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Philosophical Conceptions and Representations of the Feminine: Contributions Towards a Critical Hermeneutics of the Philosophical Tradition*

Drawing upon an extensive bibliography concerning the role of women in Western culture, this article aims to deconstruct the common idea that male domination was always peacefully and universally accepted. Thus, it calls attention to the fact that in Greece (where our tradition conceptually originated), parallel to the established canon of thought, there were significant disruptions revealing other ways of conceiving and representing the feminine, thereby demonstrating the need to re-signify our reception of the classical tradition.

Keywords: feminism; philosophy; women; classical tradition.

What is desirable must become possible.

Adela Cortina

Our heritage is our power.

Judy Chicago

This text draws upon Aristotle's claim that "being is said in many ways," and that, moreover, and perhaps more importantly, that it is said by a polyphony of voices, some near and harmonious, others far-off and dissonant, but all equally essential. Indeed, the notion that all voices are indispensable to make sense of reality underpins my argument throughout, inspired by Paul Ricoeur's observation that the hermeneutic field is constitutively fragmented and therefore impossible to mediate properly, with the result that human rationality is condemned to a *conflict of interpretations* which represents the last frontier of a finite and merely human rationality.

Thus, in the light of this, I acknowledge that the writing of this text, like any other, takes place on the horizon of a *dialectique à synthèse ajournée* – in other words, that it is indebted to many other texts; that writing is, in its essence, intertextual; that the textual fabric produced is by nature unfinished, and that there will be other texts that will oppose mine and give rise to new texts, enabling the sum of them all to achieve a deeper, truer and more enlightened vision of reality.

The aim of this article is to study the connection between philosophical thought and the conceptualization of the feminine, focusing upon certain aspects of that relationship in

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Greek culture at the moment philosophy made its appearance. This does not derive from any historicist bias towards beginning at the beginning, but rather from the recognition that, in the so-called Western world, Ancient Greece represented a founding moment and, within the sphere of philosophy, it instituted a different way of thinking, opening up a whole new theoretical space, irrespective of how the passage from *mythos* to *logos* is interpreted.

In this case, with regard to philosophical conceptions and representations of the feminine, it seems indisputable that we received from Greece a foundational anthropological discrimination, a kind of *archetypal stereotype*, which caused the feminine to be perceived as derivative, and women to be considered the second sex throughout the Western tradition. But it seems equally indisputable that there was also another conceptualization of women and the feminine in Greece, associated with strength, courage and conviction, as in the case of Antigone or the philosopher queens suggested by Plato in his *Republic*. In such a context, it does not seem likely that in Greece women were confined exclusively to the gynaecium, that they could not enter public life (with the exception of some religious festivals), and had a status conceptually similar to that of slaves and children; for, although those things did occur, there seem also to have been other occurrences that counter the universal disrespect for the feminine and for women. Thus, the ultimate aim of this text is to denaturalize the idea that male domination was always peacefully accepted.

As I am neither a Hellenist nor a specialist in Ancient Philosophy, this article will explore lines of research that have been carried out on the above-mentioned topic, suggesting some interpretations based on the state of the art.

The sense and legitimacy of the quest for a conceptualization of the feminine and of women

With the purpose of establishing the sense and legitimacy of this work from a feminist point of view, we might raise the following questions:

- Is it worth plunging into the history of philosophy or the history of cultural ideas in search of roots?
- Is it even possible and useful to do so, or will the androcentrism of our language perversely affect that research?

Obviously, the fact that this text exists indicates that I shall answer both questions in the affirmative: nevertheless, it is not redundant to demonstrate how this is philosophically

consistent and militantly useful. Thus, I shall try to explain what separates me from positions that assert the absolute alterity of the female principle, such as that of Luce Irigaray for whom a project such as this of trying to re-signify some phases of the tradition is not merely irrelevant as downright prejudicial, because “the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman will be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and a meaning that are excessively univocal” (Irigaray, 1992: 126). This then, is about encountering in the theoretical machinery resources that may be operationalized. For this, I will use Gadamer’s hermeneutics, according to what Ricoeur translates as the *effectiveness of the work of history*, as a way of characterising Gadamer’s perspective on the subject of historical consciousness, which makes it simultaneously a condition of possibility and a constraint on the way we interpret reality. For Gadamer, to have a historical sense is to measure our thought against our historical horizon, assuming our historical consciousness; in other words, it is to account for ourselves within the development of a process that contextualises us and to some extent shapes us. For this reason, it is our destiny to work on the history that works us.

