

over the maternal, the child would be male. If the mother's prevailed, it would be female.

Hippocrates (born on Cos in 460 B.C.) said that each sex produced a seed that could be either strong or weak. When a strong male seed meets a strong female seed, a male is born. When a weak male seed meets a weak female seed, a female is born. And, finally, when a weak male seed meets a strong female, or vice versa, the sex depends on the quantitatively more plentiful seed. If the father's seed is more plentiful and strong, the child will be male, but not very virile. If the father's seed is weak, though more plentiful, the child will be a girl, but not very feminine. If the mother's seed is more plentiful, the child will be an effeminate male if the seed is strong, and an unfeminine female if it is weak.¹

Socrates and Aspasia

The debate had touched the theme of the masculine and feminine "virtues," defined from the beginning in the terms of a search for a "difference." But there were those who had begun to doubt the biological nature of the "difference" or at least of the fact that it was exclusively biological. The first to question it, as far as we know, was Socrates, whom Xenophon cites in the *Symposium* (2.8-9) as saying, referring to the skill of a female juggler, that what the woman was doing was "one of many proofs that the female nature is not naturally inferior to the male, except perhaps she lacks wisdom and physical strength." As it was not nature alone but lack of education that made women inferior, Socrates maintained, it was the duty of husbands to teach their young wives to be good companions, so that they might be able to engage in dialogue and so that they might be allowed, insofar as they were able, to contribute to the good of the family on an equal basis with the men (Xen. *Oec.* 3.12. 14-15).

Socrates was particularly well disposed toward women and did not limit himself to abstract recognition of their capacities; he listened to their advice and even admitted that some of them were wiser than himself. He says this explicitly about Aspasia, a unique female figure well worth a closer look.

Daughter of Axiochus, born at Miletus in Asia Minor, we know

Philosophers and Women

The Reproduction Debate: Does Woman Contribute?

The mystery of birth divided Greek thinkers from the very beginning. Is the child, they asked, born solely from the father or from the mother too? The very terms of the question bespeak a singular attitude. The incontrovertible biological fact that the child is born from the mother (which might have led them to wonder, more logically, if the man made any contribution) was canceled at the outset, sometimes radically. For Hippo and the Stoics in general, the answer was that the child was solely the father's. For Anaxagoras, Alcmaeon, Parmenides, Empedocles, Democritus, Epicurus, and the physician Hippocrates, on the other hand, it was the mother's. Parmenides (born at Elea, ca. 519 B.C.) admitted that the woman too produced a "seed," but claimed that the sex of the child depended on the position of the fetus in the uterus; if it was on the right (the colder side), it would be born male; if on the left (the warmer side), it would be female. The idea was taken up by Empedocles (born in 488), although he maintained that males were born from the warm zone and females from the cold. For Democritus of Abdera (born ca. 470 B.C.), sexual differentiation depended on the relative strength of the father's and mother's seed. If the paternal seed were the stronger and prevailed

from Plutarch's *Life of Pericles* (24) that Aspasia lived with Pericles after his divorce from his first wife (by whom he had had two sons) until he died and that she then married a certain Lysicles, a crude and ignorant man who thanks to her influence became the foremost man of Athens. Because she was a foreigner, Pericles could not marry her and she lived with him as his concubine. His love for her was so extraordinary, says Diogenes Laertius (6.16), that he even kissed her every day when he left the house for the agora and again when he returned—most unusual and evidently in contrast with normal conjugal relations, which included neither eroticism nor love.² But what is more interesting is Aspasia's relationship with Socrates. It has even been suggested that Socrates learned the so-called Socratic method from Aspasia.³ And indeed, it seems that Aspasia had rare mastery of the art of conversation.

A disciple of Socrates, Aeschines of Sphettus, wrote a dialogue called *Aspasia* in which he recounted a conversation between Aspasia, Xenophon, and Xenophon's wife. "If your neighbor had gold that was purer than yours," Aspasia asked Xenophon's wife, "would you rather have her gold or yours?" "Hers," was the reply. "And if she had richer jewels and finer clothes?" "I would rather have hers." "And if she had a better husband than yours?" At the woman's embarrassed silence, Aspasia began to question the husband, asking him the same things but substituting horses for gold and land for clothes and asking him finally if he would prefer his neighbor's wife if she were better than his own. At his embarrassed silence, reading their thoughts, she said, "Each of you would like the best husband or wife: and since neither of the two of you has achieved perfection, each of you will always regret this ideal."⁴

Leaving aside the "maieutic" ability attributed to her by the dialogue, it is evident that Aspasia had an idea of marriage that was quite different from the Athenians' Marriage for her was an encounter between two equals, each of whom should adapt to the needs of the other.⁵ Socrates admired her ideas and wisdom to the point that, when he was once asked, "If a man has a good wife, is it he who made her that way?" he deferred to Aspasia, who knew much more than he did on the subject (Xen. *Oec.* 3.14–15).

