Any benefits that might accrue to women are entirely incidental except in so far as they are members of the community, for it is its well-being with which the texts are concerned. Yet it is important to recognize that for Plato this is just a resolution; it is not appropriate to chastise him for failing to fulfil the demands of a later liberal age when justice, equality and rights would relate to self-determining and autonomous persons. His problem was a different one. Personal happiness or expression was not a consideration in ancient thought, but then neither was the experience of alienation from the state nor isolation from a shared community. Justice was a civic virtue and all were to benefit from living in so harmonious an order.21

There is an interesting sidelight to what may be called the history of the *Republic* as a treatise. Perhaps it is little known but this story demonstrates what has been typical of the kind of varied receptions that the work has generated through the years. The time was the middle of the fifteenth century and the place was Florence, whose virtual leader was Cosimo de Medici, patron of learning and the arts. He assisted Greek scholars and embarked on the massive project of building up the famous library, *Biblioteca Laurenziana*, by assembling a major collection of ancient manuscripts which his agents had sought and acquired throughout the Middle East. Many of the books came from the library at Constantinople, which had earlier been sacked by the Turks. Among

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the books gathered were the treasures of Greek philosophy which up till that time remained unread in the West because they had not been translated into Latin. In this precious collection was the Republic of Plato. Cosimo commissioned Marcilio Ficino to translate the works of Plato from the original Greek into Latin. Before him, Leonardo Bruni had translated several of the Platonic dialogues but had declined to touch the Republic. The latter feared that its radical ideas, including those on women, would upset his readers. He found the Republic to be too searching, unconventional, and disturbing so he decided to suppress it. Commenting on this Nathalie Harris Bluestone remarks that at least he did not underestimate the importance and subversive character of the Platonic suggestions.22

In face of women’s relentless efforts to subvert the structures that work to their disadvantage, Plato’s ideas will continue to wield powerful appeal. As Rurak reminds us:

[U]topias do not retard efforts to achieve more humane societies. Instead, they promote such efforts by demanding rigorous analysis of the complex relationships between espoused ideals and social structures. Furthermore, utopias remain everlasting challenges both to those who believe in such ideals and to those who may prosper by obscuring the relationship between social structures and the ideal a society envisions itself as pursuing.23

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