Gadamer calls the outcome of the historical work that we do about ourselves *prejudice*, by which he refers to that which could be characterised as *schemata of trans-subjective signification*, which function as principles for the reading of reality. These signification schemes represent what, in Kant’s language, may be designated as the spectacles of the mind, constitutive of humanity, which confine us to an irreducible *standpoint* – not so much a form of relativism as the inevitable consequence of human finitude. We know reality and intervene in it through the conditions inherent in our being human: our insertion into a historical, social and cultural context, and the fact that we have a body, mean that any human discourse is an interpretation that is more or less validated by the premises and axioms into which it is inscribed. This perspective is directly opposed to the Western epistemological standard, according to which neutrality, universality and objectivity are considered necessary endowments for truth and knowledge, based on the idea of a pure, transparent and aseptic reason. Indeed, it points out that this knowledge is by no means unblemished or fingerprint-free; on the contrary, it encodes the blond white man’s ideology, and only appears to be universally accepted because it is still the blond white male that is discursively dominant.

Amongst many critical positions, hermeneutic rationality also challenges this kind of epistemological positivism by showing that it is always connected to a particular human and cultural place, and that we are irremediably connected to the being or reality that we seek to understand; hence, we cannot “*know* the whole” because we are “*in* the whole” (Ricoeur, 1950: 443). And although we have not given up seeking the universal, we no longer claim an abstract universality but rather an “asymptotic universality that marks a direction, a regulatory horizon” (Amorós, 2000: 99). The hermeneutic position, in undermining the legitimacy of total rationality, brings to the field of knowledge the value of argumentation, contributing to the creation of a “culture of reasons”¹ and to defend the need to seek out different sites from which reality may be comprehended and explained. If being can be said in many ways, it is important that all these interact together to enable a joint mode of speaking that can put an end to the discursive monolithism that masquerades as universal neutrality.² It is in the context of the possibility and necessity of plural narratives that this work finds its *raison d’être*, helping to reinforce feminism’s self-awareness.

Judy Chicago created her famous installation *The Dinner Party* to give shape to women’s heritage and women’s power. Similarly, all philosophical movements have sought for their roots and legitimacy in the history of philosophy. Feminist philosophy cannot avoid this rule; indeed, it is for this reason that I intend to use Gadamer’s ideas of historical consciousness to propose a different reading of the past, seeking to re-signify the idea that male domination was peacefully and universally accepted, and raising the hypothesis that this unquestioning acceptance was only apparent. This re-signification process may find support in the following words of Gadamer:

Historical consciousness no longer listens sanctimoniously to the voice that reaches out from the past, but, in reflecting on it, replaces it within the context where it took root in order to see the significance and relative value proper to it. This reflexive posture towards tradition is called *interpretation*. (1979: 111; my italics)

Thus, the fact of belonging to a time and culture implies that we have inherited a cluster of interpretative resources with which we orient ourselves as humans, as we have seen. However, this interpretation should entail a reflective behaviour towards our cultural

¹ Expression also used by Celia Amorós.

² This hermeneutic rationality is situated between a modern and a postmodern rationality, taking from the former its discriminatory and analytical power and the value of formalization (while rejecting its totalizing and excluding stance), and from the latter, the recognition of finitude and the value of difference.

inheritance rather than a passive acceptance of it. In other words, having “a historical sense” obliges us to recognise the cultural legacy that we have received, but also obliges us to *reassess it* and *reinterpret it*, so as to reconfigure, with greater equity, the cultural inheritance that we in turn will bequeath.

