

Gender and Rhetoric in Plato's Political Thought. By Michael S. Kochin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. viii + 164. \$40.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-521-80852-9.

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This book advances the thesis that the *Republic* and the *Laws* should not be read as straightforward political treatises, but as examples of political rhetoric. According to Kochin, the rhetorical aim of both works is to turn men away from gendered conceptions of excellence and toward a standard of human excellence that includes the virtues of both men and women as traditionally understood. Given the purported aim of Kochin's project, the precise nature and role of rhetoric in the book is remarkably obscure. Kochin never sufficiently distinguishes rhetoric from other sorts of speech: he defines rhetoric as 'the art of invoking conventional understandings of the good and the just so as to move one's audience' (2). But on this account, the claim that we should understand Plato's dialogues as rhetorical is not at all illuminating, for this account fails to distinguish rhetoric from other persuasive uses of language, including straightforward philosophical argumentation. And indeed, the majority of Kochin's book reads like a straightforward interpretation of the political theses and arguments of the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In some instances, however, Kochin employs a more robust sense of rhetoric: he argues that Plato does not really believe all of the claims that he makes in the *Republic* and *Laws*, but merely uses certain ideas in order to move his audience. The grounds that Kochin provides for reading Plato in this way, however, are feeble at best. Thus, his general thesis that the *Republic* and the *Laws* should be read as examples of political rhetoric is either uninformative or indefensible. Despite this difficulty, Kochin does put forward numerous original and provocative interpretations of Plato's political theses, most of which can be presented and evaluated independently of any consideration of rhetoric. In what follows, I summarize the main line of argument of Kochin's book. I then take issue with the most important instance where Kochin explicitly treats Plato's remarks as rhetorical in the robust sense. I conclude that Kochin provides insufficient grounds for thinking that Plato is not reporting his own convictions. Moreover, the rhetorical strategy that Kochin attributes to Plato is both a weak rhetorical strategy and inconsistent with Plato's conception of art and education as presented in *Republic* ii and iii. Accordingly, we have no reason to think of the *Republic* and the *Laws* as examples of political rhetoric in any distinct or interesting sense of the word.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part of the book (chapters 1 and 2), Kochin describes conventional Greek views of excellence or virtue (*aretê*) and explains Plato's criticism of these conventional views. Conventional Greek views of virtue were highly 'gendered', in the sense that men and women were held to different standards of excellence. Kochin argues that there were two com-

peting conceptions of the good man: the civic and the heroic conceptions of masculinity. According to both conceptions, the good man must be courageous (*andreia*) and so master his fears. The two conceptions diverge, however, with regard to the virtue of moderation (*sôphrosunê*). According to the civic conception, the true man masters his desires. Indeed, on this conception, a man who submits to his desires for food, sex, or drink is seen as weak and effeminate. On the heroic conception, by contrast, the true man eschews all forms of self-control: the real man has the courage and the skill to do whatever it takes to satisfy whatever desires he happens to have. Here, we may think of the manly ideals put forward by Callicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. According to Kochin, a two-fold account of femininity emerged as the negation of the civic and heroic conceptions of masculinity: women were seen as naturally lacking both courage and moderation. Accordingly, women were excluded from public life and relegated to the private sphere. The only virtue appropriate for women, then, was moderation, and in particular, chastity.

Kochin proceeds to argue that Plato thought that the gendered conception of the virtues was problematic for at least two reasons. First, the civic conception of masculinity taught that moderation and self-control were good but only for the purpose of later self-aggrandizement in either the political or military spheres. Thus, ordinary Greek men saw moderation as an instrumental, and so defeasible, good at best. Second, the various conceptions of virtue are riddled with conflict. The civic conception, for example, which puts forth moderation and justice as ideals, conflicts with the heroic conception, which holds that moderation and justice are for those too cowardly, weak, and ‘unmanly’ to take what they want for themselves. Additionally, by promulgating both the civic and the heroic ideals of masculinity, the city simultaneously taught that self-controlled male citizens ought to rule over uncontrolled female citizens and that self-control is unmanly and thus suitable only for women.

