

Eleven

Female Imagery in Plato

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The Image of the Pregnant Philosopher

AT SYMPOSIUM 206C–E DIOTIMA TELLS US that all humans (*anthrōpoi*) are pregnant (*kuousin*) in both body and soul, and require contact with the beautiful in order to be able to relieve their pangs and give birth to their physical or spiritual children. She also makes it very clear that the virtues which constitute the spiritual children, and which can take the ascending forms of heroic acts, works of art and law, and various branches of learning right up to knowledge of the Form of Beauty, are decidedly superior to physical children: they are “more beautiful (*kallionōn*) and more immortal (*athanatōterōn*)” and “everyone would choose to produce children such as these rather than the human sort” (209c–d). She also makes it clear in 209a that some people are *more* pregnant in soul than in body. Indeed, despite the wording of 206, the remainder of her speech at least allows for the possibility that some humans will concentrate on spiritual pregnancy to the exclusion of physical pregnancy (and vice versa). It is certainly notable that, again despite 206, she never discusses an example of someone who is pregnant in both senses *qua* their double pregnancy, although some of the psychologically creative people she mentions undoubtedly had physical children too. In any event, it is plain that the best kind of pregnancy is the highest kind of spiritual pregnancy, and this is the pregnancy of the philosopher. Such a pregnancy paradoxically results in a transcendent version of sexual union, a “being with” the Form of Beauty itself (212a): “in this existence above all others is life livable for a human being” (211d).¹ In the *Symposium*, Diotima’s philosophic contri-

bution notwithstanding,² the main representative of philosophy is a male, Socrates: not only is he the empirical voice of philosophy at the banquet, just as other characters are voices for comic and tragic drama, medicine, rhetoric, and public life, but he is described by Plato in ways which are clearly meant to recall the depiction of the wisdom-loving (204a–b) Eros in Diotima’s speech.³ As the philosopher-par-excellence, therefore, we are presumably meant to think of Socrates as spiritually⁴ pregnant, walking barefoot about Athens in search of the young men, such as Alcibiades, whose spiritual and physical beauty can help him give birth to the fine and educative words which constitute his *phronēsis* and *aretē*. Indeed this image of Socrates as pregnant is reinforced in Alcibiades’ speech at 215a–b where Alcibiades speaks of Socrates as a Silenus statue, containing figures of gods inside.⁵

It is an undeniably startling introduction of a female bodily process into a text which until this point has focused on men far more than on women. Women are excluded from the dramatic setting of the symposium (even the customary flute-girl is dismissed at 176e and told to pipe either to herself or to the women within), and the earlier speeches do not greatly concern themselves either with the love of women or love for women, though Phaedrus does mention Alcestis’ love for her husband at 179b–c and Aristophanes includes women who love men and women who love women in his mythological account of the origins and aim of love (189c–193d, especially 191d–

² Even if Diotima is based on a historical figure (and I have yet to see convincing evidence of this, though I take Nails’ caution (2002:137) about the danger of arguing largely *ex silentio*), she is still a dramatic construct in the *Symposium*: witness her (aptly) prophetic allusion to a remark that Aristophanes has just made in his speech, an allusion that Aristophanes himself points out (205d–e and 212c). However, the point about her philosophical contribution is that she is not just a character invented by Plato; she is also a character wholly or partly invented by the character of Socrates within the fiction of the banquet. The other characters are taking part in a fictional symposium; Diotima is physically absent even from that fiction. Nevertheless, the fact that even an invented and absent woman has her views reported (albeit by a man) at a male institution such as a symposium is still important and will be discussed below. For a judicious appraisal of Diotima’s historicity, see Halperin 1990:119–122.

³ Like wisdom-loving, “philosophic” Eros, Socrates is poor, barefoot and stands in doorways. (These attributes are assigned to Eros at 203c–d; Socrates is said by Alcibiades to have regularly walked barefoot in the ice on campaign in Potidaea at 220a–b (see also 174a), and Aristodemus recounts at 175a how Socrates stood in a doorway reflecting on a problem while on his way to the banquet.) It is also notable that Eros is categorized by Diotima as a *daimōn* (202d–e), while at 219c Alcibiades calls Socrates *daimonios*.

⁴ There is no mention in the text of Socrates also being physically “pregnant,” even in the metaphorical sense in which men can become “pregnant” in body which is discussed below.

⁵ This reinforcement is unwitting on Alcibiades’ part, as he was absent for Socrates’ speech; but it is not unwitting of Plato.

¹ The term translated ‘being with’ (*sunontos*) can carry sexual overtones: ‘have intercourse with’. See *Laws* 773a and LSJ s.v. *suneimi* (4).

192c).⁶ Yet Aristophanes also emphasizes (191e–192b) that the “best” and “most manly” males will be involved in male pederastic relationships, and this is also the message of Pausanias’ speech, in which men who love women are dismissed as ‘paltry’, *phauloi*, and are consigned to the domain of the inferior “popular” Aphrodite, who partakes of both male and female (181a–c). “Heavenly” Aphrodite, by contrast, partakes only of the male and is the source of love between males: indeed, the male in general is described by Pausanias as more robust by nature and in possession of a greater intellect (181c). Even in Diotima’s own speech, and despite the gender-neutral *anthrōpos* of 206c and 211d,⁷ the superior spiritually pregnant lovers of 209a–211d are mainly⁸ spoken of as male: *ek neou* 209a–b; *ton andra* 209c; *tous neous* 210c; *tous kalous paidas te kai neaniskous* 211d. Indeed, at 211b they are explicitly said to be engaged in the “correct method of boy-loving” (*to orthōs paiderastein*). Diotima herself, of course, may be imagined as spiritually pregnant, and needing contact with the spiritual beauty of the young Socrates in order to relieve herself of her pedagogic offspring, but she does not refer to herself as such. The explicit emphasis of 209a–211d is in general on the male lover and the male beloved,⁹ though we should keep in mind the uses of *anthrōpos* that we have already noted, as there will be more to come. Nevertheless, whatever else Diotima may be doing, she is certainly inviting us to see the older male *erastēs* as “pregnant”; and whatever else he may be doing, Plato is both placing his discussion of *erōs* at least partly within the Athenian upper-class convention of pederasty and at the same time radically revising that convention.¹⁰ Finally, the impact of the

pregnancy image is heightened still further if, in addition to love, we consider the concomitant models of education discussed earlier in the dialogue: as well as the educative element central to male pederasty and piously emphasized by Pausanias, we also have Socrates’ allusion to the notion of education as a pouring of liquid from the fuller to the emptier (175d), which for Brisson and others is reminiscent of the ejaculation of seminal fluid.¹¹