It is not surprising that many Athenians hated Aspasia. She was

not like other women; she was an intellectual. Four of Socrates' pupils mention her in their works: Aeschines, Antisthenes, Xenophon, and Plato. In the *Menexenus*, Plato has Socrates refer to a funeral speech that Aspasia composed for the dead of the Corinthian war (however, both Aspasia and Socrates were dead by the time that war began).⁶ Aspasia's ideas on the female role and relations between the sexes were simply not acceptable to the Athenians, and it is no wonder that they slandered her, saying that she was a hetaera or that she encouraged Pericles' sexual escapades by arranging meetings for him with boys and girls.⁷ Even if the Athenians' hatred of Aspasia, which culminated in an accusation of "impiety," was really aimed at Pericles (as were the attacks on his close friends the philosopher Anaxagoras and the sculptor Phidias), it still cannot be ruled out that the personality and unpopular ideas of this exceptional woman contributed to this hatred.⁸

Socrates shared Aspasia's ideas on the "female question." Though he never professed total equality between the sexes, Socrates was anything but a misogynist like most of his contemporaries. But what about the others?

The Virtues of Women

Although he echoed certain Socratic themes and thus admitted that nature had granted women "memory and attention" as it had men, Xenophon restated with utter certitude the notion that women are "naturally" destined for domestic work even though Zeus had given the sexes an equal capacity for mastering the passions. This idea is illustrated in the famous conversation in *Oeconomicus*, in which Ischomachos tells Socrates how he has educated his fourteen-year-old wife to be the way he wanted her to be and the way that it was right for her to be.⁹ "What can I do to help you? What is my capacity?" his wife had asked him. "By Zeus," Ischomachos answered, "just try to do in the best manner possible what the gods have brought you forth to be capable of and what the law praises." Since in the family both inside and outside work are needed, "the god directly prepared the woman's nature for indoor work and indoor concerns," and men's for outdoor concerns. He gave women a weaker body and more tenderness for infants than men. Accord-

ingly, the woman's duty was, besides reproduction, to control the management of the house and to take care of sick slaves.³²

Xenophon, then, contains nothing new despite his admission that women share certain abilities with men. Other direct and indirect followers of Socrates continued the teaching of the master, however, carrying it to very different consequences and contributing substantially to making public opinion (solidly oriented toward the traditional) confront new ideas. One of these was Antisthenes, the founder of the Cynic school, who was born and lived in Athens around the turn of the fourth century B.C. For him, men and women had "the same virtues."³³ Cynics did not avoid attempts to put these principles into practice. Believing that men and women should fulfill themselves equally by means of the exercise of their common virtues, the Cynics questioned the centrality of the conjugal relationship and preached sexual liberty as capable of freeing people from the bonds of matrimony. One exponent was Diogenes, a pupil of Antisthenes at Athens, who proposed a community of women.³⁴ They questioned the idea of female inferiority and formed "alternative" relationships that shocked the Greeks. For example, Crates of Thebes, with his disciple Hipparchia, spent his life traveling, including her in all his experiences and begging with her (according to the teaching of the Cynic school) at the banquets that she attended as though she were a hetaera (Diog. Laert. 6.85 ff.). They shared a relationship altogether outside the rules. Hipparchia, for her part, did not regret her choice: "You don't think that I have arranged my life so badly, do you," she asked a critic, "if I have used the time I would have wasted on weaving for my education?" (6.98). And like Hipparchia, Crates reconfirmed their common choice, giving their daughter for a month to each of his disciples so that she might be free to choose a good companion (6.93).

Other schools besides the Cynics believed in the equality of women. Epicurus, born on Samos in 340 B.C., moved to Athens in 309 and accepted Themistia as a pupil (Diog. Laert. 10.5, 25, 26). Pythagoras, who moved to Magna Graecia around 530, founded a school attended by such important women as Theano. Pythagoreans even posed the problem of the political capacity of women.

maintaining their suitability for governing (Stob. 85.19). There is no need to point out how much in contrast this position was not only with normal practice but also with the opinions of other sages. According to Phintys, for example, women had some virtues equal to those of men (courage, justice, and reflection), but they had the capacity neither to wage war nor to govern, although they did have the specific virtue of knowing how to manage a house and take care of a husband (Stob. 84.71). Theophrastus (the peripatetic philosopher whose opinions coincided on this point with the Aristotelian) believed it was necessary that a woman know not "how to administer a city but rather run a household" (Stob. 85.7). He also maintained, even more drastically, that the education of women was necessary, on condition that it be limited to "what it is necessary to know to run a household; further instruction would just make them lazy, more talkative, and indiscreet" (Stob. 16.30).