In the second part of the book (chapters 3 and 4), Kochin provides an interpretation of the *Republic* according to which Plato’s primary aim is to persuade men to turn away from both the civic and the heroic conceptions of the good man and towards a standard of excellence that vindicates both justice and moderation. To achieve this goal Plato must replace gendered conceptions of virtue with a standard of excellence that includes moderation and justice as real goods and thus incorporates the virtues of both men and women as traditionally understood. Kochin argues that Plato puts forward the philosopher as the model for this single standard of human excellence (*anthrôpinê aretê*).

According to Kochin, Plato argues against the heroic conception of masculinity by allying himself, for rhetorical purposes only, with the civic conception of masculinity and describing the lack of self-control and lack of freedom that characterizes the life of the hero or tyrant as ‘womanly’ and thus unworthy of a real man. Kochin further contends that Plato attempts to dismantle the civic conception of masculinity by ‘re-valuing’ war and political life in general such that neither is for the purpose of self-aggrandizement or exercising one’s manliness.

Plato does this by changing the purpose of war from self-aggrandizement to self-preservation, education, rearing, and reproduction, and by allowing women to be leaders and warriors.

In the last third of the book (chapters 5 and 6), Kochin turns his attention to the *Laws*. Kochin argues that Plato describes Magnesia as a 'second best' because it does not aim to cultivate in its citizens a single standard of human excellence, but reverts back to gendered conceptions of excellence. Magnesia fails to aim at a single standard of excellence for men and women because it, unlike the city described in the *Republic*, is built upon private families and property and the sovereignty of the law. According to Kochin, Plato holds that the reintroduction of the family and thus of the private sphere prevents women from attaining certain virtues. In particular, they fail to develop a certain responsiveness to spirit (*thumos*). Additionally, the reintroduction of private property and the sovereignty of law foster 'manly' spiritedness in men.

According to Kochin, despite the fact that the organization of the city makes it impossible for men and women to aspire to the same standard of excellence, Plato still attempts to modify the gendered conception of virtue in at least three ways. First, Plato attempts to ensure that women are not relegated solely to the private sphere. Second, Plato encourages moderation in men by, again, allying himself with the civic conception of virtue, and describing lack of self-control as 'womanly' and thus unfit for men. And finally, Plato legislates the Nocturnal Council, an institutional organ designed to correct the laws and move the citizens of Magnesia toward the pursuit of a truly unified human excellence.

It should be clear from this brief summary that the only instance where Kochin explicitly argues that Plato's remarks are rhetorical in the sense of insincere is in the case of Plato's disparaging remarks about women in the *Republic* (see, for example, 395d, 469d). According to Kochin, Plato takes up, *for rhetorical purposes only*, the aspect of the civic conception of excellence that portrays lack of control as effeminate and so unworthy of real men. He does this to convince men to turn away from the heroic conception of virtue and aspire to moderation and self-control instead. Kochin says,

We must continually recall that Socrates attacks the pretensions of masculinity before an all-male audience. His occasional use of sexist language is a concession to the limitations of his audience before his speeches have done their work. Greek men understand what is good as what is manly; whatever Socrates can portray as *womanish*, whether it be Achilles' excessive lamentation or his defiling Hector's corpse, his male listeners will henceforth see as bad if his regendering of these practices is successful. (41)

Thus, according to Kochin, Plato does not truly endorse these misogynist statements; he makes them for rhetorical purposes only. Kochin's claim that Plato's sexist remarks are rhetorical only is interesting in its own right, for if true, it would provide a resolution to the vexed issue of the tension between Plato's pro-

gressive and derisive attitudes towards women in the *Republic*.

But what reason do we have for thinking that Plato's comments are rhetorical? Unfortunately, Kochin's justification for reading the *Republic* and the *Laws* as rhetorical in the sense of insincere is remarkably weak. Kochin defends his reading of Plato as rhetorician by citing the fact that Plato uses encomiums to praise Eros in the *Symposium* and the just life in the *Gorgias* (15). It should be obvious, however, that we cannot infer from the fact that Plato sometimes uses words with the intent of emotionally moving his audience that he uses words with the intent of emotionally moving his audience in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In addition, we cannot infer that Plato is not committed to the claims that he makes when he is trying to be persuasive in this way. Kochin also argues that Plato's concern with the meaning of justice in the *Republic* illustrates the rhetorical effort to distinguish between apparent and real goods (15). But, again, it should be obvious that the effort to distinguish between apparent and real goods is also, and indeed perhaps more clearly, an example of the general philosophical effort to distinguish appearances from reality. Thus, the fact that Plato is concerned with uncovering the true meaning of justice in the *Republic* lends absolutely no support to the claim that the *Republic* is a rhetorical work in any interesting or distinct sense of the term. Finally, Kochin argues that the *Laws* should be read as an example of rhetoric by stating, without providing any citation, that Plato adds persuasive preludes to the laws' commands and prohibitions (15-16). Again, however, this fact gives us no reason to think that either the whole dialogue is an example of persuasive speech or that Plato is not committed to the claims he makes in his persuasive speeches.

