

Binghamton University
The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB)


The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter

8-1983

Aristotle on Women

Francis Sparshott
University of Toronto

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp>

 Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#), and the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sparshott, Francis, "Aristotle on Women" (1983). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 107.
<https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/107>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

ARISTOTLE ON WOMEN

It is notorious that Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BC combined pride in its democratic institutions with slave ownership and male dominance. In general, these latter institutions were matter neither for pride nor for apology. They were taken for granted. Both were indeed ubiquitous in the world the Athenians knew.

It is also notorious that Aristotle was an apologist of both slavery and male supremacy. Since he is a key figure in the history of philosophy, and something of a father figure for Thomists, his supposed beliefs have proved useful for consciousness-raising. In recent decades of civil-rights agitation over the treatment of Blacks, slavery was the hot theme; more lately that has fallen into a condition of benign neglect, and the status of women has been more popular. In neither case has precision in the presentation of Aristotle's benighted views been either sought or obtained. In the case of slavery, the facts are quite easy to check. In the case of women, they are not; available scholarship not only misinterprets but mis-states essential points. The following inquiry was prompted by awareness that accepted positions did not account for all the data. It was expected that a survey would uncover a number of incompatible theses from different contexts. But a check of passages thrown up by Bonitz's index suggested that, on the contrary, Aristotle has a consistent view which is not quite what is generally supposed, though that view has difficulties which he does not confront.

The aim of this paper is not to vindicate Aristotle. His opinions may be thought of as a set of mutually reinforcing fictions, and their general tendency may in fact be more offensive to contemporary enlightened thought than the positions usually ascribed to him. The aim is to give an account of what those positions may be taken, on a reasonable interpretation of his surviving words, to have been.

In understanding such issues, it is essential to bear constantly in mind Aristotle's fundamental approach, based on his world view—even people who know these very well keep forgetting about them. Aristotle's world is a world without

beginning or end, a steady-state world in which man is a part of nature. Human institutions, though interrupted by catastrophes, are part of an unchanging natural order. The world makes no progress, has no history. Human beings do not, therefore, have to discover or invent their humanity; traditional views must be basically correct, and widespread institutions such as piracy, slavery, and patriarchy, must be fundamentally right.¹ But only fundamentally right. Aristotle almost always subverts traditions, showing that existing beliefs and practices are perverse variations on what is right. His work is thus a curious combination of conservatism and radicalism. It is characteristic that his ethics combines an underwriting of traditional moral values with radical claims for the intellectual life that are based on a re-thinking of the basis of that morality itself. This means that we have to read carefully. We make mistakes if we misread his qualified endorsements. It is all too easy to slip into the assumption that he is endorsing the popular errors that he is correcting by subverting them from within. Matters are not helped by the fact that the upshot is not always clear, and that when the upshot is clear we cannot always see Aristotle's justification for drawing the line between basic truth and superficial perversion just where he does.

In the case of slavery, the pitfalls are familiar. Aristotle is often quoted as (i) justifying slavery, (ii) justifying the Greek policy of enslaving "barbarians", and (iii) saying that a slave is not a human being but a "living tool". But most of the people who write on this topic really know that none of these true statements is true in what seems to be its obvious sense. First, slavery is a justifiable institution only because there is a difference between the ability to formulate a policy and the ability to follow instructions.² Someone who has the latter ability without the former is a "natural slave", needing someone with the former ability to provide the plans, and benefiting from that condition. It is justifiable to make such a person a slave even by force, since ex hypothesi the natural slave has no grounds for approving or disapproving any action or policy. But it is only such people whose enslavement can be justified, and the argument does not show that there are any such people.³ And in any case, in real life the people who are slaves are those who happen to have been enslaved. And that practice is not justified. Aristotle does not approve but

condemns the practice of slave-taking and slave-keeping as it existed in his society—or in any other, for that matter. If Aristotle is a champion of slavery, it is of a form of slavery that never existed.⁴

Second, Aristotle says that if there are whole nations of natural masters and other nations of natural slaves, slave wars are justified. This, he says, is what explains the claim by the Greek poets that "Greeks should not enslave Greeks"—they think Greeks should enslave barbarians, who are natural slaves (*Politics* 1252b 6-9). But the fact that the thesis in question underlies and explains the poets' claim does not justify the claim, nor does Aristotle say it does; the statement remains hypothetical.⁵

Third, it is quite true that a slave, as such, is an obedient instrument. That is how the condition of slavery as such is defined. But a slave is also a human being, and one can relate to a slave as to a human being. And it is not even true that a slave is a "living tool" in any sense that would permit substitution of inanimate tools: slaves cooperate in the living of our lives (ὅ μὲν γὰρ δοῦλος κοινωνὸς ζωῆς, *Politics* 1260a 39; cf. 1253b 33 - 1254a 9).

