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Citizens But Second Class: Women in Aristotle's *Politics* (384–322 B.C.E.)

Edith Hall

Since then household governance falls into three parts – the first, the relation of master to slave (which has been discussed already), the second, the paternal relationship, and the third, the marital relationship – a man also rules his wife and children, both categories as free persons, but not with the same form of rule. He rules his wife as a citizen and his children as a monarch, because the male is by nature better suited to leadership than the female, unless the union is somehow contrary to nature, and the more senior and developed person is more suited to leadership than the younger and immature. Although in most constitutions with citizenship the roles of ruler and ruled shift from one person to another, and they are considered equal by nature and not to differ from one another at all, nevertheless, at the time when one is ruling over the other, they endeavour to create a distinction by means of regalia and titles and honours, just as Amasis described it in his speech about the basin used for washing feet: the male always holds this position in relation to the female. But the rule of a man over his children is that of a king, because the male parent is ruler on the grounds of both affection and seniority, and that is the monarchical type of government [...]

And of this we straightway find an indication in connection with the soul; for the soul by nature contains a part that rules and a part that is ruled, to which we assign different virtues, that is, the virtue of the rational and that of the irrational. It is clear then that the case is the same also with the other instances of ruler and ruled. Hence there are by nature various classes of rulers and ruled. For the free rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in a different way. And all possess the various parts of the soul, but possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an undeveloped form.¹

Aristotle prescribes that men should rule women because the male is 'by nature better suited to leadership than the female', and because men hold seniority over women and are 'more developed'. Male rule over women is founded in nature and any subversions of this natural hierarchy deviate from nature. The requirement for men to rule women is reflected in the constituent parts of the soul and how they differ in men and women: men are naturally superior to women in their capacity for deliberation.

No passage in ancient Greek or Roman literature has exerted more influence on subsequent justifications of patriarchy. Its impact can be traced from the Church Fathers and Thomas Aquinas to Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Yet Aristotle's argument is more complex than my summary implies. In recommending that men's rule over women should be like a magistrate's rule over a city-state, rather than a king's rule over his subjects, or a master's over his slaves, he indicates that the male–female relationship is *less unequal* than the father–child relationship or the master–slave relationship. Women should be like citizens of city-states in some respects, but they are to be excluded permanently from ruling magistracies and from executive power. This lesser inequality rests on another distinction: women are distinguished from children and slaves in that they have *some* capacity for deliberation, even if it lacks authority.

The remainder of this essay consists of three sections. The first offers a brief account of Aristotle's life and times and how this may have informed his political theorization of the position of women. The second locates the excerpt in the context of the preceding argument of Aristotle's *Politics*. The third explicates the excerpt, including the reference to Amasis, and its fit with other Aristotelian discussions of male–female relationships.

The passage is extracted from the first of the eight books of the *Politics* of Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Aristotle studied under Plato at the Academy in Athens, where he will have discussed the place of women in society. He was appointed tutor to Alexander, later known as 'the Great'. Once Alexander had succeeded to the throne and embarked on his conquest of the Persian Empire, Aristotle moved back to Athens in 335 BCE. It was then that he probably completed most of his treatises, including the *Politics*, which is intended to guide statesmen, reflecting the elite circle in which he moved.

Aristotle's life experiences influenced his political thought. Since even free women in all ancient Greek city-states were excluded from most dimensions of political life, it is unremarkable that Aristotle regards women as incapable of most public activities in which he expects free men to engage. He criticizes, while borrowing extensively, Plato's *Republic*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*. Although, in

his *Republic*, Plato had discussed many topics explored in Aristotle's *Politics*, the latter is the first extant treatise entirely devoted to political philosophy. Plato, for example, had envisaged the possibility that in a hypothetical ideal republic of the future there could be women among the enlightened oligarchy, or 'guardians', trained on account of their philosophical ability to participate as equal members of a full-time ruling class. But Aristotle's *Politics* systematically defines an achievable contemporary household, shared by men and women, and justifies the hierarchical relationship between them.