Responses to the Image

This metaphor of spiritual pregnancy has aroused a wide spectrum of reactions, ranging from the intrigued (Halperin 1990), through the ambivalent (Plass),¹² to the openly critical or even hostile. In this paper I wish in particular to consider one type of negative response, which focuses on whether Plato is morally justified in describing male practices and institutions through use of a female bodily function. Du Bois (1988:182–183), for example, has written with some passion about Plato’s supposed “appropriation” of the female role in reproduction. Through the image of spiritual pregnancy, she claims, Plato is taking away from women the one act that is their sole biological provenance: “she teaches him that the philosophical intercourse, conception, pregnancy and delivery of male lovers are superior to the corporeal acts of human women ... the male philosopher becomes the site of metaphorical reproduction, the subject of philosophical generation; the female ... becomes a defective male, defined by lack.” Pender (1992:86), too, in her stimulating discussion of spiritual pregnancy in the *Symposium*, argues that Plato deliberately conceals the origins of the image: “the whole of the ‘female’ experience of pregnancy and giving birth to a child has been suppressed”; “... that Plato has used the overtly female image of pregnancy and at the same time has obscured the female role in procreation is no small achievement.” Cavarero (1995:92) expresses herself yet more strongly. Although she maintains that “the works of Plato ... seem marked by a mimetic desire for female experience” and “there is ... no trace of misogyny here,” she nevertheless argues that the use of the pregnancy image ultimately brings about a situation where “maternal power is annihilated by offering its language and vocabulary to the power that will triumph over it” (1995:94). Such criticisms may seem to receive some support from *Republic*

⁶ Halperin (1990:128–129) is eloquent on the exclusion and downgrading of females and female experience from the *Symposium*, although he somewhat overstates the case. I hope to show why I think it matters so much to be accurate on this point.

⁷ Unless stated otherwise, I use ‘gender’ in this paper to cover both cultural gender and biological sex and all reworkings of the two.

⁸ Mainly, but not exclusively. Again, I intend to show why this point is so important.

⁹ It is true that a little earlier (208d) she rather unfairly cites Alcestis as an example of a person prepared to sacrifice life through a desire to create an immortal name, but though this may be an instance of spiritual pregnancy, it is clearly not intended as the highest kind of spiritual pregnancy, which occurs only after 209.

¹⁰ If an unspoken image of a spiritually pregnant Diotima is hovering in the background of this male social institution, then this would be another way in which the institution is being reworked by Plato. Similarly, if Diotima is also supposed to possess a spiritual beauty which in turn inspires Socrates to give birth, then this would be yet a further form of subversion on Plato’s part. In his contribution to this volume, Brisson highlights the point that Pausanias’ “heavenly” form of pederasty, in which *erōs* is based on spiritual qualities and can last throughout life rather than ending when the *erōmenos* first grows a beard, already constitutes an initial revision of the institution by Plato (and one which Plato illustrates through his depiction of the relation between Pausanias and Agathon).

¹¹ See Brisson’s chapter in this volume. It should be stressed that Socrates makes it clear that he does not believe that this model is a true one.

¹² “... the notion of pregnancy does seem in some respects rather awkward in defense of pederasty” (Plass 1978:48).

395d–e, where Socrates is adamant that the young guardians (at this stage of the work tellingly envisaged only as male) should on no account ever represent a woman in sickness or love or—apparently the climax of disgrace—child-birth. The charges may also bring to mind the apparent downplaying of female biological functions and traditional activities in *Republic* V: while Socrates acknowledges that women are distinguished from men by their capacity to bear children (454d–e), he appears to accord little value to the unique bond between mother and child and indeed emphasizes that, in the case of guardian women, they will not breastfeed or raise their own children, but must submit them to the care of a state nursery run by male and female officers (460b–c).¹³ Indeed, some commentators have accused Socrates here of turning the female guardians into distasteful parodies of men, obliged to hunt and go to war.¹⁴

One may wish to go even further. One may be tempted to link this downplaying of female bodily functions and traditional nurturing roles with the significant number of passages in the dialogues in which Socrates contemptuously dismisses women in general and contemporary Athenian women in particular.¹⁵ To take just four examples, the first three also from the *Republic*: at 469d he remarks that desecrating an enemy's corpse is the mark of a "small and womanish" mind, while at 431b–c the lower appetites are said to exist chiefly in "children and women and slaves and the base multitude." At 605d–e, private outbursts of wild grief are also derided as "womanish"; the manly thing to do is to endure in silence. Most damning of all, perhaps, is the stipulation in the *Timaeus* (42b–c) that the man who is unable to govern his emotions

is to be punished by being reborn as a woman.¹⁶ In the *Symposium* itself, as we have seen, the dismissal of women may be thought to be symbolized by the banishment of the flute-girl at 176e and the low value that Pausanias and others place on the love of and for women. If one does make this link between the deployment of the pregnancy image and the attitude of Socrates and other characters to women in general, then Du Bois' charge might be rephrased thus: Plato appropriates what is useful to him from female experience and discards the rest.¹⁷

A Different Response

Such responses are valid but they are not, I think, finally persuasive. In this paper I wish to offer a different interpretation of the pregnancy image and what it reveals about Plato's attitude to gender in general and women in particular. I wish to locate the image within an overall educative project of Plato in which he sees gender as both inevitably important in the everyday world of becoming (and thus an apt resource for rhetorical and pedagogic purposes), and at the same time as ultimately irrelevant in the eternal and unchanging realm of being to which inhabitants of the world of becoming should aspire.¹⁸ Thus gender will vary in its significance to both student and (Platonic) teacher depending on which stage of his¹⁹ intellectual and emotional education the student has reached (in the language of the *Symposium*, which rung of the ladder of love he has attained); in consequence, the function of gendered images will similarly vary for the educationalist depending on the level (and perhaps also mood) of the student that she or he is trying to influence.