The result of all this is that unqualified statements about Aristotle's views on master/slave relations tend to be misleading. Aristotle says in so many words that the word "slave" is radically ambiguous—δὶχῶς γὰρ ἕρεται τὸ δουλεῦν καὶ ὁ δοῦλος (1255a4-5). The implications of a statement about such relations depend on whether the subject is the relations between natural slaves and natural masters, or between de facto slaves and de facto masters; and on whether one is talking about their relationship *qua* master and slave, or *qua* human beings—and so on. And matters are further complicated by that famous pitfall for novices, the need to distinguish between what Aristotle asserts and what he accepts as being the prevailing view (δοκεῖ).

We do have to be careful. For instance, Aristotle says that the status (τάξις—the word refers precisely to civil status and not, for instance, to how people are treated or esteemed) of women and slaves (though different elsewhere) is the same in nations in which all are slaves. But the context makes it plain that he is not talking about "nations of natural slaves" here, but about nations which are under despotic rule so that the status of all but the ruler is that of slave, and a woman can only be the slave of a slave.⁶

Aristotle deals with relations between men and women in two distinct contexts. In the *Ethics* the context is that of personal bonding and parenthood (1161b16-1162a34); in the *Politics* the context is economic, and master/slave relations are taken up at the same time. The latter passage is generally misunderstood nowadays because its readers come from urban backgrounds and read it as if it were concerned with apartment-dwellers in a cash economy. It is not. It deals with the family as opposed to the city, but its subject is the οἰκία, the homestead: in effect, the family farm. The homestead is said to be πρῶτερον καὶ ἀναγκαιότερον than the city (*EN* 1102a18) which, though natural, is a product of political activity. Part of the significance of the homestead is that the prototypes of the basic political relationships (monarchy, oligarchy, timocracy, democracy, tyranny) are found in it and based on it. But the homestead is in itself fundamental and ineradicable, because it is the condition of human existence: it is the locus of food supply and generation, the basis of human survival (cf. *De Anima B* 415a23-26). The homestead as thus conceived is an independent social and economic unit. According to the key passage in *Politics* I, there are within this unit three relationships: man/wife, master/slave, parent/child. Since the homestead is a policy-making and policy-following entity, its members, as they enter into its constitutive relations, are differentiated by the way their policy-making ("deliberative") function operates. In the slave, it is not operative: the slave as such has no say in how the farm is run. In the child, it has not developed yet, is not yet operative: the child will help run the place on maturity. In the wife, it is complete but ἄκυρον, not in control. That leaves the patriarch to make the decisions.

The main question for this paper is what ἄκυρον means here. In what sense is the wife's deliberative faculty "not in control"? The prevailing view, represented by W. W. Fortenbaugh,⁷ is that it is not in control because women are ruled by their emotions. My claim is that this is quite wrong, for four reasons. First, no Aristotelian text supports the view that women are ruled by their emotions. Second, several texts tell against it. Third, the immediate context (as my paraphrase was meant to suggest) contradicts it. And fourth, that is not how Aristotle uses the word ἄκυρον elsewhere.

On the first point, all one can say is that supporting quotations are always from other authors, not all of them Greek. One eminent scholar (whom I do not name because it was in an unpublished paper) cited *La Donna e mobile*—an irrelevance significant as indicating how carelessly people assume that this *must* be what Aristotle means, because the stereotype is so familiar. But I suggested above that one must be careful, in reading Aristotle, to distinguish between what he is saying and what he is rejecting in subverting traditions from within.

The second point is easier to support. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle says that children and animals cannot have εὐδαιμονία, and that young people cannot profitably study ethics, because they cannot frame and follow policies (1099b32-1100a4, 1095a2-12). He does not say that women cannot be happy. So presumably they can; the argument from silence is conclusive here. Again, in *EN* VIII, he says of human pair-bonding that women and men come together for sex and stay together (a) because of the children, (b) to divide the chores, the partners having their own spheres of responsibility, and (c) "because of virtue", out of mutual liking and respect (1162a19-29). Nothing is said of any supposed dependence or incapacity of the female; on the contrary, each is a responsible contributor to the partnership: εὐθὺς γὰρ διήρηται τὰ ἔργα καὶ ἔστιν ἕτερον ἄνδρὸς καὶ γυναικός· ἐπαρκοῦσιν οὖν ἀλλήλοισι εἰς τὸ κοινὸν τιθέντες τὰ ἴδια (1162a22-4). And again, in *Politics* II, where he objects to Plato's rejection of sexual differentiation among the Guardians in the *Republic*, he does not do so on the basis of female incapacity for government. His objection is rather to the use of analogies from brute beasts in an area where cultural arrangements are decisive: ἄτοπον δὲ καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῶν θηρίων ποιέσθαι τὴν παραβολήν, ὅτι δεῖ τὰ αὐτὰ ἐπιτηδεύειν τὰς γυναικὰς τοῖς ἀνδράσιν, οἷς οἰκονομίας οὐδεν μέρεισιν (1264b4-6). If that means anything, it means that the objection is not that Plato defies psychology but that he ignores the requirements of division of labour in the homestead.