Politics Book I first explains political philosophy as the study of the sovereign city-state (*polis*), which Aristotle defines as a community, or partnership. Citizens pursue, in partnership, a common good, or end (*telos*), which is virtue and happiness on both an individual and a collective level. Aristotle then addresses (in order to refute) the popular view that political rule is identical to any other kind of rule – whether of kings over their subjects, men over women and children, or masters over slaves. To show how each type of rule differs, he describes the evolution of city-states from two fundamental partnerships 'between people who can't exist without one another' (27). He identifies these two partnerships as (1) those of men and women, indispensable for human reproduction, which is an imperative because people like to leave behind them someone else like themselves; and (2) those of 'natural ruler' and 'naturally ruled' (i.e. masters and slaves), indispensable for human survival. These two partnerships join to form a household, the purpose of which is to meet the practical needs of life (food, shelter, etc.). Families then join other families to create villages, and eventually villages fuse with other villages to form a city-state. The city-state reaches a greater level of self-sufficiency than is possible in a village. Although it originally evolves because it is easier to create conditions supportive of life in a partnership of several villages than in a single village, it achieves something new: the goal of merely living is replaced by the goal of 'living well'. This does not mean living comfortably or pleasurably, but in accordance with virtue in order to achieve the chief end of humans, which Aristotle sees as happiness and becoming the best possible human. Politics is inseparable from ethics because a well-run city-state is one which enables its citizens to lead good lives.

Aristotle has already stated that the political community, the city-state, has a certain priority over either the household or the individual. Since it ultimately derives from familial partnerships, which depend on natural instincts, it is a *natural* organism rather than a man-made cultural artefact. So man is 'by nature

a political animal' (28). He has offered the analogy of the physical body and its several parts. If a body is destroyed, then each of its parts, including its limbs, is destroyed. No limb can survive without being connected to a functioning body, just as no individual can survive if unattached to any city-state (29). In the establishment of male–female and master–slave partnerships among human beings, nature was aiming at the formation of city-states, the optimal contexts for all humans (who have certain qualities which set them apart from other animals) to achieve perfection. These qualities include speech, reason, and the ability to distinguish good from bad, and just from unjust. Humans pass laws to ensure that justice is upheld and to support the pursuit of virtue, which is more important than the pursuit of wealth or security.

Aristotle has proceeded to defend the naturalness and justice of slavery, which (at least in some circumstances) he regards as mutually beneficial to master and slave. Aristotle views those who are suited by nature to slavery as under-endowed in the capacity to reason, and therefore only able to flourish if humans with superior reason tell them what to do. Such people, he says, are suited to labour, or 'animate tools'.² Since slaves were household possessions, Aristotle then moves to a discussion of the management of the household, the *oikos*, where the production and processing of victuals and textiles took place (the words for 'household' and 'management' combined to produce the term *oikonomika* or *economics*). Economics is discussed in tandem with business activities, and Aristotle argues that the pursuit of 'the good life' is more important than making money.

Aristotle now addresses the governance of women and children. The three relationships which constitute the household are the master–slave relationship, the paternal relationship and the marital relationship. (Aristotle assumes that his reader is a free male householder and excludes from consideration the other three relationships which we know, from other ancient sources, were fundamental to households' happiness: those between women and children, women and slaves, and children and slaves.³) He declares a qualitative difference between a man's rule over his family members and his slaves, since wives and offspring are free. But there is also a difference between the way a man rules his wife and his children – as the opening excerpt shows.

Aristotle envisages a situation in which a female is better suited to leadership than a male, but only to dismiss this situation as 'contrary to nature'. He might have cited the matriarchal tribeswomen of myth, the 'unnatural' Amazons, who were believed eventually to have been raped or seduced into submission and to have settled down into 'natural' patriarchal relationships. But Aristotle knows

that in all periods of Greek history there were successful female leaders, such as Queen Artemisia of Caria, an admiral in the Persian King Xerxes' fleet.⁴ In the next book of the *Politics* he criticizes the Spartans for allowing their womenfolk excessive power and freedom (85–8). He here simply pre-empts any counter-argument, which might cite examples of effective female leaders.