The use of gendered images and themes will thus be of great value for an educator attempting to reach out to students in the earlier stages of their education (and on the lowest one or two rungs of the ladder);²⁰ yet the same

¹³ Tuana 1992:22 emphasizes this point: "... no guardian, male or female, would participate in the rearing of children. Thus we hear no mention of the guardians developing nurturing qualities or the types of wisdom needed for the raising of small children."

¹⁴ See Annas 1981:185: "In most of Book V Plato spends his time claiming, irrelevantly and grotesquely, that women can engage in fighting and other 'macho' pursuits nearly as well as men." Blundell (1995:185) holds that "[Plato] ascribes such low value to ... women's traditional functions and qualities that he sees no reason why their role should not—within the guardian class—be abolished ... he turns them into 'honorary men'." A similar position is put forward by Tuana 1992:22: "Women, then, can serve as guardians only to the extent that they are capable of being like men." Saxonhouse 1994:68 (1976) expresses herself even more forthrightly, if not altogether consistently, claiming that in *Republic* V Socrates "attempts to turn women into men," and that the female guardians are "de-sexed and unnatural." It is worth noting that the Amazons have often received similar treatment: the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973) revealingly gives for "Amazon" a "strong, tall, or masculine woman." All such attitudes, of course, depend on particular, if not always acknowledged, views concerning which attributes and activities are "appropriate" for women. They therefore tell us at least as much about Plato's critics (and modern lexicographers) as they do about Plato.

¹⁵ See Wender 1973 for a balanced consideration of some of the more hostile comments about women in the Platonic corpus.

¹⁶ See also *Timaeus* 90e–91a.

¹⁷ Halperin 1990:118 and n21 gives a helpful survey of some of the vast secondary literature on attitudes to women in the dialogues, and inferences concerning Plato's own views. See also Tuana 1994.

¹⁸ See *Symposium* 212a. Philosopher-Rulers are explicitly encouraged to model both themselves and their states and citizens on the order and divinity of the realm of the Forms at *Republic* 500c–e.

¹⁹ I raise the question below of whether this project is intended to apply to future female students as well. As Plato employs both Diotima and Socrates as educators, I see no such difficulty about referring to the Platonic educator as "he or she."

²⁰ The point certainly holds for the lowest rung, in which the lover is fixated on one particular body. Whether it also applies to the next rung, in which the lover turns his attention to the beauty of

educator will also need to move his or her students towards an understanding of the irrelevance of gender to the ideal of the virtuous human,²¹ and the ultimate inconsequentiality of gender and the body in general in the realm of the transcendent Forms. I shall therefore argue that we should not try to delineate a single, consistent approach of Plato towards gender and gendered images; on the contrary, I shall maintain that there is no such single approach to be found. All depends on the nature, mood and, above all, educational stage of both the interlocutor addressed by Socrates (or the Eleatic or Athenian Strangers) and the reader that Plato particularly has in mind in a given passage. He cannot, of course, control the make-up of his future readership or control the order in which the dialogues are read (though by means of certain stylistic techniques he can hope to attract certain readers more than others and make certain dialogues more likely to be read earlier or later). He can, however, through the judicious deployment of images and other literary devices, hope to speak in the same dialogue to different readers at different stages of their intellectual and emotional development. As this development progresses, so certain passages will resonate with them more forcibly than others, and some of these passages will even come to be understood quite differently: students will come to appreciate that their earlier understanding of a gendered image was dependent on an immature and limited (though temporarily inevitable) perspective drawn from the world of becoming. In short, I shall argue that gendered images are one of the main devices that Plato deploys when trying to confront the challenge of how to teach immutable truths in a mutable world, a world in which his students themselves are in a process of constant change. In the course of this argument, I shall consider some of the detailed implications of the thesis for the *Symposium* itself.

The Pregnancy Image in Context

Let us return to the image of spiritual pregnancy and the hostility it has sometimes provoked. In considering both image and hostile response, we need to apply some perspective, and there are four perspectives in particular that I

wish to bring to bear. Firstly, the metaphor of pregnancy is not the only “female” image employed by Plato: there are, amongst others, the images of midwifery and weaving, and we need to reflect on these too.²² Secondly, the “female” images need to be viewed in conjunction with the apparently “male” images used to describe the practice of philosophy in, for example, the *Laches*, *Gorgias* and *Republic*: images drawn from war, hunting and athletics.²³ Thirdly, we need to reflect on both sets of gendered images in conjunction with what Socrates says about the ideal roles of ideally educated guardian men and women in *Republic* V. Finally, we must consider all the above in the light of the ungendered, incorporeal, eternal Forms, and especially in the light of the Form of Beauty in the *Symposium*. It is only then that we shall be in a position to view the image of the pregnant philosopher in its full Platonic context.

This is not to say that the *Symposium* has to be placed in these wider contexts in order to make sense, or to be enjoyed; I strongly believe that all Plato’s dialogues work as organic wholes in their own right, according to the model laid out in the *Phaedrus*.²⁴ Yet it is also an undeniable fact that Plato is well aware that many, probably the majority, of his readers are not going to confine themselves to just one of his works, and a significant number will study all or most of them. So while the *Symposium* can certainly be viewed as an independent unit, I believe that our appreciation of the dialogue can be greatly enriched by placing it in these wider settings.

“Female” Images in Plato

Let us begin by considering our chosen trio of “female” images. In the *Theaetetus*, the metaphor at 148e–151d and elsewhere²⁵ is not of a pregnant Socrates, but Socrates as a midwife (*maia*),²⁶ helping others—and in the

²² For the midwife image, see *Theaetetus* 148e–151d; 157c–d; 160e–161b; 161e; 184b; 210b–d. For weaving, see e.g. *Statesman* 305e–311c and *Republic* 500d. These three images of pregnancy, midwifery and weaving are not the only images drawn from female experience in the dialogues, but they will suffice for the present discussion.