As regards representations of the feminine, the work of interpreting our cultural legacy is particularly delicate as it goes against that which most profoundly constitutes us. It has to start with deconstruction and a hermeneutics of suspicion, as the most deeply entrenched representations of the feminine come from an asymmetrical anthropological conception that takes the masculine as standard and the feminine as derivative.³ Following this approach, a reflective look at the Western tradition should allow itself to be oriented by the idea that male domination was not universally and peacefully accepted, but only *appeared to be so*. That is to say, re-signifying our common history, of men and women, obliges us to seek out the “noises” that disrupt the universal acceptance of male domination, bringing to light signs of ambiguity and complexity in the power relations between the sexes, to which all eras have borne witness. Without this disclosure of such events, it will not be possible to trace out a new route for the understanding of our way of being, and we women will be left without female figures that materialize the possibility of looking at ourselves as full human beings. Moreover, if we passively accept the idea that male domination was always completely accepted, we are once more discriminating against our cultural heritage, because we are not doing justice to those that fought against that domination, thereby making their efforts invisible and reinforcing the cultural legacy that has managed to erase them.

Such an interpretation of the Western tradition will reveal not only a way of conceiving the feminine and women that we might call *canonical thought* (which offers a negative, subaltern view of women and the feminine), but also counter currents of thought, or *noises on the margins of dominant thought*, which show that male domination has not always been peacefully accepted.

Re-signifying old knowledges

Philosophy, at the outset, spoke Greek, and was marked by rejection and rupture. It rejected a certain type of mythical and poetic knowledge and broke with the particular way of thinking that this implied. According to María Zambrano, philosophical discourse is an ethical

³ On this subject, see Benoîte Groult (1993).

discourse as it corresponds to the desire of humans to construct their own knowledge, rather than accepting it from an external source.

This dual situation of rejection and rupture led to a new way of thinking that determined the epistemological development of the western world. With that inheritance also came what I have called *archetypal stereotypes*, or *foundational discriminations* concerning the feminine and women, and these indelibly marked all subsequent anthropology, which developed different concepts but always involving an asymmetry between women and men. The historical effectiveness of that inheritance is so marked that Freud, who countered almost all modes of established thought, merely reiterated Aristotle on questions relating to the feminine and to women – for the castration complex and penis envy are no more than a recapitulation of the Aristotelian perspective, now raised to the status of scientific knowledge. In another field of signification, Lacan's idea that only the phallus has the capacity to evoke a specific symbolic field merely echoes what was instituted in Greece as the paradigm of the neutral universal, though it was in fact assimilated to the masculine.

Greek philosophy is, thus, our inheritance and our destiny. To adopt it, within the framework of what has previously been said about the historical consciousness, necessarily requires that it be *re-signified*, as far as possible. To attempt this, I shall propose a series of guiding questions with their respective responses, which will serve to organize the second part of my text.

Questions	Answers
What ideas inherited from Greece do we assume to be <i>natural</i> , not having reflected on their process of constitution?	The idea of the <i>neutral universal</i> , and everything associated with it.
What have we rejected outright?	The Platonic proposal.
What has been belittled or disparaged?	The confirmed importance of some female figures, such as Sappho and Aspasia.
What have we ignored or refused to accept as our inheritance?	Some less usual aspects of Greek culture, if we take into account the depreciation of the feminine, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The importance of the feminine in the transmission of knowledge – Hesiod (<i>The Theogony</i>) and Parmenides (<i>Poem</i>) ▪ The importance of the female figure in the configuration of fundamental questions concerning the human condition, as testified by the tragedies. ▪ Plato's unexpected proposal concerning the possibility of <i>philosopher queens</i> and the examples from <i>Lysistrata</i>, <i>The Assembly of Women</i> and <i>Melanippe, the Philosopher</i>

Since it is impossible to explore all these aspects within the limits of this particular text, I shall focus only on four, chosen for being particularly well known, unusual, paradigmatic or influential. These are:

- The question of the neutral universal
- The Plato controversy
- The cases of Sappho and Aspasia
- The symbolic dimension of three unusual plays

Neutral Universal/False Neutral

Celia Amorós, in her introduction to an anthology of studies on the conceptualization of the feminine in Greek philosophy, claims that, from the outset, there was an ideological conceptualization of the feminine that counterposed it to a supposed neutral universal. On this subject, she makes two important points:

- a. [...] that which is thought as being generically human is presented on an abstract plane that neutralizes sexual opposites [...]. However, this does not mean that what is proposed on the level of the abstraction of the neutral can be communicable in the masculine or feminine: it will constitute itself as *masculine*, thereby *assuming the neutral*, and thus not positioning itself as masculine but as *the generic human* itself. [...]
- b. By being placed on the side of what is different, the *other-that-is-different-from-the-neutral*, and as the *neutral* is what is *thought of* as neutral – in the same way that it becomes *neutral* in the process of being *thought* – the feminine becomes the *unthought*. (Amorós, 1994: vii)

I shall explore this dual claim – the suppression of the process of assimilation of the neutral universal and the masculine, and the transformation of the unthought feminine into the *unthinkable* – using Zambrano's perspective on the origins of Greek philosophy, particularly the direct connection that she makes between philosophy and violence (Zambrano, 1991). Focusing on Plato and Aristotle, and within the framework of a comparison between philosophy and poetry, Zambrano calls the philosophical attitude *an ecstasy failed by a schism* because the philosopher, who initially experiences ecstasy before the awe-inspiring nature of reality (unlike the poet, who loses himself in it), ultimately abandons it, and abstracts from it in order to acquire an understanding of its essence through this ascetic distancing. The image that Zambrano gives us of the origin of philosophy shows that the philosophical desire is for the unity or totalization of knowledge. From her point of view, this desire for a unified whole becomes an obsession and pursues philosophy

like a phantom. To utter the human word about reality (instead of the divine word of mythic poetry) means for the philosopher uttering the last word, absolute and pure, and thus philosophy entails a dual violence: the separation from the primary awe at reality and the imposition of an all-inclusive order on that same reality. Within this interpretation, Zambrano claims that, in the Greek world, philosophical thought could have developed in two distinct ways – one connected to a temporal *logos* (the Pythagorean way of number and music) and another connected to a spatial *logos* (of word and being).⁴

The temporal *logos* privileges both word and silence, giving emphasis to rhythm and time as reality's mode of being. If this form of thinking had triumphed, philosophical reason would have had to find another way of expressing itself. However, it was the Aristotelian *logos*, which defined and judged all things, that prevailed. With this victory, unity, clarity and luminosity gained the upper hand, and the abstract and supposedly neutral universal was established as a supreme value. However, it is useful to understand how Aristotle, the victor, defined the Universal on the anthropological and political plane.

In a work on this subject, Amparo Moreno separates “sexism” from “androcentrism” in order to show that the concept of supposedly universal *man* inherited from Aristotle's *Politics* not only excludes women, but also many men. She claims that the concept of man that Aristotle forged, particularly in Book I of his *Politics*, refers to the *aner-andros*, i.e. “to the *made man*, who has assumed the values proper to virility and thereby believes that he has the right to rule over other men and women” (Moreno, 1988: 18).

Analysing important academic works that comment on and disseminate the Aristotelian perspective, Amparo Moreno shows that, in the transmission of Aristotelian thought, Aristotle's references to women, slaves and foreigners are minimized or completely ignored, or, in some cases, only his position on slavery is mentioned. While serving the idea of a neutral universal, this selective transmission in fact ignores the discriminatory significance that the meanings of the concept originally had; because although Aristotle knew to whom his concept applied and which men could be citizens of his *polis*, we (the whole of the western world) use the word *man* to refer to humanity, thereby eliding the segregational dimension that the term originally had. This gives public and academic discourse what Moreno calls *an androcentric opacity*. In other words, we have relegated to the plane of the unthought the conditions that created the concept, and in doing so, have naturalized it,

⁴ I have developed this idea in previous texts (Henriques, 1998a, 2001).

stripping it of its constructed character, and presenting it as being itself a neutral universal, contributing to the dissemination of an idea of humanity as virile, combative, dominating and property-owning.