The third and fourth points, dealing with the context and with Aristotle's use of ἄκυρον, will be taken up later.

The foregoing suggests that the difference in authority between men and women in the household depends on the functions they fulfil in the household. But then, why should those functions call for the female to play the subordinate

part? We are prepared to find that Aristotle does think women inherently inferior to men. And so he does—in some respects⁸. But we recall Aristotle's insistence that terms like "equal" and "unequal" are not to be used absolutely: one must say in what respect the alleged equality obtains, and make sure that the equality is relevant to the practical issue to be decided (cf. *Politics* III, 1280a 10-25).

In what precise respect does Aristotle say that women are inferior to men? People often say that the inferiority is physiological; but this is misleading, because it sounds as if women were organically defective (e.g. because lacking a penis).⁹ The inferiority Aristotle speaks of is indeed inferiority of the body, but it is a matter of chemistry. The essential difference between male and female lies in what they contribute to the offspring they generate: it is the difference between the female's blood, which provides the matter, and the male's seminal fluid, which provides the form.¹⁰ The seminal fluid is blood that has gone through a further process of *μάγειρ*, or cooking—Aristotle's all-purpose word for the processes of metabolism (*Gen. An.* IV, 765b10). This sexual differentiation in reproduction is found in all well-developed species of living things. But why? Aristotle gives one of his annoying non-answers: because it is better to have the matter-supplier and the form-bearer separate (763b20).¹¹ As to why it is better, we are given no hint; perhaps we should supply one from the remark in the *Politics* about why wife and slave should not be the same in the household: nature generally uses different things for different purposes (1252b 1-5). But once the differentiation is allowed, everything else follows. The child has to grow where the matter is, in the mother and later with the mother. All physiological differences between the sexes either result from this fact or follow directly from the male being better cooked. In neither case are they unequivocal superiorities, and in the former case it is inappropriate to speak of "better" or "worse" at all, since the differences are functional. In most animal species, the female is larger, slower, softer; the male is smaller, more active, more aggressive, and tougher in the sense that it is more likely to have large horns, tusks and other hard bits (*Part. An.* 661b32). The same chemical difference that makes the female the matter-supplier makes it less mobile and hence more apt to stick around with the young ones; so everything fits.

It is obvious from this that females are not going to be flightier or more emotional than males. We might rather expect the opposite. But Aristotle does not say that either. What he does say is that in most species there are typical differences in temperament between the sexes; that these tend to follow a common pattern; and that these become more marked to the extent that a species has ἦθος, that is, character traits or personality. It follows that the typical differences between male and female will be more clearly marked in humans than in any other species.

Aristotle's description of the differences in question is indeed male-oriented in the precise sense that women are described by their differences from men and men are not described at all. But the differences are not in the direction of greater flightiness.

Woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, . . . more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. The female is also more despondent and despairing than the male, more shameless and more given to falsehood, more easily deceived and of more retentive memory. She is also more wakeful and more shrinking. And in general the female is less quick to take action than the male and needs less food (*Hist. An.* IX.1, 608b 8-15).¹²

Men are mobile, aggressive, tough, simple-minded and hard to teach; women are passive, tender, devious-minded and easier to teach.

The *Historia Animalium* is a descriptive work, and no attempt is made to derive these stereotypes from the initial chemical difference and the physiological and functional differentiations that follow from that. But as we look at the alleged differences we may reflect that, not only do they fail to add up to males being more governed by reason than females, but they do not add up to males being better than females in any clear sense. Males are not so much better as bossier, and Aristotle says just that. The word he uses is ἡγεμονικώτερον (*Pol.* 1259b2).

Does Aristotle not say, then, that women are inferior to men? Yes, but his statements are more nuanced than is sometimes supposed. Consider, for instance, his most notorious statement, that a woman is in a sense a "monster" (τέρας) (*Gen. An.* 767b5). It turns out that the point of this is to say why women are not monsters. A woman is a monster in just the same sense as a child that

resembles neither of its parents: it is a departure from type—but not, we may infer from the analogy, in human terms defective. Whereas a monstrous birth, in the literal sense, is a product of accidental necessity, a mere failure of the form to realise itself, female births are a natural necessity—if there are to be human beings, somebody has to be mother. So the cooking process has to be incomplete in half the species. The inferiority is metaphysical: the reason for not simply saying that males and females differ in the amount of cooking (without implying that either amount is better than the other) is that form is inherently better than matter and that cooking is form-giving; and that to be a form-bearer is “more divine” than to be a matter-supplier.