But nothing is more edifying than a story told by Plutarch (*Moralia, De mulierum virtutibus* 19) about one of the few men who believed that women could have the same virtues as men. Aristophila of Cyrene, who freed the city from the tyrant Nicocrates (we shall return to cases of women who led armies in the Hellenistic period). After the victory her fellow citizens invited her to take a role in government, but Aretaphila, "when the city was liberated, retired to her 'gynaeceum' and, refusing all indiscreet activities, spent the rest of her life weaving." This is a perfect example of how women, even though able to behave like men, did so only in case of need and returned afterward to their habitual duties, sacrificing their personal abilities to the harmony of the whole.

As we have seen, there was an alternate tradition of "advanced" thought, which, although it confirmed women's essential domestic role, was not characterized by the misogyny of the major tradition that lasted for the entire history of the polis and found ample acceptance in the popular social conscience. Influenced by the teaching of Socrates, some thinkers took their discourse on women far beyond the Socratic point of view. The foremost of these was Plato, whose position on the "female question" has been the subject of heated debate, more than justified by his many ambiguities and contradictions.

The man "who lived well his assigned time," we read in the *Timaeus*,

after he travels back into the habitation of his guardian star, will have a happy and congenial life; but the man who fails in this, will change in his second life into a woman. And if in this condition he continually does not cease from evildoing, he will change into the beast who most resembles the character of his evil. . . . (42 b-c)¹⁷

More precisely: "Of the men who came into the world, those who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation" (90 e), according to the plan of "those who made us," who "knew that from men would be born women and other animals" (76 e).

Certainly, the assertion in the *Republic* of women's capacity to govern had revolutionary potential, as did the abolition of the family and property. But while the Platonic plan freed women from the state, in making women equal to men Plato eliminated the difference, claiming, as Wilamowitz wrote, "that they were men, for him imperfect men."¹⁸

As a theorist of the superiority of the relationship between men over that between a man and a woman (as we shall see in chapter 6),¹⁹ Plato granted women, in the *Republic*, a certain freedom of action, aimed at the single purpose of rationalizing his political plan. He expressed in the most radical way the certainty of female inferiority, an idea later to be theorized without further ambiguity and contradictions, by the man who definitively locked women in the circle of their "natural difference"—Aristotle.²⁰

Aristotle: Woman-Matter

Addressing himself to an already much-debated theme, Aristotle explained the female contribution to reproduction. When the embryo is formed, he said, next to the sperm flows the menstrual blood, but the role of these two elements is different. The sperm is blood, like the menses, but more complex. Food that is not expelled from the organism is converted into blood, and the converting agent is heat. But the woman, less "warm" than the man, cannot complete the final conversion, which produces sperm. It is the male

Plato: Feminist?

Plato, in fact, departs from positions that could seem and that have been called "feminist."²¹ In the *Republic*, envisaging an ideal state, he entrusted the power to a group of "guardians" of the constitution, abolishing the family and private property. The family should not exist because it is there that wealth is accumulated and if the guards had wealth as well as power, they would become "savage masters" (3.416 a-417 b). And "the wives of our guardians are to be common, and their children are to be common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent" (5.457 d). The female element of the city, liberated from the family role, must then be incorporated into the community to work together with the men at the management of the political project. Educated with men, after having learned music and gymnastics (as at Crete and Sparta), women must be used exactly like men; they must fulfill identical duties; they can be doctors or "lovers of knowledge," and, like men, they can be guardians. This, then, is Plato's feminism—granting women the same opportunities granted to men in his utopia.²²

Even more problems emerge from the ideology of the *Laws*. Plato proposes a different political model there, still in part collectivistic, but more practicable, that is, less irreconcilably in contrast with the political and social reality of the time. The city of the *Laws* is divided into 5,040 family groups, each assigned a parcel of land (*kleros*) (5.739 c-741 a). In his discussion of the family, female subordination reappears. In marriage (which all citizens are obliged to contract and to dissolve in case of ten years of sterility), the woman must be under the control of the husband.²³ But family control is not enough; it must be backed up by that of the state.

"By nature more inclined toward hiding and craftiness," women can be a devious element. They can cause the social fabric to break down, as at Sparta, says Plato, where, freed from their family functions and economically powerful, they threatened the solidity of the state.²⁴ The "difference" (which in the *Republic* was at least partly due to education) returns as an excuse for discrimination and as a justification of a subordination that becomes explicit inferiority in Plato's dialogues.

seed that in reproduction comes from a female to produce a new being, the seed in other words, has an active role while the female blood has a passive role. Through indispensable, the female contribution is one of matter, with which woman is identified. And the contribution of the woman-matter is passive by nature, while the male contribution, man being form and spirit, is active and creative. In essence the male in reproduction, "converts" female matter with his sperm."