The importance of this perspective is connected to the ultimate purpose of Aristotle's *Politics*: to naturalize a particular state of affairs by showing that the *polis* represented the natural mode of collective organization. For this reason, Aristotle used the "nature of things" to legitimise those that had the power to command and those that had, naturally, to be commanded. Thus, he says at the beginning of Book I of the *Politics* that nature created some beings to command and others to obey, emphasising that everyone would gain through this. This perspective served the West for many centuries, legitimizing slavery. We may ask if it still serves today to keep women away from public life and deprive them of full and inclusive citizenship. It has certainly influenced other ideas that have prevailed, such as those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for whom the place of women according to "the nature of things" was clear:

In the union of the sexes each contributes equally to the common aim, but not in the same way. [...] One ought to be active and strong, the other passive and weak. One must necessarily will and be able; it suffices that the other put up little resistance.

Once this principle is established, it follows that woman was made specially to please man. (2010: 532)

There are many other examples like this that show that, when the will exists to establish the superiority of one sector of humanity over another, there is always a tendency to ground it in arguments concerning the "nature of things." This is why it is crucial for feminist thought – or indeed any other form of thought that aims at justice – to lay bare the constructed nature and the context of construction of all that presents itself as "natural." In fact, the keyword for non-discriminatory thought of any type should be "denaturalization." Particularly in relation to the idea of the neutral universal, such denaturalization is absolutely essential.

The non-acceptance of the Platonic proposal for the *Just City*

The occultation of the context underlying Aristotle's idea of the *citizen-man* may have been partly responsible for the reception of Plato's proposal in the *Republic* that women could also govern the city and become philosopher queens.

Plato has two works on social and political organization: the *Republic* and the *Laws*.⁵ In the first, he argues that, although men as a group are superior to women, there are many women that are better than many men; for this reason, women should be given the chance to benefit from an education that could turn them into potential city governors. In the light of his notion that only practising philosophers could govern wisely, this proposal in the *Republic* implies that women (or at least some women) could arrive at the pinnacle of knowledge, as represented by philosophy, thereby enabling them to be queens of the just city. Even in utopian terms, it does not seem irrelevant that this idea once arose in Greece and that it is the object of debate in one of the best known works of western philosophy.

However, it so happened that, while Western culture accepted this work as important, it excluded the part about women accessing the heights of knowledge and power, considering it ridiculous, unreasonable or “against nature.” Natalie Bluestone (1987: 21-73) analysed how this issue was received by the academy between 1870 and 1970 and identified seven types of hostility in relation to the Platonic proposal, of which I shall highlight the following four:

- Equality is a non-issue (i.e. devaluation of the proposal)
- Women are different (i.e. the proposal is against nature)
- Women have better things to do (i.e. the proposal is undesirable)
- Plato did not really mean that (i.e. the proposal is unintentional, unwelcome or comic)

I do not believe that scholars can remain indifferent before such arguments for not accepting a theoretical proposal. And I believe, moreover, that this hostility is likely to have had a decisive *historical effectiveness* in the formation of our *collective consciousness*, to the extent that it still operates today as a preconscious schema in the minds of those that have doubts about parity or about the value of quotas as a process of positive discrimination.

The rupture that Bluestone identifies in her analysis of the reception of the Platonic proposal in the 1970s is related, as we might expect, with the cultural and epistemological revolution that occurred in the 1960s and '70s, which in one way or another had repercussions upon the academy. However, although the reception of this issue seemed to change after that date, Bluestone points to the persistence of the stereotype, particularly in

⁵ On this question see, for example, Julie K. Ward (1996); Sister Prudence Allen (1985); Claude Mossé (1983).

readings such as that of Allan Bloom, which continue to propagate an eminently sexist interpretation of the Platonic proposal (Bluestone, 1987: 154 ff.). Bluestone's analytic framework makes it clear that it is the reception of Plato that continues to erase the meaning and pertinence of his proposal; despite considering women as "fallen souls," Plato was nevertheless able to conceptualize the feminine without taking it as a collective, and thus, to conceive of the possibility that at least some women could rise to become governors of the city.

Without wishing to make Plato a defender of women's rights, we should be aware of what is at stake in the Platonic proposal: a rational argument in favour of the human right and philosophical legitimacy of women being able to rise to the highest form of knowledge and, consequently, to the highest rank of power. If we take into account that even today those rights are not peacefully accepted by all, we can glean some sense of the extent of Plato's daring.