Beyond that, however, is the clear implication that it is better to be dominant than to be submissive, better to be active than to be passive. The activity of the male in generation (729a25-35) is part of the general fact that, as we have seen, males are physically more active than females (it is because males move around and injure themselves in the womb that more males are born defective than females, *Gen. An.* IV, 775a8). When males are said to be superior to females, the word used is κρείττων, as opposed to χείρων; not βελτίων or ἀμείων. But this is a word with a very distinctive flavour. It does not always connote superiority in the sense of betterness at all. When Thrasymachus in *Republic* I defines justice as τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον, the whole point is that the stronger are not better in anything other than their superior power, and no one has yet translated that phrase as “the interest of the better.” When the word does connote a more general superiority, as when νοῦς is called κράτιστον in *Metaphysics* A 7, or as when one man’s work is said to be κρείττον than another’s at *EN* 1133a13, there is often a sense of overreaching or holding sway. *LSJ* sums up the tendency of the word’s most venerable uses as “stronger, braver, superior in rank”, with its converse χείρων as “inferior in bodily strength or courage or in rank.” And now when we look at the one flat assertion of male superiority in *Politics* I, we can appreciate the nuances: ἔτι δὲ τὸ ἄρρεν πρὸς τὸ θῆλυ φύσει τὸ μὲν κρείττον τὸ δὲ χείρον, καὶ τὸ μὲν ἄρχον τὸ δ’ ἀρχόμενον (1254b13). The context is that of dominance. To use such a word in Aristotle’s world (or in ours) is already to endorse male values. And yet, when discussing the virtues of men and women in *Politics* I, Aristotle observes strict

parity. (When issues of superiority and inferiority are mooted, he speaks of "the male" and "the female"; but he speaks of the virtues of "men" and of "women.") The statement that the *ωφροσύνη* of a man would be pushiness in a woman is balanced by the statement that the *ἀνδρεία* of a woman would be cowardice in a man.¹³ The complementariness of function in the homestead is matched by a complementariness of virtues. And this is very important, for to be better is simply to excel in virtue. To say that men are better than women is to say that they excel women in human virtues. Aristotle is careful not to say that, and what he does say rules it out. One has only to realize that *ωφροσύνη*, no less than *ἀνδρεία*, is discussed in the *Ethics* as one of the human virtues, and that to be better than someone or something else is necessarily to excel in some virtue, to realize that Aristotle has ruled out of court the possibility that women as such should be inferior to men as such.

The functions of husband and wife in the homestead are different. The man acquires, the woman preserves, as suits the mobility of the male and the immobility of the female. It would be lunatic to say that one of these functions was better than the other, and Aristotle does not say it. What he does say, in *Politics* III, is that the differentiation of function explains the differentiation of appropriate excellence or "virtue" mentioned in Book I: ἔπει καὶ οἰκονομία ἐτέρα ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς· τοῦ μὲν γὰρ κτᾶσθαι τῆς δὲ φυλάττειν ἔργον ἐστίν (1277b20-25).¹⁴

We are now finally in a position to return to the context of the statement in which Aristotle says that the wife's deliberative power is *ἄκυρον*. What we find Aristotle actually saying there is exactly what we should by now be expecting him to say—something entirely incompatible with the notion that women are too emotional to be left to their own devices.

The relation of man and wife is political: that is, it is based on the presumption of equality. Wife defers to husband not because of any innate superiority but because his is the leader's role. In typical political organizations, people take turns to exercise this function; but, even there, the person who is in office for the time being is treated as a superior, with respect and deference—just as the piece of gold that used to be Amasis's washpot is worshipped when it is made into a statue. That is the analogy Aristotle draws, and it makes no

sense at all unless men and women are, so far as their ability to run their lives goes, equal. This is the immediate context of the statement that the wife's deliberative power is ἄκυρον, and commentators tend to ignore it.¹⁵

But what does the word ἄκυρον mean anyway? Aristotle elsewhere, if Bonitz's index can be relied on, invariably uses it in the same one of its several meanings—a meaning that Fortenbaugh, for instance, does not mention. It is the sense in which a superseded contract or an overruled νόμισμα is ἄκυρον. It is simply not operative. A contract that is ἄκυρον is not for that reason a worse contract than the one that is in effect. The idea that Aristotle holds that women's intellectual faculties are somehow either defective or at the mercy of their feelings in a way that is not true of men is mere moonshine. All he is saying is that, in the household, wives do not make the policy decisions but defer to their husbands.

All this may still leave us wondering why men should be the decision-makers. The fact that as males they are more active and bossier may suggest that they are likely to take the lead, but not necessarily that it is better that they should do so. It is not obvious that acquirers are better decision-makers than preservers, or that the temperamentally cautious, calm, and gentle female should not make the decisions. Indeed, since the two make separate contributions to the economy, it might seem reasonable for them to reach decisions jointly. In fact, this is what Aristotle does say, in the passage where he deals most directly with the issue.