Passivity in reproduction is one of the factors that Aristotle uses to justify the social and legal inferiority of women. The *oikos* (a central element of the Aristotelian political plan) is arranged around a head: "Although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female." "Only this head has the right to participate in the management of the *polis*, and to him too falls command over his wife, slaves, and children, "for the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature." The difference of the subordinates having been established, the relationships of subordination within the family are different too. The husband-wife relationship is characterized by the fact that the man has "over his wife a constitutional rule." Although constitutional authority (that of the *politikos*) involves an alternation of command among the citizens, in the man-woman relationship, there is no alternation: "The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind."

And so we come to the virtues of women, the qualities that allow them best to correspond to the "natural" model. "Silence is a woman's glory," says Aristotle, citing a well-known line of Sophocles, and thus he reconfirms the usual female model." Endowed with a smaller and imperfect reason, incapable of controlling her "lustful" side, the woman, who has no will, must be controlled by either the husband or the state. He uses Sparta as an example:

The licence of the Lacedaemonian women defeats the intention of the Spartan constitution, and is adverse to the good order of the state. For a husband and a wife, being each a part of every family, the state may be considered as about equally divided into men and women; and

therefore in this state, in which the constitution of women is bad, half the city may be regarded as having no laws. And this is what has actually happened at Sparta: the legislator wanted to make the whole state hardy and temperate, and he has earned out his intention in the case of the men, but he has neglected the women, who live in every sort of intemperance and luxury.

Shut up in the circle of her "materiality," the woman had only negative power: although she guarantees the reproduction of the citizens, she is excluded from the *logos* and if uncontrolled she is dangerous.

Conclusions

We have traced the different traditions in Greek thought regarding the "female question." One trend, departing from the notion that women are radically different—already present in myth—leads to the Aristotelian theory of mother-matter. The other trend, beginning with Socrates, sees women, as, if not truly equal, at least not inferior to men, and believes it possible for women even to achieve personal and intellectual fulfillment not tied exclusively to motherhood.

As reflections of the actual social conscience, the Socratic approach was clearly the minority opinion. For all his teaching, including that on women, Socrates represented to the Athenians an intolerable element of subversion. It is not remarkable that Aristophanes in the *Clouds* (423 B.C.) chose him as the butt of irony, representing Socrates ridiculously installed in his *phrontisterion*, suspended in a basket and intent on measuring the leap of fleas. No one was more dangerous than Socrates as a bringer of new ideas, which Aristophanes—and many other Athenians—blamed for the decline of the *polis*.

Socrates' condemnation in 399 for "impiety" (*graphe asebeias*) of having "speculated about the heaven above, and searched into the earth beneath, and made the worse appear the better cause," and especially of being "a doer of evil who corrupts the youth; and who does not believe in the gods of the State, but has other new divinities of his own,"³² was, then, a political sentence. It was Athens' response to subversive teaching as an element of corruption and

disintegration of traditional values. They did not condemn him only for what he believed on the subject of women, but perhaps also in part for that too. Even his ideas on women endangered the city.

Did the majority of Athenians share what some have termed the popular morality?²⁴ Obviously, Athenian public opinion has not come down to us directly. We have no documents that tell us what the "average citizen" thought about women. But sources do exist that permit reconstruction of public opinions: the works of the playwrights, poets, or orators whose ideas and views were presented in public forums. The problems of trying to use literature this way are so well known as to make long discussion superfluous.²⁵ How can one distinguish the opinion of the author from the many contrasting opinions of his characters? Once his opinion has been identified (assuming that is possible)—or at least once the opinion presumably nearest that of the author has been identified, how can one know if it corresponds to popular opinion or if it expresses "advanced" positions that most of the public would not share?

The problem is anything but simple, but we will attempt in the next chapter to discern the attitudes toward women in drama and poetry and the attitudes of the audiences for whom plays and poems were produced.

Five

Women and Literature

Women in Classical Literature

The literature of the classical period, which begins with the tragedies of Aeschylus, gave its public important female characters, images of women of strong character and proud temperament capable of heroic and terrible deeds, women like Antigone and Medea. But the tragedians' attitude toward their heroines and toward the female sex in general has been and continues to be the subject of debate.

THE TRAGEDIES

For some Hellenists, tragedy, and for that matter all the rest of classical literature, reflects a profound disparagement of women mixed with an invincible fear of their negative power. For others (who believe that women enjoyed an elevated social position), such characters as Aeschylus' Clytemnestra or Sophocles' Antigone and Deianeira demonstrate the Greeks' admiration for the female sex.¹ Still others (some of them women) maintain that we should make a sharp distinction between Aeschylus and Sophocles on the one hand, and Euripides on the other. The infamous acts of many Euripidean heroines, says S. B. Pomeroy (who notes in partial support of her position that British suffragists used to recite ex-