The belittling, denigration and disparagement of the notable women of the Ancient World

In its guise as neutral universal, androcentism is also likely to have been an important factor in the silencing or belittling of women. However, despite women's general invisibility, it was not possible to make them completely disappear from the history of ideas and culture. The cases of Sappho and Aspasia may be taken as the paradigm of the (deliberate or unconscious) occultation of the feminine, letting us believe that women were always confined to the gynecaeum and that male domination was universal, uncontroversial and "in accordance with the nature of things."

The reception of Sappho and Aspasia was, in both cases, connected to sexuality; however, there are differences between them that have to do with their personal history and the topics for which they became important.

For most people today, two associations immediately spring to mind when we think of Sappho: her identification with the tenth muse and her lesbianism. However, these have nothing to do with the specific qualities that made her impossible to erase from history, namely the fact that she was one of the greatest poets of all times. As far as we know, Sappho was from the city of Mytilene on Lesbos, and lived between the second half of the 7th century and the first decades of the 6th century BC. This makes her slightly later than Hesiod and Simonides – poets whose views of the feminine were not the most positive.

According to specialist studies, the information about Sappho's life is so contradictory that the most reliable details may be gleaned from her own oeuvre. From this, we learn that she was responsible for herself and for her family circle, and was far removed from the received idea of the Greek woman, confined to the home and kept under guardianship (Iriarte, 1997). One of the prejudices that the reception of Sappho's poetry seems to have been unable to overcome was the categorisation of her poetry as exclusively concerned with the inner world; indeed, she is frequently accused of a cloistered sentimentality centred upon a self-contemplative Eros, in contrast with the political awareness shown by Alcaeus, her contemporary and compatriot, who sang of war and the active life. As some studies point out, this preconception has had the effect of turning Sappho herself into a symbolic figure, relegating her to the plane of the divine and identifying her as "the mortal muse."

The other preconception concerns Sappho's own life and her identification with lesbianism (the term of course derives from her native island). This idea indicates the ideological framework in which women are conceptualized; for while it was common in Greece for teachers to have relations of this nature with their (same-sex) students, in her case it became her defining feature. We might note that the same did not occur with other distinguished figures of Greece, such as Socrates (who is never characterised first and foremost by his passion for Alcibiades);⁶ for, in the context of Western morality and worldview, linking an eminent person with homosexuality was a way of denigrating them, thereby obscuring their value. Thus, the reception of Sappho offers a prototype of how female figures were mythically represented, as either divine or evil.

As for Aspasia,⁷ most people that know her name remember her as the mistress of Pericles. They will also know that she had great influence over him, especially negatively. However, what they probably do not know is that Aspasia belonged to an elite intellectual circle in Athens, and that she took active part in debates there alongside the famous men that also formed part of the group. This shows there were other roles for women in Athens besides that of the faithful submissive wife of an Athenian citizen, protecting the family's honour and property through her fidelity and submission. Thus, in the case of Aspasia, we find the same ideological interpretation operating as we found with Sappho. That is to say,

⁶ If the differentiating circumstance is the fact that Socrates was married, we should remember that Sappho was also said to have a husband and daughter, and that, moreover, she composed epithalamiums (songs celebrating marriage).

⁷ On Aspasia, see, for example, Mary E. Waithe (1992); Amalia G. Suárez (1997); José S. Dueso (1994).

when it is not possible to ignore women, then the aspect of them that is least prestigious is presented first and foremost, in the light of a morality that is also supposedly neutral.

The introduction to the bilingual edition of a work on Aspasia ends on a note that is pertinent for my purposes here:

[T]he information Plato gives about Aspasia corresponds to the historical reality. I consider that this is the best hypothesis to explain what the critics repeatedly call the “mystery” or “enigma” of Menexenus. The reason why the vast majority of modern authors, and some ancient ones, not only refused to accept this hypothesis but also did not consider it worthy of study is another question that raises important issues for the ideological history of the West. (Dueso, 1994: xl-xli)

Interestingly, it is once again the reception of Plato that is at the heart of this controversy. In this case, we are dealing with the Platonic dialogue *Menexenus*, where Aspasia is described as a master of rhetoric and author of speeches. According to Mary E. Waithe (1992), commentators on this work can be divided into two large groups: those that consider that the *Menexenus* belongs to the Platonic oeuvre, but that it is his only non-philosophical work (which effectively belittles it); and those that consider that the references it contains to Aspasia were made by Aspasia herself, and that Plato included them because he recognised her reputation as a philosopher/rhetorician, and wanted to make clear that he disapproved of the influence that philosophers like her had in Greece.