The husband's rule depends on his worth or merit, and the sphere of his rule is that which is proper to a man. Whatever is more suited to a woman he turns over to his wife. But whenever a husband takes the authority over all matters into his hand, he transforms the association into an oligarchy, since in doing so he violates the principle of merit and does not rule by virtue of his superiority. Sometimes the wife rules because she is an heiress. But of course this kind of rule is not in terms of excellence or virtue, but is based on wealth and power, just as in oligarchies (*EN* VIII, 1160b32-37).

But we note that the division of powers comes about through delegation: the husband hands over (ἀποδίδωσιν) certain matters to his wife. We are still left wondering why the man has this authority. Is it because, as the acquisitive one,

he is in contact with the world outside the walls and knows what must be done to succeed in it? Conceivably; but I think the explanation lies elsewhere.

I think the situation envisaged is that described in Xenophon's *Economicus*. The position is incorporated in the quasi-Aristotelian *Economica* I, and endorsed in *Politics* VII; but it is the terms of Xenophon's explanation that are addressed most directly to our concerns here. The situation, clearly envisaged as normal, is that of a 35-year-old man marrying a girl of fourteen. He teaches her how to run the household, he says, because she has as yet had no chance to learn anything. "What knowledge could she have had when I took her for my wife? She was not yet fifteen years old!" (*Econ* IV, 4-6). But now that she has been taught, "In my house, my wife is quite capable of looking after things herself" (*πάνου ἰκανῆ διοικεῖν*, *Econ.* VII, 3); and the wife contributes as much to the household as the husband does, because she controls expenditure as he controls income (III, 15).

It is clear enough that if normal households are thus constituted the husband will be the senior partner. But perhaps the disparity in ages is simply a fact of Greek upper-class mores, arising precisely from the fact that the man was expected to lead and provide.¹⁶ We need some independent reason for the difference in ages; and Aristotle provides one. The reason is hygienic. Ideally, men should marry women twenty years younger than themselves, because the children of those who are too young or too old tend to be defective and weak: women should bear children between 18 and 30, men between about 37 and 50. And the reason why men should start begetting at about that age is so that the next generation will be ready to take over when father is ready to retire (*Politics* VII 16, 1335a12-27). The point is that in an independent household one of the partners must be mature, and it can hardly be the woman.¹⁷

We may still feel like asking, however, why nature fixes things this way. It is not too hard to imagine a world in which women start bearing children at age 35, recruiting young studs to do the outside work under their wise direction. Aristotle has no explanation to offer of why the world should not be like that. In a way, he needs none; if the best medical opinion says that a certain age span proves best for bearing and begetting, that is that. Culture does not defy nature, but is itself natural. But, since the facts might have been otherwise,

Aristotle's system calls for a teleological explanation; and the explanation, though he does not offer it, might well be that the mature partner is the male because the male, on account of the busy and assertive character with which his chemistry endows him, is ἡγεμονικώτερον.¹⁸ It is in just such ways that Aristotle's closely-argued and well-integrated views of sex relations may be seen as a tissue of mutually supporting prejudices.

A real problem in Aristotle's treatment, comparable to the lacunae left by his failure to look beyond two generations, is: what happens to widows? Clearly, those young wives are going to outlive their husbands; and they will then be mature, in no need of guidance, and such that their deliberative faculty need not be ἄκυρον. As it happens, Aristotle does have something to say about them, though within the conventions of Athenian law. We saw that according to *EN* VIII a domestic economy is "oligarchic" and misrun if the husband interferes in the running of the household or if the woman makes all the decisions. This last, Aristotle says, is what happens with heiresses (ἐπίκληροι, 1161a2). These "heiresses" are not, as today's reader easily supposes, marriageable daughters of the rich and powerful, the Barbara Woolworth type. Under Athenian law, a widow must remarry because the law forbids her to handle property. But the new husband does not control his wife's estate. She is trustee for her first husband's children, and can sue her husband for mishandling the estate. She thus has tremendous leverage over her husband, and obviously may take the lead in the family: she is, after all, not an inexperienced child. This is the sort of heiress Aristotle has in mind. And we note the asymmetry of Aristotle's language: an oligarchic husband wrongly intrudes in the wife's domain, an oligarchic wife wrongly assumes power in the family as a whole. That is, though husband and wife have separate spheres of interest, it is taken for granted that the wife's sphere is part of the husband's and is delegated to her by him. οὐκ ἄρα θῆ πολυκοιρανίη, as Aristotle says at the end of *Metaphysics A*.

It is not the case, then, that Aristotle thinks of women as primarily child-bearers. The chemical differences between male and female are necessitated by their different reproductive functions, the anatomical differences arise from those functions, and the innate tendencies to temperamental differences arise from both; but the practical differentiation of husband's and wife's roles depends

on the division of chores in the homestead, and on the fact that someone has to stay around. The relevant stereotype of the family farm is one still familiar. I have already mentioned that Aristotle's objection to Plato's use of animal analogues in his advocacy of the abolition of sex roles in the *Republic* is that it ignores the human institution of household organization, οἰκονομία. We may now add to that his explicit statement that equality of sexes would not work on the farm, because "Who will see to the house while the men are seeing to the business of the fields?" (1264b 2-3, Barker trans.) In relation to Plato, of course, this is merely stupid, an amusing or exasperating *petitio*; but we note once more that Aristotle's appeal is to a natural separation of functions, not to any supposed intellectual or emotional incapacity of women to take executive roles.