In the sentences omitted from the excerpt, Aristotle argues that although slaves, women and children can participate to an extent in virtues such as courage, temperance and justice, since they have some limited capacity for reason, they do so in a different way from men. Where the excerpt restarts, Aristotle proposes the real distinction between the ruling householder and other household members: he alone possesses a *fully developed* rational faculty. It consists of the ability to deliberate and come to reasoned decisions about action. The word for deliberation, *bouleuesthai*, derives from the same root as the Greek word for the civic Council (*boule*), whose role was to deliberate about how the community should act. In all households only ruling males are competent deliberators, which legitimizes their exclusive rule at home and eligibility to participate in power in the public sphere. Deliberation is a central topic in Greek ethics long before Aristotle; women were held to be incapable of it.⁵ Yet Aristotle does not deny the deliberative capacity to women and children altogether, as he does to slaves. In children it is undeveloped, but (exclusively in boys, we must assume) has the potential to mature with them. In women, the ability to deliberate is described not as 'undeveloped' but as 'lacking authority'.

Aristotle's choice of term here, *akuros*, makes this sentence one of the most debated in ancient Greek. *Akuros* denotes the opposite of *kurios*, which means 'having power', 'having authority', 'being entitled', 'decisive', 'trustworthy', 'ordained', 'ratified', 'lawful', 'valid', or even 'authentic'. Aristotle is saying that women's deliberative faculty means one or more of the following: 'powerless', 'lacking authority', 'unentitled', 'indecisive', 'untrustworthy', 'not ordained', 'unratified', 'not grounded in law', 'invalid' or 'inauthentic'. It is not clear whether Aristotle means that the capacity is present in women but not legally acknowledged, or whether it is not acknowledged *because* in women it is by nature untrustworthy and indecisive. Some scholars, who argue that Aristotle is, for a man of his time, surprisingly enlightened about women, favour the former interpretation. My own view is that he indeed believed women's deliberations to be untrustworthy and indecisive, which is why he thought that women were not entitled to equality with men, either in the miniature city-state, which constituted the household, or in the institutions where decisions

were made on behalf of the whole *polis*. The word *kurios*, used as a noun, also denoted the legal position of a male ‘guardian’ of a female. Every citizen woman in classical Athens had a *kurios* – her father until she married (in Athens often as young as thirteen), her husband, or in the absence of either a husband or father, her brother or uncle. Her *kurios* not only provided for her but also had power over her. He represented her in financial dealings and in the courts of law.⁶ Women’s souls, like their persons, needed a *kurios* – an authoritative male agent to validate their decisions and deeds.

Yet women are not to be subordinated to the absolute sovereignty (albeit affectionate) which characterizes a man’s control of his children. Aristotle is giving women a more consequential role in suggesting that a wife’s relationship with her husband bears at least some comparison with the relationship between two equal citizens of a city-state. Within the community of the household, Aristotle is inventing a new civic status, which did not exist anywhere in reality: it is citizenship, but one in which women are permanently debarred from decision-making bodies and magistracies with executive power. As Aristotle says, ‘in most constitutions with citizenship the roles of ruler and ruled shift from one person to another, and they are considered equal by nature and not to differ from one another at all’. In such constitutions, when a man became a magistrate, he was temporarily granted insignia of office, titles and privileges for the duration of his rule over other citizens. Aristotle suggests that husbands appoint themselves magistrates in perpetuity, as if assuming forever the regalia, titles and privileges of power. This relationship ‘is unlike the civic partnership in that the freedom of man and wife cannot be expressed in functional interchangeability’.⁷

In illustration, Aristotle cites the Egyptian King Amasis, who had been made famous a century before by Herodotus.⁸ Amasis was a commoner who had become king. At first, despised by his subjects for his humble origins, he ‘won them over to himself by wisdom and not by wilfulness’. One of his kingly possessions was a golden foot-basin in which he and his dinner-guests washed their feet and urinated. He had it melted down and turned into the image of a god. The Egyptians worshipped it and paid it honour. Amasis then summoned his people, and revealed the truth about the divine image; he compared himself with the basin, since he had once been treated with indignity as a commoner, but now deserved honour as their king.

