

READING A WOMAN

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ABSTRACT. The article analyzes a passage from Plato's *Republic* that has long since caused confusion and debate amongst editors and translators: οἷον ἰατρικὸν μὲν καὶ ἰατρικὴν τὴν ψυχὴν [ᾠντα] τὴν αὐτὴν φύσιν ἔχειν ἐλέγομεν ἢ οὐκ οἶει; (*Rep.* 454d1–3). Can ἰατρικὴ τὴν ψυχὴν translate as ‘capable of healing psychically’ and refer to a female doctor, or is this passage “hopelessly corrupt” (Slings), the feminine flexion in ἰατρικὴ only putting the reader off the track? The authors give a brief summary of the readings and emendations proposed by various editors and commentators, and offer their own interpretation of the passage guided by its *philosophical* context, relying on Plato's redefinition of *physis* and his sustained attention to the *eidos* of the different and the identical, τῆς ἐτέρας and τῆς αὐτῆς φύσεως (*Rep.* 453b5–456a4). The phrase about “doctor and doctor *in soul*” fits into this context only if we consider these “doctors” opposites in the physical sense and cor-relatives socially. From this perspective, it makes sense to read ἰατρικὸν μὲν καὶ ἰατρικὴν τὴν ψυχὴν as the correlation of the different (male and female) *within* the identical (aptitude for healing).

KEYWORDS: Plato, the *Republic*, female doctor, *physis*, *eidos*.

A passage from the Fifth book of Plato's *Republic*, οἷον ἰατρικὸν μὲν καὶ ἰατρικὴν τὴν ψυχὴν ᾠντα† τὴν αὐτὴν φύσιν ἔχειν ἐλέγομεν ἢ οὐκ οἶει; (*Rep.* 454d1–3; cf. a picture below, p. 431), has long since caused much confusion and debate amongst editors and translators. Against the above reading in all the primary manuscripts,¹ most 19th-century editors² were inclined to pick καὶ ἰατρικὸν from a weaker

¹ Cf. Boter 1989 for enumeration and classification of the MSS. containing the extant texts of the *Republic*.

² Including Fr. Ast, I. Bekker, C.E.C. Schneider, G. Stallbaum, B. Jowett and L. Campbell, and J. Adam.

manuscript tradition, comparing it to the first *ιατρικόν* (or even *ιατρὸν*, inferred from Ficino's or Cornarius' Latin versions³) and arriving at a hairsplitting distinction of 'doctor' and 'doctor *in soul*, i.e. at heart', or, in Chambry's rather prolix translation (1934), 'un homme doué pour la médecine et un homme qui a l'esprit médical'.⁴ Alternatively, Hermann (1852) reads *καὶ ἱατρικὴν*, following Stephanus (1578) and in his turn followed by Burnet (1905) and later editors, the only difference between the three being their treatment of *ὄντα*: Hermann emends it to *ὄντας*, Stephanus to *ἔχοντα*, Burnet secludes it altogether.⁵ All three yield an opportunity to read a woman into the passage.

An opportunity that may well be ignored, as in *Stephaniana*: "medicum, qui revera faceret medicinam, et eum qui animum haberet medicinae studiis aptum, eademne natura praeditos habere diceremus?" Or else grasped at, as in Shorey's translation (1930, based on Hermann's text): "a man and a woman who have a physician's mind have the same nature".⁶

Jowett and Campbell explain *ιατρικὴν* in the best manuscripts (which they emend to *ιατρικόν*) as the result of scribal desire to avoid *dittographia*, and believe that "the singular *ὄντα* is accounted for by attraction to the nearest word" (1894, 3.221–2). On a more refined level, they treat the repetition of the same word with masculine ending as an anticipation of contrasting identity and difference, the Same and the Other, in the dialogue; at the same time, they would not blame Plato with stylistic "clumsiness of assuming at the very beginning incidentally the general proposition which he has to prove, viz. the aptitude of women for all pursuits" (*ibid.*).

In the same vein, Slings argues "against introducing women capable of being doctors at this stage of the argument"—at this *exact* stage, since a female doctor does surface later on (*γυνὴ ἱατρική*, 455e5) (2005, 83). Slings' excellent note on this "hopelessly corrupt" passage is unfortunately too sketchy to be overall consistent;

³ Adopted by Bekker, Ast, Stallbaum, rejected by Schneider, Jowett-Campbell, and Adam. It is worth noting "that *ιατρικός* is not the same thing as *ιατρός*: the adjective means 'being fit for an *ιατρός*'" (Slings 2005, 83).