The differentiation of sex roles belongs to the context of the homestead, the οἶκος. But man is by nature a political animal: the possibilities of human life are fulfilled only in the city. What comes of sex differentiation in the city? Aristotle fails disastrously to come to grips with this question. A city is originally a union of households; and in such a union it seems obvious that it should be the outside workers, the males, who get together. But in the city as such it is (as it were) only these outside relations that matter. The male acquires a new role. The female plays no part in the city as such: women are not, or should not be, citizens, because they are restricted to the homestead and do not contribute to the life of the city as such. Besides, a city is more than a union of homesteads: it is centred on a town, and landowners increasingly live in town. And, in the town, neither the internal nor the external chores of the homestead remain. The town context replaces the man's life with the richer life adumbrated in the *Ethics*; but what sort of life does a Greek town provide for the wife? Aristotle says nothing at all, anywhere, about the lives of women otherwise than in the homestead context; he ignores what is surely the fact, that in an urban environment this context has vanished and not been replaced—or, insofar as it does remain, has become vestigial. Aristotle is aware of the problem, in a way. He points out that, just as husband and wife each constitute half of an οἶκος, so a city consists half of men and half of women (1269b14), and in a city that makes no provision for the lives of women half the citizen

body is left ἀπαιδευτόν—a word which it would be hardly tendentious to translate here as “unprepared for civic life” (1260b19).¹⁹

How can Aristotle have got himself into this mess? Essentially, it is because, although it is only in a city that human potentiality is fulfilled, no accommodation is reached between three ways of looking at the city. From one point of view, it is an association of homesteads; and, as such, the homestead retains its essential “economic” function. From another point of view, it is an association of individuals, because it exists for the sake of the quality of the lives of its members. But from a third point of view it is an association of family units through their decision-making members, and such units are not necessarily homesteads. If they are not, women are left without any context in which they have a significant role. It is this third viewpoint that Aristotle never acknowledges.

The same fuzziness pervades Aristotle’s entire view of man as a φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον (1253a 3). We tend to translate τὸ λόγον ἔχον as “reason” or “the rational”, but of course that is misleading: λόγος is language, as Aristotle makes explicit at 1253a 9–18, and the function of language is to integrate the values and purposes of people in households and in cities. The *Ethics* makes it entirely clear how human life is thus self-consciously realized in a distinctively civic setting. But when we turn to *Politics* III we find that the virtue of a citizen as such is confined to the performance of public functions in relation to the city as an organized institution—functions which are almost necessarily confined to a part of the free population. The vaunted union of state and society, supposed to be summed up in the concept of the πόλις, stands revealed as pure ideology. We have seen that Aristotle shows himself uneasy about the problems his treatment involves; but his uneasiness is not sufficient to make him mend his ways.

The social background of Aristotle’s curious blindness on the equivocal nature of the city is explored by M. I. Finley in “The Greek City” (reprinted as chapter 1 of *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*). No Greek writer, he says, makes any distinction between town and hinterland, much less argues for a beneficial division of labour between the two (in the manner of Adam Smith), still less argues for a conflict of interest between them (in the manner of Marx

and Engels in the *German Ideology*). As in Plato's *Republic*, urban institutions simply mediate between family homesteads, and are presumed to have no separate interests. Findley points out that Strabo thinks of urban life as associated with agricultural (as opposed to pastoral or hunting) economies.²⁰ That is, as Aristotle suggests at the beginning of *Politics* I, an agricultural society is static and needs a permanent defence for its fields, and the city develops out of the resulting union with its walled town. The city, that is, comes from the functional interdependence of agriculture and town life; the possibility that the city might develop further is not to be taken seriously. Greek cities have temples but no guild halls; the town as a self-contained unit is a development of the late middle ages.

To conclude: sex differentiation is a pervasive and striking feature of the animal world, of which humans form a part. Patriarchy and role differentiation between men and women are pervasive phenomena in human societies. Aristotle is not about to re-design the world. But these phenomena are explained and justified at the economic level, and that is not where the human values lie. At the higher level of civilized life, the differentiation becomes anomalous. Aristotle never shows how the anomaly is to be overcome. As in the *Ethics* the phenomenon of ἀκροαία arises because individuals remain victimized by the mechanisms that kept them alive as children, so the natural development of the city is undermined by the fact that half its members are disenfranchised by its economic origins. In both cases, an optimistic teleology is undercut by an essentially tragic view of individual and social life. The difference is that in the *Ethics* the problem is confronted and the limits to its solution sketched. In the *Politics*, which of course is not a unified work, the problem is raised but not explored. This is partly because the account of the homestead and the treatment of the city as such are not made into a single whole. Like the problem of slavery, the problem of woman's place in the city (or rather: the place of sex differentiation among citizens) is not treated as urgent. But, in any case, it is hard to guess just how Aristotle's discussions of the *Politics* are supposed to be related to the social and political realities of his own place and time.