²³ In the *Republic*, doing philosophy is compared to battle: 534c; hunting and tracking: 432b–d; swimming, often against mighty waves: 453d, 457b–d, 472a–473c; wrestling: 554b, 583b; mountain-climbing: 445c. See Hobbs 2000:passim, but especially 243–249.

²⁴ *Phaedrus* 264c. This principle strikes me as true even for the explicitly linked *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*.

²⁵ See n22 above.

²⁶ We are told at *Theaetetus* 149b that women only become midwives when they can no longer bear children of their own; hence the images of pregnancy and midwifery cannot, in the *Theaetetus* at least, be represented by the same person simultaneously.

all bodies, depends on whether (a) the ‘all’ (*pasi* 210b) really does mean *all*, i.e. both male and female; and (b) even if it does apply to both male and female bodies, whether the gender of the beautiful beloveds is truly of no significance whatsoever to the lover (gender can still be important to those attracted to both sexes, even if they have no preference for one sex over the other).

²¹ *Meno* 73a–c, discussed below.

context of the *Theaetetus* this means other men²⁷—give birth to their ideas and test which ones are healthy and sound. Turning to the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Stranger tells us at 305e–311c that true statesmanship is the expertise which weaves (*sumplokē* and cognates) everything together in the correct way. In practice this means weaving together the apparently opposing virtues of *andreia* and *sōphrosunē* and the two classes of people who embody them; such interweaving is to be achieved by a twin policy of “divine” and “human” bonds, the divine bonds comprising true and secure beliefs concerning fine, just and good things, and the human ones being largely formed by a state-controlled policy of eugenics. Intermarriage between the two basic types will check the tendency of the one to descend into savagery and madness, and of the other to degenerate into sluggish passivity. In these ways, the citizen body will become a well-woven fabric of resolute warp and softer woof.

We have, then, three striking and memorable images, drawn on the face of it from female bodily functions and traditional female activities. These images can be approached (and have been so approached in the scholarly literature) in two main ways. Firstly, one can ask what such comparisons tell us about Plato’s conception of the practice, purpose and value of philosophy and philosophic statesmanship; in particular, one can ask what the images of pregnancy and midwifery tell us about his theories of knowledge and education and what the image of weaving tells us about the art and function of ruling.²⁸ Furthermore, this approach can be taken either with respect to a single image or single dialogue (the latter considered as an independent unit), or by considering the images together, perhaps in the hope of building up some kind of developmental picture (a somewhat unfashionable hope at the moment in Platonic studies, but certainly not to be rejected on that account).²⁹ Do Plato’s theories of knowledge and education, for instance, change between the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*? Is the picture of the pregnant Socrates of the former philosophically different from the midwife Socrates of the latter?

Secondly, one can approach the images specifically from the point of view of their apparent *femaleness*. Are their female connotations merely contingent—even irrelevant—to Plato’s purposes, or does Plato exploit such female

associations for some particular rhetorical or philosophic goal or goals? And even if he does not deploy the gendered associations deliberately, does the “femaleness” of these images tell us something important nevertheless? Does it, for example, tell us something more about Plato’s view (whether conscious or not) of the nature and role of women—both actual, contemporary Athenian women and the hypothetical female guardians of *Republic* V–VII, who have been trained and educated according to the ideals that Socrates lays out? What are the effects of the images on the minds of readers?

It is this second approach with which I am principally concerned here, though I hope to show that in any case this second approach leads us back to the question of how Plato views philosophy. To begin with, we need to consider an issue which has hitherto gone largely unexplored, namely the extent to which such images really are “female” in the first place.³⁰ Let us start with midwifery, because it is the most straightforward. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* states that all—or almost all—midwives in Greece at this time were women: it admits that male midwives cannot be entirely ruled out, but points out that the evidence is very difficult to interpret, as male doctors not surprisingly sometimes delivered babies (a point made clear in inscriptions).³¹ In any case, the critical point for our purposes is that the term *maia* would without doubt have had female associations for Plato’s audience. However, the possibility that there might have been the occasional male midwife—and the certainty that male doctors sometimes delivered babies—is still important, as it allows Plato room to maneuver and to invite his readers to rethink the association between midwifery and women. In this context, it is helpful to turn to the proposals for occupational equality put forward by Socrates in *Republic* V and to ask whether they entail that midwives will be both female and male. At *Republic* 454d–e we are told that the only essential difference between men and women is that the female bears (*tiktein*) and the male begets (*ocheuein*), and this difference is not a sufficient basis for the assignation of different occupations to each: in consequence, there is no state-related function (*epitēdeuma ... pros dioikēsin poleōs*) peculiar to women (455a–b and 455d), though in general women will not perform as well as men. It is true that in *Republic* V this argument for occupational equality is only applied explicitly to the guardian class (457b–c, though see 455e discussed below), and midwifery is presumably an occupation of the producer class. Yet this does not stop the principle of 454d–

²⁷ At *Theaetetus* 150b and 210c Socrates makes it clear that his midwifery is practiced upon men, not women.

²⁸ It is this approach which is mostly dominant in the fine studies of Burnyeat 1977, Sheffield 2001a, and Lane 1998.

²⁹ Many of the arguments both for and against developmentalist interpretations of Plato in general (although without specific reference to gendered images) are ably discussed in Annas and Rowe 2002.

³⁰ An exception is Blondell, who briefly discusses the relation between gender and weaving in her thoughtful treatment of these images (2002:141n143). See below n34.

