

# Interpretation

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*Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***

Department of Political Science

Baylor University

1 Bear Place, 97276

Waco, TX 76798

*email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

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ELIZABETH C' DE BACA EASTMAN  
LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA  
*e.eastman@verizon.net*

“For a city that is going to be governed on a high level, women must be in common, children and their entire education must be in common, and similarly the practices in war and peace must be in common, and their kings must be those among them who have proved best in philosophy and with respect to war” (543a). Socrates proclaims this to Glaucon at the beginning of Book VIII of the *Republic*, referring to topics discussed in the section commonly referred to as the “three Waves.” Though Socrates predicts waves of laughter at these startling suggestions, the consequences of these positions and their place in the dialogue are central to the discussion in *The Woman Question in Plato's "Republic"* by Mary Townsend.

The action of the dialogue begins when Socrates turns to greet others as he returns from the Piraeus where he said a prayer to the goddess and witnessed the celebration of the Thracian goddess Bendis. The provocative assertion about women and children quoted above comes in response to questions posed by those who entreat Socrates to stay for a further honoring of the goddess. Their conversation turns to justice. They seek a definition and judgment of the merits by examining justice in both the individual and the city and exploring many other wide-ranging topics such as education, virtue, the soul, and philosophy.

Townsend's book, as the title indicates, addresses in particular those parts that speak to the woman question in one of Plato's lengthiest dialogues. The book is composed of an introduction, nine chapters, and an epilogue. The author launches her inquiry with the initial task “to uncover and take

seriously the action of the First Wave (the radical change in the roles of women, children, and men)” (1) by explaining the content of the dialogue before and after the three Waves in Book V. The subsequent six chapters further explore the three Waves by focusing on specific topics including Glaucon’s *aporia*, *thumos* and *eros* in the hunt (one of the activities of the guardians), taming the hunting women, women and men exercising together, the political problem resulting from women in a private setting, and robes of virtue that clothe the women exercising naked. She devotes the last two chapters to the larger theme in Plato’s writing, the philosopher-king, and her critical assessment of the *Republic* in a chapter entitled “Woman Is a Political Animal.”

Townsend presents a stimulating reading of the *Republic*, with references to other Platonic dialogues that offer insight into the woman question as well as a wide array of secondary literature and authors in literature and philosophy. A prime example of Townsend’s careful reading is her reinterpretation of the three Waves, which is also a crucial part of her argument.

Socrates refers to “waves” in Book V when Polemarchus asks him to explain more fully the participation of women and children in the second city in speech, the city with a fever. Socrates expresses concern about waves of paradox or laughter when discussing these proposals. The content of the three Waves consists of the following: 1) the claim that some women are fit by nature to share in the same education and duties as male guardians, including stripping naked for exercise, though Socrates explains they will be clothed in virtue; 2) the claim, similar to the requirement that male guardians have no private property, use common messes, and live as soldiers, that women and children will also live in common, neither child nor parent will know one another, and women will join men in war; and 3) the claim that unless philosophers rule as kings or rulers study philosophy, that is, unless political power and philosophy come together, there will be no respite from evil. Most group the First and Second Waves together owing to their similar content, but Townsend proposes that the First and Third should be grouped together and that the Second is the outlier.

Townsend argues that bringing women into the public and political realm as Socrates does in the First Wave is similar to the role that he calls on philosophers to perform in the Third Wave. She identifies parallels between the women and philosophers: each may be dishonored by the city, each may be compelled to change their customary state, and each may be met with laughter (14). Further evidence of the link between the First and Third Waves is apparent in Socrates’s discussion of philosophy in Books II–IV, and the

second, more comprehensive discussion in Books V–VII. The entrée to this more extensive discussion, Townsend explains, is provided by the content of the First Wave, in part owing to the similarity of the problematic nature of women or philosophers ruling, the attractiveness of the proposition, and whether either desires to rule or remain outside of the public realm (14, 17, 18). To make the case that this is what Socrates is pursuing, she tailors her subsequent chapters to advance the argument, with special attention to the arguments that underscore the link between philosophy and women.

