

Women In and Out of the Canon: The (R)evolution of a Field

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These remarks serve as an introduction to the symposium devoted to the range of work offered by a selection of “early career women” working in the subfield of political theory and constitutional studies. I want to celebrate their work by going back to my own “early career,” not so much in a personal, autobiographical vein (though I will do some of that, since all the women in the political science profession of a certain age, shall we say, have our own stories) but in conjunction with my central concern for these remarks—namely, how political theory as a subfield in political science has evolved with regard to women as the content from the early 1970s when I was an “early career woman.”

I begin with an early manuscript rejection letter (of which, I assure you, there were many); this one was a single-paragraph rejection that I received from the editor of one of the major journals in the political science field in 1976. I had submitted a paper entitled “Men, Women, War and Politics: Family and Polis in Aristophanes and Euripides.” Before I describe the content of the rejection letter, let me offer some background. In 1963 Frederick Crews, a professor of English at University of California, Berkeley, had published a delightful satire titled *The Pooh Perplex*. The book included a collection of essays mimicking the various styles of literary analysis popular in English departments at the time to interpret A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*. There was the Marxist interpretation that in looking for the “bourgeois capitalist elements in English literature” focused on the “appropriation” of the 100-acre wood and on Rabbit as a “capitalist manager” and Owl as the “pedantic

plutocrat”; there was the psychoanalytic reading analyzing A. A. Milne’s “bear phobia” and his “pre-Oedipal cathexes.” There was the “death of the author” chapter, the Christian humanism chapter, the “instrumentalist” chapter, and so forth.

With that in mind, let me quote almost the entirety of the one-paragraph rejection I received:

The author’s use of Hegelian distinctions between private and public, family and community . . . may not be altogether implausible in interpreting Antigone, but it is hardly illuminating. The application of these distinctions to the Trojan Women is less helpful still. In *his* extension to Lysistrata and Ecclesiazusae *he* produces . . . a burlesque of literary criticism of nearly Aristophanic outrageousness. I found snatches (please overlook this slip into particular, female, private, via salacious double entendre) . . . as amusing as some of the better passages in Fred Crews’ Pooh Perplex.¹

As a young academic at an institution where it really was publish or perish, the rejection stung deeply enough that I didn’t initially appreciate the humor of the comments or the suggestion that perhaps my work could have approximated “Aristophanic outrageousness.” Only later could I think, “What a compliment!” I had not thought of myself as a skilled writer of comedy.

In any case, a few years earlier I had received some valuable advice from the incomparable Judith Shklar. She had advised that given the serendipity of who ends up reviewing one’s manuscripts, I should have an envelope ready for submission to a different journal after receiving the inevitable rejections. The paper was eventually published in *Political Theory*, which at that time was relatively new and more eclectic than the mainstream political science journals and a bit adventurous in its acceptances.

I recount this story because I think it captures the two issues I want to emphasize (apart from the inevitable assumptions in the late 1970s that the author of a manuscript submitted to a journal

for publication was male—and how comfortable the reviewer felt about making off-color jokes in his review²): namely, how the content of fields of inquiry change over time and how the resources we use to explore those fields change as well. That is, women became part of the content of the study of political theory, and incorporating women into the field entailed an extension of the resources available for that study. Even in the late 1970s, to make women the focus of an academic article and, moreover, to do so through analyses of ancient comedies and tragedies was the stuff of comedy itself, worthy of being satirized and mocked, indeed Aristophanic. That all has, thankfully, changed.

The early 1970s, of course, initiated the height of what we know as second-wave feminism. Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* had been published in 1963 and is often credited with sparking that movement. *Ms.* magazine was founded by Gloria Steinem and others in 1971. A multitude of books expressing various degrees of anger about patriarchy and often written with revolutionary fervor further developed the feminist theory and arguments about the need for liberation from the old ways, from the long-held assumptions about women's roles in the family and society at large. There were Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller, and so many more. But for the most part, during that period an academic silence prevailed in the institutions where that scholarship was pursued. That silence did begin to crack in the late 1970s. In history departments the emergence of social history opened opportunities to move beyond the great man and the diplomatic relations approaches to history into areas where the lives and experiences of women could be explored and highlighted. Family life, women's participation in the labor force and contributions to the economy, prostitution, women in missionary work, and much more surfaced in scholarly publications. And even in political science there were some scholars with a more sociological bent who looked, for example, at the development of political views within the family and the nature of female participation in politics. Marjorie Lansing's book *Women and Politics: The Invisible Majority* in 1980 was a lonely entry in the field. The female political actor

may not at that time have been entirely absent, but she was for sure an anomaly, more likely to be found at meetings of the local PTAs than in the halls of Congress. The paucity of studies of women and politics is captured in my mind by the efforts of the Women's Caucus of the Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan to compile a bibliography of women in politics in the late 1970s. The bibliography was to aid in teaching for the first time at the university a course on women and politics. As far as I remember, the bibliography was no more than three pages long. Imagine how many pages it might be today.