³¹ See H. K. King “Midwives” in OCD ed. 3.

e and 455a–b from being applicable to the producers, even if it is not here applied. It may also be significant that at 460b it is stated that the officers who run the state nurseries will be both male and female;³² the nurses themselves are described as female (460c), but as one of their main tasks is to breastfeed, this is hardly surprising. We are also told at 455e that a woman may possess a natural ability for medicine, which presumably means that Socrates envisages female doctors (a possible exception to the limitation of occupational equality to the guardian class of 457b–c), and if female doctors are permissible, then why not male midwives? In any event, the basic inference is clear: if consistently applied, then the principle of 454d–e would indeed have to allow for male midwives. In short, though the associations of *maia* in the *Theaetetus* are predominantly female, they are not necessarily exclusively so, either in contemporary Greece or in Plato's imaginary state.

A similar picture emerges from a study of weaving. The spinning and weaving of wool³³ was in this period of Greek history almost exclusively a female task and area of expertise, a point made by Plato himself at *Republic* 455c. Its archetypal exponent in myth was Penelope and its deity Athena. Indeed, the association between women and weaving is so strong that to accuse a man of weaving is to accuse him of being effeminate: witness the jibe at Cleisthenes at Aristophanes *Birds* 831. However, in contrast to our sketchy knowledge surrounding the possibility of male midwives, we do know for certain that some men did weave: the same passage at *Republic* 455c acknowledges this when Socrates says that women are mocked if a man can weave better than they; further evidence comes from *Republic* 369d, *Phaedo* 87b, *Cratylus* 388c and *Gorgias* 490d.³⁴ Once again, these exceptions are important, because they make it easier for Plato to rework the relations between occupation and gender in the ideal society; at the same time, the fact that they are exceptions and not the rule allows Plato (as we shall see) to appeal to weaving's mainly female associations for rhetorical purposes.

After the slight ambivalence about midwifery and weaving, pregnancy might appear the most unequivocally “female” image of the three, as it is the only one to refer not to a potentially transferable occupation but to a biological function: indeed, we have already seen how Socrates states at *Republic*

454d–e that the only essential difference between women and men is that the female bears and the male begets. However, it is in fact the “femaleness” of the pregnancy image above all which some commentators have questioned. A few, such as Plass (1978:47–55), have argued that *kuousin* at *Symposium* 206c just means ‘fertile’, ‘fecund’: hence the applicability of the verb to all humans (*anthrōpoi*). A greater number, including Morrison, Dover, Stokes and Pender,³⁵ claim that Diotima's language shows that she is actually not much interested in female pregnancy at all, and is instead mostly talking about male arousal and ejaculation, which she views as a kind of male pregnancy and giving birth. To this end, such commentators adduce the *Timaeus*, particularly 86c, as proof that Plato could and did speak of male arousal and orgasm in such a way. Morrison and Pender in particular argue that, taken together, *Timaeus* 73b–c, 86c and 91c–d show that Plato is inclined to this view because he believed that the human seed originates in the brain and marrow of the male, and that both the male and female sexual organs serve as first receptacle and then outlet for this seed.

These are challenging ideas and I believe that they are partly correct. I agree that Diotima is chiefly, though certainly not exclusively (as we shall see), interested in both spiritual and physical procreation from a male perspective: witness 208e, which talks of the men who turn to women in order to beget physical children, and 209a–b, which discusses the case of a young male whose soul is pregnant with virtue and who, on attaining manhood, seeks a beautiful male through whom he may bring these conceptions forth. I also agree that *Timaeus* 86c shows that Plato does seem to view male arousal and orgasm as at least analogous to pregnancy and giving birth. I am a little less sure whether this is because he thinks that the mother's womb simply provides a receptacle for the father's seed (whether that seed originates in the brain and marrow of the male or not), and that the father is therefore the real parent: in my view, the *Timaeus* passages cited above make this view probable, but do not prove it conclusively. It is true that at *Republic* 454d–e, as we have seen, Socrates claims that the woman bears (*tiktein*) and the male begets (*ocheuein*), but again I am not clear that this conclusively rules out the possibility of a female seed as well. It is certainly the case that Plato would have been well acquainted with the common belief that only a male seed is involved, as such a belief is regularly expressed by the tragic poets, with whose works Plato was familiar: Apollo's words at Aeschylus *Eumenides* 657–663 are the *locus classicus* here.³⁶

³² These officers are presumably auxiliaries, who act in an executive as well as a military capacity (414b).

³³ According to I. Jenkins 2003:71, this was also true of the weaving of flax.

³⁴ See also Blondell 2002:141n143. I. Jenkins (2003:75) writes that “In addition to the ‘amateur’ female weavers of the self-sufficient household, there were also the professional artisans, both male and female.”

³⁵ Morrison 1964:42–55; Dover 1980:147; Stokes 1986; Pender 1992:72–86.

³⁶ See also Aeschylus *Septem* 753–754; Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* 1257; Euripides *Orestes* 551–556.

Yet Plato may also have been aware of an alternative view which postulated both a male and female seed, which is aired in the Hippocratic Corpus.³⁷ We simply do not know for certain what Plato's views were on the woman's role in reproduction.

In any event, Diotima's tendency to view physical and spiritual procreation from a male perspective is still only half the story. What the interpretations of Plass, Morrison, Pender and the others do not properly acknowledge is Diotima's careful choice of *kuousin* at 206c; in the Hippocratic Corpus, Aristotle and Galen, *kuō* in the present and imperfect tenses always refers to the woman's experience of conception or being with child.³⁸ Diotima could have used *tiktein* or *gennan*, which can apply to either sex, but she does not. There is no escaping the fact that she—Plato—has selected a term which the other symposiasts and Plato's readers would have associated with women, despite the fact that it is here applied to all humans (*anthrōpoi*). Nor should we overlook the fact that Plato has chosen to put these words into the mouth of a woman, which again would incline his audience to think of female pregnancy, even though, as a (probable)³⁹ prophetess, it is likely though by far from necessary that Diotima is childless, at least officially.⁴⁰ In short, the language of 206c

conjoins up, and is supposed to conjure up, an image of both men and women pregnant and swelling in both body and mind in the way that a woman's body swells with child. Nevertheless, the point that female pregnancy and birth can be used as metaphors for male arousal and orgasm (which I am not denying) once more allows Plato room for maneuver in the use he makes of female imagery and will again prove helpful when we gather our conclusions on Plato's attitude towards the significance and function of gender.