⁴ "It has indeed been thought that *ιατρικόν* by itself suggests a doctor in actual practice, whereas an *ιατρικός τὴν ψυχὴν* need not practise" (Adam 1902, 287). Adam chooses to totally seclude from his text *τὴν ψυχὴν ὄντα*, deeming it "a relic of *ιατρὸν τὴν ψυχὴν ὄντα*, a marginal annotation on *ιατρικόν*" (*ibid.*).

⁵ Cf. the all-inclusive emendation by G. Luck, *ἔχοντα(ς)* (ap. Pomeroy 1978, 498 n. 4).

⁶ Cf. "a man and a woman whose souls are suited for the doctor's art have the same nature" (Bloom 1991) or "a male and female doctor have souls of the same nature" (Grube and Reeve 1997).

mostly, he is inclined to support Adam's stripped-down reading: οἶον ἰατρικὸν μὲν καὶ ἰατρικὸν τὴν αὐτὴν φύσιν ἔχειν ἐλέγομεν.

This rather awkward repetition of the masculine ἰατρικός, as we have seen, may be interpreted as a *marker* hinting at the discussion of identity and difference. Why, then, should we avoid the supposedly “pre-emptive” reading of a woman into the passage in question: this “clumsiness” may well serve as another marker planted by the author.

Provided we acknowledge the opposition between masculine and feminine forms, ἰατρικός vs. ἰατρική, as intended in the original text, how should we interpret ἰατρικήν τὴν ψυχὴν? Can we indeed assume that Plato speaks here of male and female doctors? The latter might have been in need of a further specification with an *accusativus relationis* τὴν ψυχὴν, since, if we take at face value Hyginus' account (fab. 274), women, along with slaves, were legally forbidden to learn the art of medicine in Athens of Plato's times until one Hagnodike caused the change of the law, allowing women to at least practice obstetrics.⁷ To be sure, Hyginus is a late author (c. 150 CE), and his account does not fully agree with Plato's own references to slave physicians and particularly to Athenian midwives, with their art of *maieutics*.

Whatever philological or literary approach we try, we cannot do without heavily drawing on the *philosophical* context of the passage under discussion. When the question whether a woman may be engaged in the same activities as a man is raised in the *Republic*, Socrates (speaking on behalf of the opposers) recalls the basic principle agreed upon at the very beginning, when he and Glaucon set out the foundation of their *polis* (cf. 369e–370c): everyone should mind only their own business in accordance with their nature (453b5). And since there is by nature a great difference between women and men, each must be prescribed a corresponding occupation.

And now, as Socrates remarks on behalf of his imaginary opponents, a question is being raised that contradicts his and Glaucon's erstwhile foundations. Socrates is aware of the complication and “the need to try and swim out of the argument”, ἡμῖν νευστέον καὶ πειρατέον σφῆζεσθαι ἐκ τοῦ λόγου (453d9–10). He stipulates that “formerly, we most manfully and eristically *chased after the names*, arguing that natures not the same should not engage in the same pursuits, but totally missed to consider what is the *eidos of different and same nature* (Τὸ <μῆ> τὴν αὐτὴν φύσιν ὅτι οὐ τῶν αὐτῶν δεῖ ἐπιτηδευμάτων τυγχάνειν πάνυ ἀνδρείως τε καὶ ἐριστικῶς κατὰ τὸ ὄνομα διώκομεν, ἐπεσκεψάμεθα δὲ οὐδ' ὀπηροῦν τί εἶδος τὸ τῆς ἐτέρας τε καὶ τῆς αὐτῆς φύσεως, 454b4–6).” Here, one of the key themes of the *Republic*

⁷ For the discussion of Hyginus' account and its considerable influence in later times, cf. King 1998, 181–7.

comes to the fore: while previously the interlocutors “chased after the names” (κατὰ τὸ ὄνομα διώκομεν), i.e. relied on the immutability of the meaning of “nature” in relation to “sameness” and “difference”, now a redefinition of *physis* and the sense of the different and the identical in general seems to be taking place.