The bubbling up of the women's movement and the issues related to women did begin to surface slowly in political science. In the field of political theory there emerged a few works that attempted to bring a consideration of women and gender into the ken of scholars working in that subfield just as there began to be an increase in the numbers of women graduate students. Initially most of the publications in the field followed the trend of highlighting the misogyny of the canonical works. One book, published in 1979, revealed its orientation with the title *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory: Women and Reproduction from Plato to Nietzsche*. Also in 1979, Susan Okin published her less dramatically titled *Women in Western Political Thought*, which focused on the patriarchal orientation of most of the theorists who inhabited the canon except for Plato. There were, though, also works that looked beyond patriarchy and misogyny to explore the theoretical aspects that women introduced into our thinking about political life. The journal *Political Theory* published Mary Shanley's piece on the connection between social contract theory in the seventeenth century and the changes in marriage law at that time. Jean Elshtain's *Public Man / Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* came out in 1981, and Carole Pateman's path-breaking *The Sexual Contract* appeared in 1988.

More common, though, early efforts to bring the female into the content of the subfield entailed what I refer to as "rummaging," the search through the male chauvinist wilderness for women authors who might be plumbed for their insights into the nature of politics.

Art historians had the wonderful Artemisia Gentileschi from the seventeenth century with her powerful paintings of women's experiences as told in biblical stories or, from more recent times, Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot with their images of maternal domesticity; meanwhile, political theorists latched onto Mary Wollstonecraft and her powerful *Vindication of the Rights of Women* arguing for the fundamental equality of men and women as human beings and the need to educate women to be more than pleasant adornments. Harriet Taylor came into her own as more than just an influence on John Stuart Mill, and Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* didn't quite come to replace *On Liberty* but entered the field as a work to read with all the attention that his other works had enjoyed. However, there were few such authors whose works might be available for such resuscitation.

Now, while it may have been important to seek to right history's wrongs and to elevate—that is, to bring up to their rightful place—authors who had been largely neglected over the centuries simply because they were female, I myself did not go in that direction, and I didn't because (shall I say?) of my love of the texts that I had read in my political theory classes as a graduate student. I was not ready to abandon those texts, even if they may have appeared to have included comments that were certainly objectionable to a woman—or to anyone, for that matter. I was challenged by the sense that I couldn't imagine replacing, let's say, Rousseau with Wollstonecraft in my syllabi, as intriguing and forceful a writer as Wollstonecraft was. And so, I felt a certain unease about this rummaging, not because it is not informative and not because one might not learn from those recovered authors and works and discover that women do have a history even if in the past it was not considered worthy to be recorded. Rather, this rummaging forced me to think about the theoretical assumptions raised by this search, the assumption that women might write and think differently about the issues raised by male authors. I don't want to deny the fruitfulness of such efforts to include female authors in the canon, but I felt that while this approach was being adopted, there was also the need for understanding how the existence of women informed the writings of

those writers who *had* been included in the canon of political theory over the last several centuries. That concern opened a new arena of inquiry and incorporated the effort to address and remedy the academic silence that pervaded the field.

But how was the female to be excavated, so to speak, from the intricacies of the canonical political theorists' texts? The challenge I set for myself, then, was not to find authors neglected by previous generations of scholars, what I have perhaps unfairly called "rummaging," given the slightly pejorative connotations of that word, but to bring the female out of the shadows of political theory in its "great books" manifestation. I wanted to continue to read and interpret and write about the canonical works of political theory, but now with a view to considering how the female and the family had been a previously understudied and underappreciated concern in those works. Could it be that women were absent not because they were not there but because scholars had not been interested in looking for them? That was the challenge that the interest in women and political theory presented for me and others. A common refrain when I would mention to colleagues that I was working on women in political theory was, "Were there any?" Yes, they were indeed there.