Female Imagery and Pedagogy

In the images of pregnancy, midwifery and weaving, therefore, we have three metaphors which would have held mainly, but importantly not exclusively, female connotations for Plato's readers, at any rate to begin with. The question now is: does Plato put such female associations to any deliberate rhetorical, pedagogic or philosophical purpose? And—a separate question—do such female connotations produce any particular rhetorical, pedagogic or philosophical effects, whether Plato intended them or not?

To gain some purchase on this issue, it will be helpful to consider briefly Plato's deployment of ostensibly "male" imagery (imagery drawn, for example, from war, hunting and athletics) to describe the practice of philosophy in other dialogues. As I have written extensively about such imagery elsewhere,⁴¹ I shall only point to my main conclusions here. The immediate rhetorical purpose of such vigorous images, I suggest, is to help counter the charges of critics such as Callicles that the serious pursuit of philosophy, particularly beyond a certain age, makes one feeble, impotent and generally "unmanly" (*Gorgias* 485c): it is part of a general project to show that the traditionally male virtue of *andreia* (literally 'manliness', though often 'courage') can be manifest in the academy as well as on the battlefield. In the *Republic* alone, as we have seen, the practice of philosophy is variously compared to making an assault, tracking, swimming against huge waves, wrestling and mountain-climbing: a pentathlon of the mind.

Yet such images also raise complex problems, of which one in particular concerns us: to what extent are the male connotations of *andreia*, war and sport really significant in these comparisons? What, again, of *Republic* V, where we are told that properly trained guardian women will also practice athletics and go to war (456a–b)? In the ideal state, many of the activities traditionally associated with males will be practiced just as much by guardian females, and

³⁷ See Dean-Jones 1994:chap. 3.

³⁸ See LSJ s.v. *kuō* (sic): the entry under *kuō* makes the point about the present and imperfect tenses being used of the female more clearly than the entry under *kuēō*. The point is also emphasized by Sheffield 2001a.

³⁹ We are never told precisely what Diotima is: she is referred to as *xenē* (201e), which links her to the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*. However, specifying that she comes from Mantinea is probably meant to suggest that she is some kind of *mantis*, 'seer', and the claim that, by advising sacrifices, she helped the Athenians delay the onset of the plague for ten years indicates a woman of special, though clearly not unlimited, spiritual powers (and perhaps function too). Her closest associates in Plato are the priestesses of *Meno* 81a (though there are also parallels with the secular Aspasia in *Menexenus*, a connection illuminated by Halperin 1990:122–124).

⁴⁰ Most commentators assume that Diotima is chaste (Halperin calls her "presumably chaste" 1990:199n102), but there was no uniformity of either regulation or practice concerning the virginity or chastity (or lack of them) of Greek priestesses and seers during this or any period: in a few instances chastity was an official requirement of office, but generally there seems to have been no such stipulation (and in some cases, such as on Samos, the obligation appears to have been spectacular lack of chastity). And if Diotima is simply to be viewed as some kind of religious expert (perhaps assisting in rituals and cults), then she could well have had a child: according to Demosthenes, Aeschines' mother offered initiation into a minor mystery-cult (18.259–260). At 201d Diotima is referred to as *gunē* (woman) and not *parthenos* (maiden), which may indicate that she is not a virgin, though it is not conclusive. Nor should we forget that Socrates, with teasing ambiguity, says that she is wise on the matter of *erōs*, and that she taught him *ta erōtika* (201d). For the role of women and girls within Greek religion generally see Dillon 2001 and Blundell 1995.

⁴¹ See n23 above.

the virtue of *andreia* required for the excellent performance of these often risky activities will presumably be displayed by females too:⁴² in short, neither *andreia* nor sporting and military pursuits are essentially male preserves at all. Yet this does not alter the fact that such images would have “manly” connotations for at least the majority of Plato’s audience (certainly at first hearing or reading) and Plato cannot plausibly claim to be unaware of such reactions.

In response to this puzzle, my suggestion is as already outlined:⁴³ namely, that Plato’s position is deliberately ambivalent, designed to accommodate both the ideals to which his students should aspire and the reality that his immediate audience is almost entirely male and living in a world of becoming in which gender (and the body generally) is inevitably important. On the one hand, he genuinely wishes to convince them of the originally Socratic theory, first voiced in the *Meno* 73a–c, that the virtues are gender-neutral.⁴⁴ Indeed, we have seen how, in the *Republic*, the *Meno* position is given a theoretical underpinning: beyond the roles men and women play in biological reproduction, there are no essentially male and female activities, and hence no essentially male and female excellences. What matters is the human subject. In time, Plato wishes to educate his students to another level again, a level where the ideal is the realm of ungendered and human-transcendent Forms (*Republic* 500c–e; *Symposium* 212a). Yet he is also acutely aware that some of the young males in his audience are deeply suspicious of higher philosophical studies, believing that the pursuit of philosophy in adulthood would be tantamount to abrogating their manhood. If he simply ignores their fears, he will lose them.

One of Plato’s solutions to this conundrum is, I propose, as follows: namely to deploy images for the philosophic enterprise which his (predominantly male) students in the early stages of their education will perceive as “masculine” and find attractive, but which they will later, when they are ready, come to view as not really “masculine” at all. He is happy to exploit the fact that his depiction of philosophy in robustly active terms is likely, initially at least, to be misinterpreted by many of the young male students, new to the subject, and will thus alleviate their concerns. It is true that there is no formal separation of rhetorical tactic from rational teaching in any of the dialogues

which uses such apparently gendered imagery, but this need not count as an argument against the theory: what one appreciates from a first reading of a work at eighteen is very different from what one understands from a tenth reading at forty, and its forty-something author may easily write with this knowledge of human emotional and intellectual development in mind.