NOTES

1. Compare Aristotle's objection to the radical innovativeness of Plato's sociology in the *Republic*: "We are bound to pay some regard to the long past and the passage of the years, in which these things would not have gone unnoticed if they had been really good. Almost everything has been discovered already. . ." (*Politics* 1264a1-4, trans. Barker).
2. Careful attention should be paid to the wording of *EN* 1102b29-1103a2. The $\delta\rho\epsilon\kappa\tau\iota\kappa\acute{o}\nu$ is really $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\omicron\gamma\omicron\nu$, though in a sense it shares in $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ because it is $\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\eta}\kappa\omicron\omicron\nu$ and $\pi\epsilon\iota\theta\alpha\rho\chi\iota\kappa\acute{o}\nu$ in relation to it; but it can, for that reason, be called $\lambda\omicron\gamma\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ in a secondary sense. It is presumably, then, able in a way to interpret instructions, precisely as a person does and not as a computer does.
3. Moses Finley calls Aristotle "the most forthright exponent of the doctrine of natural slavery, a doctrine which was combatted in his own day and generally rejected by philosophers in later generations" (*Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, New York, Viking Press, 1982, 128). Finley does not specify what the doctrine expounded and combatted was. He plainly wishes us to believe that Aristotle taught that slavery, as practised, was a natural and hence defensible institution. That is not what Aristotle taught.
4. Aristotle's argument is, none the less, pernicious. Once one has established that it is right to treat in a certain way persons of a certain sort, it is always tempting to declare that persons one wants to treat in that way are persons of that sort. And it is a familiar observation that people who have been enslaved for a while do come to act like natural slaves.
5. The sharpness of Aristotle's division between planning ability and the ability to obey intelligently obscures a lot of practical issues. There could not literally be a nation of natural slaves, that is of people who were simply unable to run their own lives at all: if they are a nation, they must be running their lives. But all sorts of people are reluctant to accept responsibility for running their own lives, at one level or another. A nation with an "unemployment problem" is one in which most people do not accept responsibility for maintaining themselves in existence, but expect that someone else will "give them a job" and tell them what to do with

their lives. Are they natural slaves? And there may well have been nations, like the Scythians, which regularly sold off certain classes of the population as slaves, and in which the condition of slavery was accepted.

6. Moses Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* 114-115, states that "The Pre-Greek world . . . was, in a very profound sense, a world without free men. . . . It was equally a world in which chattel slavery played no role of any consequence. . . . One aspect of Greek history, in short, is the advance, hand in hand, of freedom and slavery." If Finley is right, Aristotle is wrong in an illuminating way. In the grip of the Greek preoccupation with ἐλευθερία, he ignores the existence elsewhere in his world of a great variety of servitudes, such that for any individual the question is not whether one is in servitude or not, but to whom one is in servitude in what respect.
7. "Aristotle on Slaves and Women," in Jonathan Barnes et al., eds., *Articles on Aristotle*, II, London, Duckworth, 1977, 135-40.
8. A soft spot in the present paper is that it takes insufficient account of Aristotle's careful terminological distinction between women and females. In *Politics* I 13, he speaks of the virtues of women (in the context, of wives) at 1259b 30, but in the discussion of authority at 1260a 9-14 he uses different language: ἄλλου γὰρ τρόπον τὸ ἐλευθερον τοῦ δούλου ἔρχεται καὶ τὸ ἄρρεν τοῦ θήλεος καὶ ἀνὴρ παιδός. It is the female, not the wife in which (rather than in whom!) the deliberative function is ἄκυρον. But immediately afterward, in reverting to the topic of male and female virtues, Aristotle reverts to the word γυνή, as though the two discussions were one and the two terms synonymous.
9. Perhaps this formulation derives from the summary and incidental statement in *Metaphysics* Θ, where Aristotle asks why the differences between the sexes do not lead us to speak of men and women as different natural kinds. The answer is that men and women do not differ in essence, but only in their bodies (1058b23).
10. *Gen. An.* 729a10. The male provides the "formal and efficient cause"; from *De Anima* we know that this is the "soul", the vivifying power that enables the catamenia to fulfil the power of developing into an animal body and living an animal life. Aristotle thinks of semen as a foam (*Gen. An.* 729a10), not as a bearer of spermatozoa;

hence his mistaken supposition that the analogue of semen is the catamenia, not the ovum—see Platt's note to the Oxford translation of *Gen. An.* I. 19.