One of the primary links is that of the hunt: “Socrates recommends the practice of philosophy, imagined as a hunt, as the path to the love of wisdom where the goal may or may not be achieved” (61). The hunt was among the guardians’ tasks, which women would join. Townsend’s discussion in chapter 4 centers on the taming of the hunting women. She notes that women were intemperate, even more lustful than men, according to “common Greek report” (67–68). She suggests further that “women’s over-wild passions make them only dubiously tamable as citizens” and refers back to Socrates’s first city in speech (the city of utmost necessity) in Book II, from which, she claims, “women are absent” (68). Townsend asserts more than once that women are absent in the first city (2–3, 68, 74, 109), but that is inaccurate.

In Book II, Socrates proposes investigating justice in the city before turning to the individual. With the recognition that no one is self-sufficient, cities are formed to meet basic needs. In the first city, the essential minimum is “four or five men” (369d) but as needs increase, the city grows to include farmers, craftsmen, merchants, retailers, and wage earners. While no specific reference is made to women, their presence can be inferred by remarks about feasting together, bearing no more children than their means allow, and bequeathing a life to their offspring similar to theirs that is marked by living at peace, in good health, and dying at a ripe age (372a, d). Townsend asks in the introduction, “why aren’t women everywhere and present from the beginning?” (2), yet women are present in the first city, albeit in a private capacity. Contrary to Townsend’s assertion that women are wild in the private setting, Socrates’s description of the life bequeathed to the offspring suggests that the harmony in the first city is in both the public and private realms.

Socrates introduces a prominent theme in the first city that provides insight into the role of women in a private setting, that of “one man, one art” (370b). It is based upon the principle that differences in nature make one better suited to a single task or profession. Far from the first city being “comically limited” (74), as Townsend suggests, or women’s alleged absence constituting

“another humorous deficiency” (75), this important principle in the *Republic* of “one man, one art” is established and applied consistently in the first city. This is seen in women bearing and raising children at home as well as in the fact that all of the other professions are assigned to men in accordance with their nature. The principle also appears in several later discussions, including the one linking it to the parts of the soul (586e) and the one defining justice as having and doing one’s own and not meddling (433–435b). The city that Socrates also refers to as true and healthy (372e) is not as easily dismissed as Townsend suggests.

Another instance where women are described in a private setting is in Book VIII, where Socrates points to the actions of women in the timocratic and oligarchic cities as contributing to the regime’s downfall (549d, 550d). Socrates has come full circle. Women are in a private capacity and are as moderate as the men in the healthy city, but they contribute, along with the men, to the decline in the bad cities. In Townsend’s efforts to persuade that the private is not desirable, she links the philosopher, the housewife, and the tyrant. Whereas one pities the plight of philosophy in isolation, she writes, “it is also the isolation the tyrant and the housewife possess, where alone in solitude, the tyrant finds it easier to give reign to his worst desires. . . . It is the paradox that even being kept within the walls of a house, one’s privacy can take on this wild quality.” Further: “The souls of women are left disordered, without the tempering effects of justice in the soul” (113–14). Socrates’s “one man, one art” proposal in the first city counters Townsend’s argument: “That rule we set down at the beginning as to what must be done in everything when we were founding our city—this, or a certain form of it, is, in my opinion, justice. Surely we set down and often said, if you remember, that each one must practice one of the functions in the city, that one for which his nature made him naturally most fit” (433a). This does not apply only to men. Socrates asks Glaucon, “Or is the city done the most good by the fact that—in the case of child, woman, slave, freeman, craftsman, ruler and ruled—each one minded his own business and wasn’t a busybody?” (433d). This exchange is part of a larger discussion about virtue in Book IV in the presentation of the second city, the city with a fever, but it refers back to the principle presented in the first city. The political problem of women being “unregulated by the city” (110) that Townsend argues is present owing to their private life is thus addressed by Socrates. He presents an alternative solution to the political problem by looking back to the first city.

Townsend does offer an explanation of how the wildness of women is tamed and their activity redirected toward the public good by arguing that the virtue that will clothe the women who exercise naked “will be Socratic in nature” (140). The link that she established between the First and Third Waves or between women and philosophy comes to fruition at this point: “Socrates’ robes of virtue wrap women’s concerns up into Socratic ones” (143). To respond to the challenge that only a few will take up philosophy, Townsend explains that the *Republic* invites all readers to participate. She praises Socrates, whose heavenly polity offers “hope and promise for individual human women to follow its laws and no other” (149). She also praises Plato’s *Republic* more broadly, as “one of the profound liberators of human women our reading selves have ever seen because it proposes to liberate all human beings by means of justice in the soul” (149). Townsend’s book encourages the reader to reexamine Plato’s *Republic* in light of her arguments.