Part of my argument here is that the liberal perspective of modern scholars had blinded them to the significance of the female in these works. Two aspects of liberalism play a role here. On the one hand, there is the fundamental emphasis on equality, that all are equal. Think Thomas Hobbes's assertion about our equal ability to kill one another, an ability that does not depend on strength if the subject of one's murderous intention happens to be sleeping. That emphasis tends to ignore the differences between the sexes that might be relevant for thinking about the nature and purpose of political life. On the other hand, there is liberalism's separation between public and private (think John Locke's *Letter on Toleration*), with the focus on what matters as existing in the public sphere, leaving the family out of the political equation. Both tendencies in liberal thought would effectively make the female disappear from consideration by contemporary readers and interpreters.

I return here to another story from my early years as an aspiring assistant professor, though not quite as satisfying as being criticized for my “Aristophanic outrageousness.” It goes back to the joys of the days before books and catalogues were digitized and one could easily get lost looking for a particular volume in the musty stacks of the library. Once early in my career I was searching for a book on Aristotle and somehow ended up in the section on Greek poetry, and there on the shelf was a book that caught my eye with a rather tired-looking binding emblazoned with “Women in Greek Poetry,” by an author unknown. Upon opening it, I found it was printed in 1896, not notable enough to make it into a rare book room despite its ancient imprint. Because of the author’s death the previous year, the manuscript was incomplete, and so the book’s subtitle was “A Fragment, Printed for the Use of Scholars.” Thinking, therefore, that it was meant for me, I read on. It soon became clear that the author’s use of “women” in his title was a reference to romantic love, which the author would argue could be attributed to a particular fourth-century, seldom read, and little-known poet. The “women” of the title was intended to make us think of such love, and the book was about the transition for love by a man for man to love for a woman. Women and romantic love were in the mind of this author and its posthumous editor, almost synonyms. I certainly have no objection to romantic love and somewhat sheepishly admit to crying every time I see yet another rerun of *Brief Encounter*, but romantic love is not how I wanted to be thinking of bringing women into the study of political theory. This “fragment printed for the use of scholars” posed for me the question of how was it that I would bring the female into the discussion of the canonical works if it was not to be as rediscovered authors nor as objects of romantic love. It seemed simple: I did not need to scour the texts for a particular handle by which I could excavate them. Women were indeed very present in a variety of guises in the canonical works; they just had not been noticed by most interpreters. They were not ignored by the canonical writers; rather, their presence raised questions about the explicit arguments those works offered. The female often undercut liberalism’s elision of

differences that led to arguments that ignored the private world of the family and the perspective of the human species as marked by differences between male and female.

In 1987 Alan Bloom published *The Closing of the American Mind*, his bitter denunciation of higher education in America where he blamed the valueless, relativistic youth that he asserted inhabited the modern universities on the abandonment of the canonical works of Western civilization—on our failure, our lack of commitment to reading Plato and Aristotle with our students. His indictment sparked notable controversies about the place of those canonical texts in university curricula, leading many—students and faculty alike—not to condemn the absence of the texts that Bloom extolled but to complain that they were too powerful, forcing on students perspectives limited by race, class, and gender, perspectives that needed to be rejected if we were to move to a more just society. The complaint was not that the canon had been lost but that it was confining, propagating views that needed to be resisted.

This controversy, of course, has deeper roots in the methodology of how to read the texts that form the core of the study of political theory, an issue often characterized as the conflict between the Cambridge and the Straussian schools, the former reading the texts as epiphenomena of the time periods in which they were written, the latter as works that rise above their times to address the perennial questions that confront the nature of political life, irrespective of the historical moment in which they were written. For Straussians this meant that the authors worth reading did not just recapitulate the prejudices of their time but had the capacity and eagerness to examine those prejudices, the *doxai*; they opened new ways of understanding the political world and, as I and others came to see it, how the female fit into that world. For me, that meant looking at the ancient texts—Plato and Aristotle—for the seldomly acknowledged role of the female in those texts. This entailed acknowledging that the *family* and the difference between the male and female were an integral part of the thought of those authors and needed to be included in any effort to understand their philosophies about the nature and purpose of political life—in other words, the liberal

perspective with its emphasis on equality and the separation of public and private precluded attention to the presence of these concerns. Reading the ancient texts with an effort to understand them from this perspective and not dismissing them as tools of oppression enabled one to see them not simply as works that justified the subjugation of women and the defense of an elitist paradigm but as inquiries into the tensions posed by the differences between the sexes and the need for procreation as a condition of political life.

