

# Interpretation

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Charlotte Thomas sets out in *The Female Drama* to make the case that “the real power and relevance of the *Republic*...is always psychological” (274). The preliminary challenge of the dialogue Socrates recounts in the *Republic* is to persuade Glaucon that justice is truly good for the individual and worthy of any necessary sacrifice to ensure that he rejects the siren call of Thrasymachean justice, the argument that justice is only a word that the strong and ambitious use to manipulate and rule the weak for their own advantage. What matters in Thrasymachus’s worldview is power. Ultimately, Thomas contends, Socrates seeks to persuade Glaucon that it is knowledge of the idea of the good, external to the individual, that should serve as a standard for justice and the best life for the city and the individual. Thomas argues that when Socrates asks Glaucon to permit him to investigate justice in the city, the larger entity, first, and, then, find it by analogy in the smaller unit of the soul, Socrates very logically begins by addressing the male drama most pressing to the politically ambitious Glaucon and his companions in the *Republic*. The male drama is the political drama, the one in which the standard for justice is the proper ordering of the factions and classes that usually contend for power in any city, with the calculative rational element leading the spirited to rule the appetitive part of the city (33–40). In Book IV of the *Republic*, Socrates turns to draw the promised analogy to the soul to demonstrate that the moral efficiency and harmony of the just city has its parallel in the internal psychology of the individual when there is a harmony of the parts of the soul with logos or reason, which Thomas identifies as calculation, harnessing spiritedness to channel and manage appetite or desire in

each individual. This story is familiar to students of the *Republic*. Thomas's argument is, however, that the male drama, the political case for justice in the city and the soul, is preliminary, and fails to explain the real power and relevance of Socrates's argument for the good of justice, which occurs chiefly on the psychological level of the account, and of which Socrates hopes to persuade Glaucon, if not the other interlocutors. The narrative of the male drama of Books II–IV is sufficient, Thomas argues, for explaining the nature of justice for the city and the soul, but “it was insufficient for an inquiry into the nature of the best life for an individual (philosophy) or the ideal constitution (philosophic rule)” (188). The only truly good and hence fully just political arrangement for a city is the one that is governed by philosophers, who have the capacity to generate, nurture, and educate the philosophic soul, and hence perpetuate the good city. The city/soul model could in theory produce harmony or justice internal to the city and the soul but, Thomas argues, it could not train and educate the individuals who could “generate ideas external to oneself,” and thus be in a position to give an explanation of “the ideal constitution.” In other words, the just city in speech of Books II–IV does not generate and nurture the philosophers who have knowledge of the good and so could give an account of what makes the just city good and worthy of perpetuation (188).

In Books V–VII, Thomas contends, we move from the male or political drama to the female drama. It is the female drama, she argues, because in Book V, Socrates is compelled to address the way in which women and children will be incorporated into the just city, but chiefly because this introduction addresses “potentiality” (211), the genesis or creation of the just soul, how the just soul will come into being. The generative quality of the psychological level of the dialogue that the female drama represents is particularly important if the conditions necessary for the just city turn out to be unachievable. The proposals of Book V are often referred to as the three waves because Socrates contends each proposal would be met by a wave of laughter or resistance, each greater than the last, which would threaten to drown or destroy the proposal and hence to destroy the possibility of the just city in speech. The three waves are the necessary (waves 1 and 2) and sufficient (wave 3) conditions for producing this perfectly good and just city or soul. The three proposals address the characteristics in human nature that pose challenges to the achievement of the perfectly just city in speech. Thomas explains that the first wave suggests that if *logos* or reason cannot persuade the city that men and women should be equal and perform the same roles in the city, then the city will be unable to transcend the conventional morality