The question, of course, is whether this approach, intended to accommodate the different needs and capabilities of students at different stages in their education,⁴⁵ will actually work in practice. There is surely a danger of readers feeling tricked when they appreciate Plato’s technique and rejecting the work, and even philosophy altogether, in consequence: they could end up like the *misologoi* of *Phaedo* 89c–90d, who put their faith in unsound arguments and come to hate arguments altogether. In this paper, however, I shall not focus on these dangers:⁴⁶ here I simply wish to see whether Plato deploys “female” imagery in the same or a similar way, i.e. a way which aims to speak differently to readers at different developmental stages.

One point immediately strikes us: there certainly does not appear to be any comparable move to persuade young students that by pursuing philosophy they can still be “real women,” or become more “womanly”—even though, if we are to take *Republic* V seriously, Plato must presumably be hoping for a time when many more women will be able to study his dialogues with more freedom than is the case in his Athens.⁴⁷ Plato understands his current young audience, and the concerns that he has to soothe. In this respect it is worth noting that Plato generally only deploys such female imagery when Socrates, and the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*, are comfortably amongst friends, men who are not accusing philosophy of compromising their manhood.⁴⁸ In the *Symposium* the only character who might perhaps feel threatened by an image of a pregnant male philosopher is Alcibiades, and he notably does not arrive in time to hear Diotima’s speech; besides, it is not obvious that he would be upset by it anyway: it is Alcibiades, after all, who likens Socrates to

⁴² At 456a Socrates says that some women are naturally thumoeidic, and *andreia* is the particular virtue of the thumoeidic part of the *psychē* (441d).

⁴³ See “A Different Response” above.

⁴⁴ Aristotle criticizes the historical Socrates for holding that the temperance and courage and justice of a man and a woman are the same at *Politics* 1.13.1260a20–24, and a similar view is attributed to Socrates at Xenophon *Symposium* 2.9 (though here there is the qualification that women are still lacking in judgment and strength).

⁴⁵ And perhaps also principally aimed at different parts of their *psychē*, respectively the *thumos* and *logistikon*.

⁴⁶ For more detailed discussion, see Hobbs 2000:247–249.

⁴⁷ This strikes me as another example of the *Republic* V discussion not being fully integrated with the rest of the work; the fact that the education program of II and III appears to be directed solely at male trainee guardians (see above) is a further instance.

⁴⁸ The use of weaving imagery at *Republic* 500d may be thought to be an exception, but by this point Thrasymachus is no longer an active opponent and if his capitulation is specious rather than genuine, Socrates is no longer particularly concerned. It could be argued that Aristophanes’ lampooning of Socrates in the *Clouds* is hardly an act of friendship, but such hostility is at most only hinted at in the *Symposium* (e.g. 221b).

a statue with models of gods inside (215a–b), and it is Alcibiades who arrives crowned with violets and ribbons, conjuring up an image of the often androgynous Dionysus. Within such mostly friendly surroundings Plato is relaxed about depicting male philosophers engaged in activities and processes usually associated by his contemporaries with women. This relaxed attitude, however, does not mean that the “pregnant” male philosopher (or, indeed, intellectually pregnant female philosopher) is viewed as being a “real woman.”

However, despite the fact that there is no parallel move to emphasize the potential “womanliness” of engaging in philosophy, it may still be thought that Plato exploits the predominantly female associations of the images of pregnancy, midwifery and weaving in a number of ways. For my present argument, I need only list four possible candidates. Firstly, in a culture where texts are mainly written by and for men, such images are plainly startling, memorable and thought-provoking, and thus an excellent pedagogic tool: witness the fact that they are still causing debate nearly 2,400 years later. They are another manifestation of Socrates’ radicalism. Secondly, the images of pregnancy and midwifery are arguably used to appeal to the reader’s protective instincts towards pregnant women and their unborn children, or children in the process of being born: precisely the attitude that is needed to nurture vulnerable young philosophers and their embryonic or newborn ideas.⁴⁹ Just as critically, these images illustrate Plato’s belief that the process of achieving wisdom is a creative one, rather than the passive imbibing of knowledge that Socrates discredits at *Symposium* 175d.⁵⁰ Conversely, the mostly female connotations of weaving may be intended to soften and palliate—at any rate they have the effect of palliating—the image’s decidedly troubling implications, namely that the statesman’s subjects are inanimate wool to be spun and woven at will. Their passivity (only the statesman-philosopher remains a creative figure in this scenario) is thus in marked contrast to the creative potential ascribed to all humans by Diotima, and to a significant number of

younger males by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*; whether this inconsistency presents a problem for Plato is something we shall discuss shortly.

Female, Male, and Human

All these possible uses relate to the “female” images when examined individually, within the context of individual dialogues. While still keeping these particular functions in mind, it is now time to explore the “femaleness” of the images when they are considered together, and also when they are, as a group, placed in the contexts both of the “male” imagery we have noted and of the proposals for idealized gender roles in *Republic* V. The results of such an exercise are striking, and do not support the view (at least not straightforwardly) that Plato is simply appropriating female functions and activities for male ends. If we take all the apparently “gendered” images together, and in addition view them in the light of *Republic* V, we can see that, at a higher level than that of appealing to initially wary young male students, or even of appealing to protective instincts towards pregnant women and their growing children, Plato is equally happy for the philosopher to appear as male or female, masculine or feminine. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates is implicitly presented as Theaetetus’ father-figure as well as his midwife (Theaetetus is even said to look like Socrates 143e),⁵¹ and Alcibiades’ comparison of Socrates to a Silenus-statue containing images of gods inside (*Symposium* 215b) significantly combines the images of the pregnant female with the vigorously erect male. Socrates is also, of course, the voice of the female Diotima. Now some of the reasons for this cavalier approach towards gender will of course be *ad hoc*—whatever suits the purposes of a particular passage in a particular dialogue best; but I wish to suggest that, taken together and in conjunction with *Republic* V, the overall effect of the images is to suggest to the more reflective and informed reader that it really is ultimately of little consequence whether the philosopher is male or female. Nor is it ultimately of much consequence whether a male or female philosopher is described in terms traditionally associated with the opposite gender. At this level, talking of a male philosopher as pregnant, or as a midwife or weaver, does not mean that he is turning into a “real woman”; nor does talk of female philosophers hunting or going to war mean that they are turning into “real men.” Taken together, the images can be seen as contributing to Plato’s project of emulating his mentor, the historical Socrates, and