Next Socrates asks, whether the nature of the bald and the hirsute is the same or the opposite (ἐναντία); if it is opposite, can both groups be cobblers (454c1–5)? This provokes, without fail, Glaucon’s expletive γελοῖον. It is at this exact point that the passage about “doctor and doctor” follows (454c7–d3): “Would it be ridiculous for any other reason than that we did not then set up the same and different nature in all and every way, but were watching solely for that *eidōs* of otherness and likeness which tends to the same pursuits? We meant to say, for example, that a man capable of healing and a woman capable of healing psychically have the same nature? (οὐ πάντως τὴν αὐτὴν καὶ τὴν ἑτέραν φύσιν ἐπιθέμεθα, ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνο τὸ εἶδος τῆς ἀλλοιώσεως τε καὶ ὁμοιώσεως μόνον ἐφυλάττομεν τὸ πρὸς αὐτὰ τείνον τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα; οἷον ἰατρικὸν μὲν καὶ ἰατρικὴν τὴν ψυχὴν ὄντα τὴν αὐτὴν φύσιν ἔχειν ἐλέγομεν· ἢ οὐκ οἶει;)”

If we acknowledge ἰατρικὴν τὴν ψυχὴν, then ἐλέγομεν would refer here to what has been discussed immediately before, in the sense of ‘we meant to say, implied’, since no female doctors had been mentioned anywhere above in the dialogue⁸. Immediately after this, it is stated that a doctor and a carpenter have different natures (454d5), and next the question is raised whether the difference between woman and man—that the female bears and the male mounts—entails the difference between them in matters of the *polis* (454d7–e4)?

Thus, we are presented with two distinct arrangements of the different and the identical: in one, these opposites pertain to the *physical* nature, in the other, to the *social* one. The bald is opposed to the hirsute by his physical nature, but they may be identical through their social role (e.g., if both are cobblers). A man doctor is other than a man carpenter, but they are identical by belonging to the masculine gender. A male and a female differ in what concerns physical procreation, but persons of either sex capable of healing are identical via their aptitude for studies.

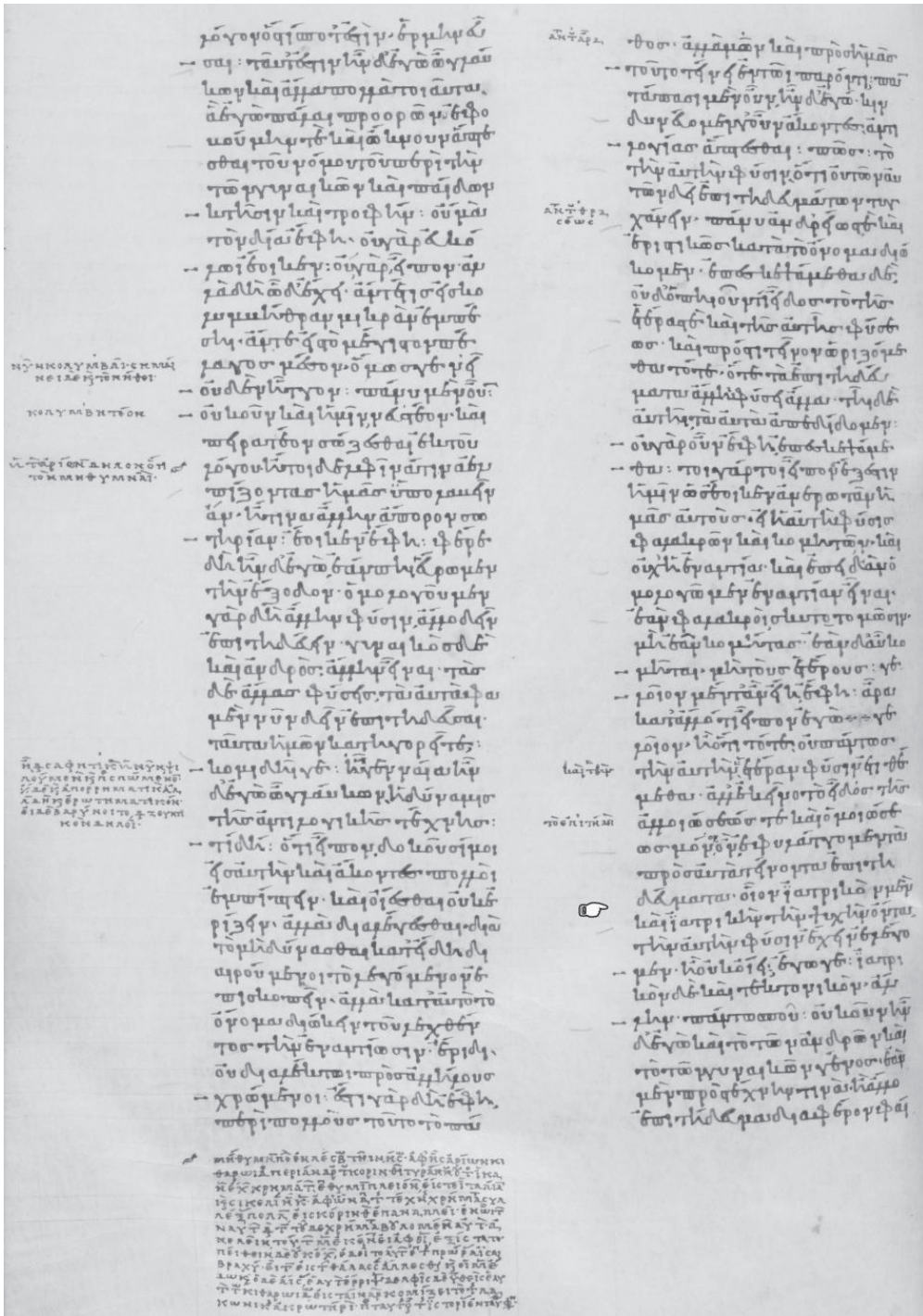
⁸ As Slings notes, no fitting reference is to be found for ἐλέγομεν even if we fail to read a female doctor here: “The passage adduced by Adam, 350a1–3, is about an ἰατρικός who does or does not consider himself superior to another ἰατρικός—this is clearly irrelevant, and besides, it is from a discussion by Socrates and Thrasymachus” (2005, 83). Though we do agree with Adam that in 350a6–b8 two ἰατρικοί are adduced as an instance of those who are alike or unlike each other by pursuit.