11. This is followed by an even more baffling non-answer: that male and female are the $\kappa\rho\chi\alpha\iota$ of living things. Presumably this refers back to the argument of *Physics* I, which establishes that in every change the $\kappa\rho\chi\alpha\iota$ are the same: a continuant and a form. This in turn relies on the yet more basic principle that change is never self-precipitating or self-perpetuating, so that if animals can't live for ever animal continuity must depend on something happening—presumably to an animal. Since the outcome must be a new animal, presumably the event must be occasioned by an animal. But why not by something in the same animal? Or by an animal of just the same sort (a bisexual one?). Such things do occur, so that in the end Aristotle's purported explanations reduce to descriptions of the ordinary course of events.
12. I have departed from Thompson's Oxford translation here, which obliterates Aristotle's terminological differentiation between man and male, woman and female. The difference seems to have no function in this context, but it is striking enough to preserve (cf. note 8 above). I have also rendered $\epsilon\upsilon\kappa\alpha\tau\eta\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ in the passive rather than in the active sense which Thompson and *LSJ* prefer here.
13. I take it that the statement at *Rhetoric* I 5, 1361a5, $\theta\eta\lambda\epsilon\iota\omega\upsilon\upsilon\delta\epsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\tau\eta\ \sigma\acute{\omega}\mu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \kappa\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\omicron\varsigma\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\epsilon\theta\omicron\varsigma,\ \psi\upsilon\chi\acute{\eta}\varsigma\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \sigma\omega\phi\rho\omicron\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \phi\iota\lambda\epsilon\rho\gamma\acute{\iota}\alpha\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\epsilon\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\theta\epsilon\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma,$ represents the common view of the masculine world in which the orator operates rather than Aristotle's analytical view.
14. Emphasis on the distinction between getting and keeping is not peculiar to Aristotle. We find it in Xenophon (cited below). Long before that, on the Uruk vasa, c. 3000 B.C., the bridegroom Amaushumgalanna, followed by a long retinue of food-bearers, is received at the doorway by his bride Inanna, behind whom we see an array of storage vessels. See Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, 24.
15. Essentially the same point is made at *EN* V. 6, 1134b 7-18. There cannot be justice in an unqualified sense between oneself and one's child or chattel (i.e. slave) because the latter are not independent persons. Justice in the city is a matter of legally

structured relations between people who are subject to law and have an equal share in ruling and being ruled. "Hence" (my emphasis: $\delta\iota\omicron$) "justice can more truly be manifested toward a wife than toward children and chattels, for the former is household justice; but even this is different from political justice."

16. In Toronto in 1950, when I was 24 and contemplating wedlock, my landlady, a banker's widow from Kamloops B. C. told me that I should wait until I was 35 and had established a position in the world and then marry some nice young girl. I suppose it is just coincidence that she hit on the same age as Xenophon for bridegrooms, though not for brides. (Whatever may have been the case among the upper crust in Kamloops, no such disparity in ages was regarded as the norm where I come from, nor, my mother-in-law assures me, in rural Ontario; though in both places there was a strong and unargued feeling that the bridegroom should be a year or two older, and certainly no younger.)
17. It is very curious that Aristotle nowhere considers the structure of a three-generation family or an extended family: the model is always the married couple with their children and slaves. The reason for this is nowhere discussed. Perhaps the reason is that given for discussing only simple forms of political constitution: a basic city is already a complete city, and complications add nothing of significance. If that is the reason, though, it is a very bad one.
18. In this connection, it is not inappropriate to point to the real weakness of Aristotle's teleology: that it represents an ill-integrated mixture of three very different notions. One is the notion of immediate finality involved in his theory of generation and of change generally: that in natural processes the final and the formal causes are the same. The second is the general thesis that natural change has as its general end the simulation of the unchanging activity of an eternal unmoved mover. The third is the hierarchy of ends and integration of functions in the natural world as a whole, so that the placing of a shark's teeth partly serves the purpose of allowing some of its prey to escape—an integration that is strongly implied at the end of *Metaphysics A*. Aristotle is conscious of the ambiguity of teleological explanations as between intentions fulfilled and functions performed; but he is less steadily aware of the difference between the three sorts of explanation distinguished here, so that when he says loosely that something

"is better so" one sometimes does not know at all what he has in mind.

19. At 1260b18, the expression is γυναῖκες ἡμῶν μέρος τῶν ἐλευθερίων, for after all women are not (as we saw) strictly citizens; but in the discussion of Sparta, at 1269b18, women are said to be ἡμῶν τῆς πόλεως.
20. Findley cites Strabo 4. 1. 5 and invokes other unspecified passages. But all one finds at 4. 1. 5 is a reference to the Massiliotes as ἀντὶ τοῦ πολεμεῖν τετρακμήνων ἤδη πρὸς πολιτείας καὶ γεωργίας, and this hardly carries the point, for Strabo could be citing what he thinks of as two unrelated marks of stability