For Dueso, who belongs to this second group, Plato’s references to Aspasia demonstrate the importance that she would have had in those circles. Indeed, this author points out that, in refusing to accept the factual basis of what Plato says about Aspasia, scholars are employing different criteria to those used for the reception of other figures from his works, such as Lysias (in *Phaedrus*), Gorgias and Protagoras.

In his study of Aspasia, Dueso collected 34 testimonies, 17 of which refer to Aspasia’s rhetorical expertise and others that connect her to philosophy; thus, he believes it is absolutely legitimate to consider that Aspasia was connected to philosophy and to the art of argumentation, claiming that her trial for impiety illustrates her importance and intellectual influence. Dueso also raises the hypothesis that a movement of female emancipation may have developed around Pericles and his circle, which might help explain not only the trial, but also comedies such as *Lysistrata* and *The Assembly of Women*.

Some peculiarities of Greek culture

This reference to *Lysistrata* and *The Assembly of Women* leads conveniently to the last point I wish to make in this paper, involving the analysis of some of the less usual aspects of the Greek legacy. In particular, I will focus upon three plays (two comedies and one tragedy) where women are protagonists in situations that would be completely unlikely within the framework of the dominant conceptualization of the feminine.

However, to legitimise this incursion into the poetic, I shall call to my defence the words that open the second part of the work *La Femme dans la Grèce antique*:

The knowledge of a society does not consist simply in establishing legal, social and economic facts. A society is often revealed much more sharply through the image that it has and conveys of itself than through statistics or laws, however reliable they might be. [...] Consequently, a study of women in Greece involves updating the images that the Greeks themselves created and defined in epic, lyric poetry, and tragic and comic theatre, without overlooking the works of the philosophers and the narratives of the historians. (Mossé, 1991: 93)

Although I do not agree with the conclusions that this author draws from her analysis, I do share her starting point with regard to the importance of what might be called social imaginary, so effectively transmitted by literature and theatre. Thus, any discussion of women's role in Greek society needs to take account of the importance of female figures in Greek theatre as vehicles for the consideration of fundamental philosophical problems.

In a groundbreaking work of feminist theology (*In Memory of Her*, 1983), Elisabeth Fiorenza, a specialist in New Testament exegesis, reconstructs the history of the origins of Christianity in the global social context in which it emerged, i.e. its *Sitz im Leben*. By revealing the social, cultural and ideological conditions underpinning the production of the Biblical texts, she situates them in time, thereby separating the historical and the symbolic dimensions.

To my mind, Greek theatre requires the opposite reflective operation in order to make visible a contradiction between its *Sitz im Leben* and the role of women in the textual testimonies that have come down to us, and the symbolic function of that contradiction needs to be explored. Thus, Greek theatre should be analysed within its (strongly patriarchal) *Sitz im Leben*, in order to at least raise the hypothesis that there might have been noises on the margins of the dominant thought, that not everyone thought in the same way and that, therefore, male domination was not peacefully accepted.

From the complex of questions that arises in this context, I would like to highlight two situations that would seem to be exemplary:

- The connection of women to fundamental social issues, such as peace and the organization of collective life, as is the case of *Lysistrata* and *The Assembly of Women*;⁸
- The totally atypical existence of a play entitled *Melanippe, the Philosopher*.

Claude Mossé's study, mentioned above, does not give any political significance to the two comedies by Aristophanes, considering that both *Lysistrata* and *The Assembly of Women* only depict female figures that have all the characteristics traditionally ascribed to women (particularly the negative ones), and that the issues that are raised pertain strictly to the female worldview.⁹ As we have already seen, Dueso suggests another reading: that these comedies might have echoed a real-life protest by women in the context of Pericles' circle.