Perhaps, though, the fact that Kochin's claim that Plato's sexist remarks are rhetorical, if true, would provide a resolution to a serious tension in Plato's work gives us some reason for taking Kochin's thesis seriously. Since Kochin provides insufficient textual grounds for thinking that Plato's remarks are rhetorical, we can think of Kochin's claim as a speculative resolution to the tension. Is it plausible that Plato's sexist remarks are simply part of a rhetorical aim of turning men away from gendered conceptions of virtue? I think not, for this would be a highly questionable rhetorical strategy. Kochin argues that Plato's aim is to persuade men to value women, to see them as equals so that they learn wholeheartedly to value certain traits, such as moderation, traditionally seen as feminine (133). At the same time, however, Kochin argues that Plato wants to persuade men to reject certain behaviors by portraying them as womanly and therefore undesirable. That is, he continues and reinforces the tradition of viewing anything that is womanly as bad. But how could this lead to anything but inconsistent beliefs and attitudes in Plato's audience? Kochin argues that Plato's sexist remarks are 'a concession to the limitations of his audience before his speeches have done their work' (41). But how could Plato's speeches convince his audience to see women as the equals of men by reinforcing the prejudice that anything 'womanly' is bad? The rhetorical strategy seems incoherent. On Kochin's account, Plato's purported method of rhetoric is at odds with itself in exactly the same way that the

ordinary Greek view on gender and virtue was at odds with itself: it yields inconsistent ideals. Moreover, we know that Plato was particularly attuned to the danger of instilling contradictory beliefs in individuals. Indeed, the philosophy of art and education that Plato presents in *Republic* ii and iii is explicitly designed to avoid instilling beliefs in children that will conflict with the true beliefs that they ought to have as adults (see, for example, 377b). Thus, it seems highly unlikely that Plato would *intentionally* put forward inconsistent ideals in the way that Kochin describes. Thus, Kochin's claim that Plato's sexist remarks are rhetorical both lacks textual support and is inconsistent with Platonic ideals.

My discussion of Kochin's claim that Plato's sexist remarks are rhetorical is illustrative of the main problem with his project: Kochin never gives us explicit and defensible standards for determining whether Plato's remarks should be read as examples of insincere rhetoric as opposed to expressions of Plato's own beliefs. As I mentioned at the outset of the review, most of Kochin's book reads as a straightforward interpretive essay on Plato's views on politics and gender; the issue of rhetoric, in any interesting and distinct sense of the word, seems irrelevant to most of Kochin's book. Only very rarely does the notion of rhetoric in the sense of insincere seem crucial for Kochin's understanding of Plato. But it is not up to Kochin simply to choose which of Plato's remarks are rhetorical and which are sincere. And yet, in the absence of independent defensible standards for determining which of Plato's remarks are rhetorical and which are sincere, Kochin *is* simply making his own choice, where this choice probably has more to do with Kochin's own views than Plato's. Nonetheless, because the notion of rhetoric in any robust sense plays such a small role in Kochin's book, we can still appreciate the majority of his project. Of course it is altogether plausible to think that Plato is interested in critiquing ordinary Greek ideals of the good man and replacing them with his own ideal. Furthermore, much of Kochin's account of Plato's critique and remedy of ordinary Greek ideals is interesting and plausible. Kochin simply gives us no reason to think that Plato does not mean everything that he says. In sum, then, I would recommend Kochin's book to anyone with an interest in Plato's views on politics and gender; I would simply advise the reader not to take the claims about rhetoric too seriously.

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