⁴⁹ Both Plato (*Laws* 788d–790a) and Aristotle (*Politics* 7.16.1334b29–1335b20) show concern for the well-being of the fetus and newborn baby, and emphasize how important it is to provide the right conditions both within the womb and without for their development. Golden (1990:89–94) provides substantive, detailed and compelling evidence that both parents in classical Athens cared for their offspring, often deeply; he argues persuasively that the practice of exposure of newborns did not diminish the care bestowed by parents on the children they did raise, and in some cases may even have intensified it. The *Theaetetus* itself provides evidence of parental attachment: Socrates not only refers to the custom of exposure, but also mentions the distress of parents, when their newborn child is taken away (151c and 161a).

⁵⁰ See above. Both Halperin (1990:137–142) and Brisson (in this volume) emphasize the creative nature of Plato’s conception of learning.

⁵¹ Blondell also suggests that Plato plays with the idea of Socrates as Theaetetus’ male *erastēs* (2002:271).

moving away from notions of gender towards an ideal of the human, an ideal which we have seen articulated eloquently by the character of Socrates at *Meno* 73a–c.⁵² For Socrates in the *Meno* and his historical source, the goal is to become not a virtuous man or woman but a virtuous human, as both men and women are virtuous in the same way.

Diotima's choice to use *anthrōpoi* at 206 (despite the female-related verb) and *anthrōpōi* at 211d now takes on a deeper significance. Though it remains true, as we have seen, that she mostly speaks of love from a male perspective, it is still notable how often she pointedly talks of her erotic subjects as "human": as well as 206c and 211d, *anthrōp-* words also appear at 208c and 211e and twice in the rousing climax of 212a when she describes what it would be like to live in contemplation of the Form of Beauty: "do you call it a paltry life for a human to lead, to be looking in that direction, gazing on it by the appropriate means and in intercourse with it? ... if anyone is, such a human is immortal."⁵³

It is at this higher level that Plato can exploit the fact that, though the images of pregnancy, midwifery and weaving have predominantly "female" connotations, each can in certain cases be applied to males too: even in Plato's Athens, men can and do occasionally weave and at any rate act as midwives; if we extend the principles of *Republic* V to the producer class, then they would do so in the ideal state as well. In the *Timaeus*, and perhaps also in the *Symposium*, male arousal and ejaculation are in some ways depicted as at least analogous to pregnancy and giving birth.⁵⁴ Such exceptions to the general rule help Plato to break down distinctions between the male and the female, and the masculine and the feminine. He has room to play. Such playfulness, furthermore, does not only manifest itself in to whom "gendered" images apply, but *how* they are made to apply: this is why it does not particularly matter that the creative subjects implied by the pregnancy and midwifery images appear at odds with the mostly passive subjects implied by the metaphor of weaving. Plato can afford to be relaxed in his use of gendered imagery because, from the perspective of the wise and virtuous human, gender really does not matter very much.

Female Imagery and the Forms

There is another perspective, however, that as we have already seen matters even more, and this is most powerfully expressed by Diotima. Those who can gaze upon the Form of Beauty itself, she says, pure and unalloyed, would no longer have any interest in "human flesh and colors and all the rest of mortal trash."⁵⁵ Diotima bids us to transcend, as far as possible, not just our gender but, ultimately, even our humanity itself, in an attempt to have intercourse with and perhaps emulate, as far as we can, the non-human and non-gendered Forms.⁵⁶ Biological sex and cultural gender and all permutations of their relation are part of the corporeal world of becoming and impermanence: the final goal is the incorporeal, eternal realm of being manifest in the Forms. This is the ultimate context in which Plato's use of female imagery should be viewed. Now, the actions and words of both the character of Socrates in the *Symposium*, and Plato its author, partly undercut Diotima's contemptuous dismissal of humanity in 211e: both Socrates and Plato manifest a profound concern with how humanity fares, and Plato's masterly composition radiates an exuberant delight in the vividness and variety of its colors and flesh. Indeed, Diotima herself expresses a passionate interest in the welfare of humanity in the lines that immediately follow 211e. Yet this deep concern and delight can perfectly well be accompanied by an awareness of the smallness of humans in the greater scheme of things and an acknowledgement of the ultimate irrelevance of gender, which is contingent on our temporary incarnation and will not survive our death.⁵⁷ The enjoyment of playing with, transgressing and utilizing concepts of gender is possible precisely because, finally, they are of no lasting importance. The *Symposium* is not so much a rejection of the female as gaily cavalier in its attitude towards the embodied. I submit, therefore, that Plato is chiefly concerned not with "appropriating the feminine" but with liberating men and women alike from inessential bodily and cultural constraints.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ 211e (translation mine).

⁵⁶ We have seen an open exhortation to emulate the Forms at *Republic* 500c.

⁵⁷ See *Republic* 486a8–10 and 604b–c for an acknowledgement of the small significance of human affairs when viewed from the perspective of "all time and all reality." Yet no one could seriously charge the author of the *Republic* with being indifferent to human concerns.

⁵⁸ I am indebted to comments made at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC, and Warwick University, where earlier versions of this paper appeared. Particular thanks must go to Debra Nails, my main editor, and also to the anonymous readers for the Center, to Christine Battersby, Ruby Blondell, Jim Leshner, and Frisbee Sheffield.

⁵² See above and n44.

⁵³ Translation mine. It is interesting to compare *Apology* 38a5–6; Debra Nails has helpfully pointed out to me that the *Apology* contains forty-one instances of *anthrōp-* words.

⁵⁴ The connection may be even stronger if, as Morrison and Pender think, Plato does believe that both the male and the female sexual organs serve as receptacle and outlet for the seed that originates in the brain and marrow of the male. But see the discussion above for a counter-view.

PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

ISSUES IN INTERPRETATION AND RECEPTION

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