that imposes differences between women and men and manages erotic longing. The second wave proposes the improbable complete elimination of the private interests that cause faction and discord, in order to establish perfect unanimity with regard to the choices and priorities among the parts of the city. And when Glaucon, having agreed to the conditions of waves 1 and 2, demands that Socrates explain how this city can come into being, Socrates admits in the third proposal, or wave, that the only means for putting the just city into practice is through the unlikely rule of philosophers as kings. Only the philosophers could know and then rule with a view to the external idea of what is just and good for human beings. Thomas thus shows us that Socrates lets Glaucon down gently by offering the female drama as an alternative to perfect political justice. The female drama, as Thomas explains it, is ultimately the psychological story of the potentiality and becoming of the individual philosophic soul. It is the explanation on the level of the psychological that is necessary to explain to Glaucon that the good life, the truly just life he seeks, *is* available to him, if not as a ruler in the just city, then internally, as an individual, through philosophic training and education. Thus, it is not a matter of mere convenience that leads Socrates to introduce the model of the just city as a foundation for understanding the proper order of the just soul. Instead, Socrates intentionally builds the argument from the city to the individual to demonstrate the relationship between the male and the female drama. Thomas identifies the proposals of Books V–VII as the female drama because they show us that the just city can exist only when it dedicates every facet of its becoming and its being entirely to the genesis, training, and education of the philosophers whose reason will rule the passions of their own souls and regulate the appetites and spiritedness of the city in order to perpetuate it as a good regime in light of what is good *per se*.

In part 4, Thomas turns to describe why the education of the philosopher is central to the success of the project of the *Republic*. At the beginning of the dialogue, both Glaucon and Adeimantus believe that if they understand what justice is, they will be qualified to lead a good life and rule the city well. Thomas explains that Socrates articulates the images of the Sun, Divided Line, and Cave to show his interlocutors that there is a higher knowledge of the good itself, attainable through philosophic education, the ascent from imagination to belief, hypothesis, or theory, and finally to intelligibility, or what she calls “noetic insight,” that informs our standards for justice. And this education, Thomas argues, essentially requires the ascent from the conventional or political male drama through the three waves of the female drama, towards knowledge of truth and virtue. Theoretically, it is still the

case that this education must also inculcate a responsible condescension, the willingness to apply the highest understanding of the good achieved by the hypothetical philosopher kings to political rule of the just city. Given the improbability of such a perfectly just city ruled by the wise philosopher kings, however, Thomas concludes that the teaching might instead point us towards the possibility of the sort of philosophic friendship that summons, on the psychological level, those with philosophic potential to reach for knowledge and truth beyond the conventional teachings of any particular city or cave.

Thomas concludes her account of the power of the female drama with two arguments, one of contemporary relevance and one more permanent. The contemporary argument addresses the relevance of Socrates's psychological argument to the political. The truth is that we are more often than not left to contend in political life against the threatened tyranny of the one, the few, and even the many. Thomas suggests that in the absence of a regime governed by the philosophic nature—a highly unlikely prospect—Socrates might be pointing towards the possibility that the best political order is one that privileges the liberty of the individual, which gives those so inclined and educated sufficient space to pursue wisdom privately. Thomas explicitly identifies this option as libertarian. And it is certainly worth speculating whether in the predictable absence of the perfectly good and just political order, one that would recognize and allow wise human beings to rule, Socrates might have settled for the political order that allows the greatest degree of individual freedom of thought and study. In fact, when Socrates introduces democracy in Book VIII of the *Republic*, he concedes that it would be the “fairest” of the regimes; like “a many-colored cloak decorated in all hues,” it would contain all the different kinds of human dispositions (557c–d, Bloom translation). Perhaps such a regime would permit the philosopher to think freely and pursue wisdom. Of course, Athens did not ultimately allow Socrates such freedom. So, perhaps the life of the philosopher will always be most akin to Socrates's image in Book VI (496d–e), that is, the account of the small group of human beings who seek a place where they can lead quiet, just lives in pursuit of wisdom, away from the noise of politics and the city. This image is consistent with Thomas's final reflection that, in the end and regardless of the regime or the times, the *Republic* teaches its students the psychological lesson about how to follow a path that engages with philosophy, so that they can pursue the truest individual freedom and access the full diversity of ideas and knowledge available to human beings.

Let me conclude by saying what a pleasure it is to read Thomas's account of the *Republic*. Reading *The Female Drama* is like taking a small seminar course with the best of teachers, one who has thought through and taught the *Republic* repeatedly for years, as Charlotte Thomas has undoubtedly done. Her study works through the *Republic* in a way that is both familiar and challenging—a way that invites discussion, probably some disagreement about the details and arguments, but one that most of all aims to engage her readers in a conversation about the possibility of a philosophic life.