Further on Socrates elaborates the topic of aptitudes pertaining to both men and women. It is here that we find the direct statement that one woman by nature is apt at medicine and another not (γυνή ἰατρική, ἢ δ' οὐ); one woman is apt at musical arts and another unmusical; one is apt at gymnastic and another no lover of gymnastic; one person is a lover of wisdom, and another a hater of wisdom (φιλόσοφος τε καὶ μισόσοφος),—all of this, despite alternating feminine and masculine flexions, pertains equally to both women and men (455e6–456a5).

We are shown here the dialectics of identity and difference in relation to physical *and* social natures. By physical nature, women are *identical* to women, as well as men to men, and at the same time both are *different* in relation to the opposite gender. However, like aptitudes make men and women identical on the intellectual and social level, while different aptitudes would bring on difference between woman and woman, as well as between man and man, within their own respective gender.

Thus, this is an instance of a complex interaction between the identical and the different, as between the two opposite natures. What really matters here is the denial of any kind of essentialism, whether natural or social: neither *physis* nor *nomos* as such can be considered to be a firm foundation for *polis*, which somehow resonates with the conversation between Socrates and Calicles in the *Gorgias* (509–511). Here, we find the *physis* gradually and at first barely appreciably for the reader shifting registers, moving from the *horatic* to the *noetic* level, at which prevails the aptitude to work with *eide* rather than with *words* (cf. “the chase after the names” above). While chasing after the word “nature”, the interlocutors failed to realize that this *physis* may well be different in relation to itself. The configuration of the two pairs of opposites (differing natures and identity vs. difference) we find in the *Republic* is at the same time fairly close to what will later, in the *Sophistes*, be shown on the example of interaction between the pairs “rest vs. movement” and “same vs. other”.

The passage about “doctor and doctor *in soul*” fits into this philosophical context only if we consider these “doctors” opposites in the physical sense and correlatives socially. From this perspective, it makes sense to read ἰατρικὸν μὲν καὶ ἰατρικὴν τὴν ψυχὴν as the correlation of the different (male and female) *within* the identical (aptitude for healing).



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