Although I am not in a position to settle this interpretative dispute, it does strike me as remarkable that Aristophanes created a plot in which female protagonists suggest political solutions in times of crisis, and that, in both cases, those female figures managed to mobilise and organise themselves in such a way as to occupy the public space which theoretically was forbidden to them. Whatever one wishes to think, only one of two hypotheses is possible here: either Aristophanes dreamed up the situation that he staged (which means that he implicitly acknowledged the possibility that women could perform such roles) or he was echoing others that did think in that way. Whichever, it is remarkable that such an image of female strength and power, with the capacity for mobilization and public action, was staged and applauded in Greece in the 5th century BC. What is more, although the solutions suggested by the women seemed to originate from their own experience and worldview, this can only be perceived as negative if those solutions are assessed from an exclusively male vantage point. Yet, in both examples, the so-called male solutions had been exhausted and had led to chaos, making it legitimate to seek alternatives.

⁸ *Lysistrata* (411 BC) is set during the resurgence of the war between Athens and Sparta. The Athenian Lysistrata summons the women of Greece to mobilise and put an end to the war by going on a sex strike. In *The Assembly of Women*, the Athenian women disguise themselves as men, and their leader, Praxagora, takes control, establishing a communist regime.

⁹ In the case of *Lysistrata*, the women suggest replacing weapons with distaffs and spindles. "However," the author adds, "the 5th century Athenian spectator knew very well that at the end everything would return to normality, that the topsy-turvy world would eventually be righted and that the women would once more find their way home" (116). In *The Assembly Women*, the protagonists conceive the life of the city in terms of a giant household (*oikos*), and therefore do not ever get beyond the female imaginary.

Melanippe, the Philosopher is the title of a tragedy by Euripides of which only fragments have survived. As the title indicates, the play focuses on a woman philosopher, or at least a woman that philosophises. The story is as follows. Seduced by Poseidon, Melanippe bears twin boys. Afraid of her father Aeolus, and upon the orders of the god, she hides her sons in a stable. However, the twins are discovered and taken to Aeolus, who considers them monsters and condemns them to be burned alive. Melanippe intervenes, and uses rational arguments to demonstrate that the children cannot be monsters and must have had a human mother. She finally acknowledges that she herself is the mother, at which her father blinds her and shuts her away. However, 16 years later, she is released by her sons and father, and recovers her sight.

Séverine Auffret (1988) has carried out a study of this work, making the following points:

- The protagonist's name, Melanippe, which is related to *black mare*, is interpreted as referring to the feminine and tragic side of the centaur Chiron, considered to be the ancestor of the philosophers for having gained dominion over brute strength through the power of the spirit. For Auffret, the tragedy of Melanippe stages not only the Greek situation but also the whole paradigm of the relationship between women and philosophy – they are always excluded from it and operate at its margins. In this respect, she evokes the work of Gilles Ménage, *Historia mulierum philosopharum*, which identifies 65 female philosophers, thus proving that it is in the reception and dissemination of women's thought that the occultation of this inheritance occurs, thereby obstructing its historical effectiveness.
- In the ambit of this occultation or de-legitimation, Auffret mentions Aristotle's comment in the *Poetics* that Melanippe is an example of theatrical bad taste; this is because its protagonist is inappropriate, as it is implausible that a young woman would develop philosophical discourse to this extent.
- Finally, pointing out that the tragedy ends happily, despite Melanippe's philosophising, Auffret suggests that Euripides may have wanted to focus on the prohibition against women philosophers and on the reasons that led them to engage in that practice.

Even without going into the anachronistic question of whether Euripides might have been displaying pre-feminist impulses, we cannot ignore that he wrote this play and that the

situation described in it must have had some significance with regard to the representation of women and their capacities in the Greek world.

Conclusion

Although this is only a very brief introduction to what is a very vast subject, I have suggested that the conventional perspective on women in Ancient Greece (which depicts them as wholly subordinate to men and culturally irrelevant) does not tell the complete story. A more systematic in-depth survey will certainly show a greater range of perspectives on this topic, uncovering a new list of names beyond those that are well known from the canonical literature. Thus, further work needs to be done in the field of Greek philosophy and culture in order to uncover some of the possibilities that were not developed in the past, thereby enabling us to narrate our own roots in a different way.

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