Aristotle’s choice of anecdote is subtle. The figure from history he chooses to illustrate the husband’s right to rule over women is a commoner who had won the right to rule and be paid respect through merit and superior wisdom

rather than birth-right or autocratic conduct. Just so, a husband's role as ruler, and the respect paid to him, although natural, are neither a birth-right nor for ceremonial show, but predicated on his superior wisdom. Amasis' lack of concern with material possessions and public display (the gold basin, slightly comically, represents the 'regalia' of the official in the city-state which Aristotle has been discussing) and his conversion of financial wealth into a symbol of piety also implicitly colour Aristotle's portrait of the perfect household community and its idealized male ruler.

This passage in Aristotle has found defenders even among recent scholars who would never condone sexism in the modern world. Some point to Aristotle's theory of the complementarity of the sexes, elaborated in his works on biology, zoology and ethics. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, he states that the difference between justice in the household and political justice lies in the way that offices are assigned; within the household, roles and responsibilities are assigned in recognition of the complementarity of the sexes, but in the political sphere as a reward for an individual man's excellence.⁹ Different skills, he says later in the *Politics*, are required from men and women under the same heading 'household management', since it is the task of men to acquire goods and of women to guard them with vigilance (110). Other apologists for Aristotle's view of women point to his statement that both women *and* children must be educated in a way which promotes the well-being of the city-state as a whole, since for a community to be excellent it needs to have excellent children and women (51). They also cite Aristotle's recommendations concerning the appropriate ages at which men and women should marry in order to maximize conjugal harmony. He prefers a husband and a wife reach the end of their fertility simultaneously, which requires that men marry considerably younger women. But he also recommends that women marry much later than was the usual practice – at eighteen – in order to aid procreation (it is implied that he believed, correctly, that it is less dangerous for an older teenager to carry a child than a younger one), and to enhance the woman's chance to improve and grow in excellence (292–3). Apologists for Aristotle's attitude to women also compare him with Plato; they argue that although Plato's Socrates envisages in the *Republic* the hypothetical possibility that a few women might have philosophical talents qualifying them as guardians, the general tenor of remarks on women elsewhere in Plato is infinitely more derogatory than in Aristotle.¹⁰ The younger philosopher, it has been suggested, at least envisages a real, contemporary marriage in which the wife has some kind of agency in that she can attain excellence crucial to the happiness of the household as a whole.

Aristotle was prolific. His arguments concerning women's capacities and relations with men, whether considered biologically or socially, pervade all his treatises. But it is this passage in the *Politics* which ultimately justifies *both* women's exclusion from political life in the city-state *and* their second-rate status as citizens in the mini-city of the household. The justification lies in woman's allegedly inferior capacity for deliberation. Those who would argue that Aristotle's gender theory is more nuanced or enlightened than we might otherwise expect, from a man raised under ancient Greek patriarchy, should consider the ultimate consequence of applying his recommendations in any community:

the existence of fifty percent of the species is legally and economically subordinated to the benefit of the remaining fifty percent. The social system depends on women to give up their public rights and autonomy to the benefit of the private security granted by the status of minority they must have for life.¹¹

Men who try to live considered lives in accordance with virtue have no doubt always been kinder to their wives than those without such a commitment. But critics who would try to turn Aristotle into anything other than the founding father of patriarchy in the field of political theory need to remember his pithy, epigrammatic statement on gender relations in the *Politics* just a few chapters before the more extended discussion in the excerpt which has been discussed here: 'the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject' (33). That is Aristotle's bottom line.