Let me offer a few examples from Aristotle, who is often portrayed (and unfortunately was indeed used by Southern writers before the Civil War) as a defender of natural slavery and as the portrayer of the female as a “defective male” conceived when the wind was blowing in the wrong direction or there was not sufficient heat at the moment of conception. While addressing the nature of the family in Book 1 of his *Politics*, Aristotle suggests that the deliberative element (*to bouleutikon*) in the female is *akuros*. The word *kuros* entails authority, and joined with the privative alpha the word *akuros* means “without authority.” So, what did it mean when Aristotle wrote that the female’s *bouleutikon* was “without authority.” For those who without question accepted the prejudice that Aristotle as an ancient Greek must have dismissed the female as weak, irrational, and inferior to the male, the passage was read as the female’s deliberative power not having authority in her soul, supporting the view that perceived the natural inferiority of the female. But if we step back from what we *assume* Aristotle meant, given that he was writing in a society that sheltered its women within the household, we could also read this as Aristotle criticizing that society for not allowing the female’s *bouleutikon* to have any sort of authority in that society. Her *bouleutikon* might have had authority in her soul, but because of the prejudices of his society the female was denied authority and her potential for wise judgment dismissed. I don’t want to turn Aristotle into the John Stuart Mill of *On the Subjection of Women* who argued that the human race denied itself the potential benefits of the wisdom of one-half of the human species, but I raise the point because Aristotle was a

questioner, examining people's opinions, working through the logic (or illogic) of those opinions, posing questions that he then tries to work through by reflecting on the question as he proceeds in his books. By leaving the meaning of *akuros* ambiguous, he is making us question our immediate assumptions and reflect on the broader question of how we decide to whom we listen as we engage in the processes of deliberation and judgment.

In his discussion of slavery Aristotle remarks that it is impossible to know the soul based on external appearances. The soul of one who has been made a slave is not necessarily slavish. It is only the condition of being a slave that makes him so. Perhaps it is only the condition of a being female that makes her lack authority among the males. This becomes even more suggestive if we look to Aristotle's discussion of the virtues in *Politics* I. In considering the virtue of courage, he quotes a line from Sophocles's *Ajax*. It is the one that Ajax says to his wife, Tecmessa, who quotes Ajax as telling her, after she has warned him about following through on his excessive anger, "Silence is the ornament of a woman." Again, this has mostly been read as Aristotle (who defined the citizen as the one who uses his *logos*, his reasoned speech, to deliberate about the just and the unjust) dismissing the female voice. But the quote needs to be read in context. In Sophocles's play Ajax's wife is warning Ajax. Silencing her as Ajax tries to do, refusing to listen to her, allows him to follow through on his intention to kill the Greek generals. However, he instead slaughters the cattle and sheep in the field that he mistakes for the Greek generals, all of which precipitates his suicide. He would have done well to listen to wise Tecmessa rather than silence her.

One of the few bright lights on which feminist scholars in the history of political thought have often focused is Socrates and his proposals in the *Republic* to include women in all the activities of the guardian class, including ruling, leading some to argue that Socrates (or Plato) is an early feminist. But so much in Plato's writings argues against that, that using such a modern category to describe the ancient theorist does not ring true. Instead of trying to enlist Socrates into the feminist camp, we might benefit more from

seeing his arguments in Book 5 of the *Republic*— so at odds with his other statements about women—as exploring the *problematic* effects of making the female the equal of (in the sense of no different than) the male. It is not easy to make them equal in this sense, not because he is a misogynist, but because he acknowledges the different roles that males and females play in the processes of procreation. A careful reading of Plato's texts, I believe, reveals much deeper questions about the place of women in political life. Those reading the passages in Book 5 of the *Republic* as a feminist manifesto fail to acknowledge the questionable assumptions about what is entailed in bringing the female into that class of guardians—namely, the effort to ignore the reproductive role females play in the city and make them share in the male's uncertainty about who their children are.

Exploring the ancient texts from this perspective and not starting from questions about whether Plato and Aristotle are misogynists or feminists for me derives in part from a work that had a profound influence on me, one assigned during my first semester of graduate school and I suspect not much read at this point—namely, R. G. Collingwood's *Autobiography*. (Collingwood was once described as the best-known neglected philosopher of his time. I suspect the attribute “best known” has faded by now.) Collingwood's autobiography describes walking by the monument that Queen Victoria had built for her beloved husband, Albert. Collingwood writes that he found it distressingly ugly, but then he began to realize that he should not judge the monument by the standards of beauty that he had but look at it to understand what the artist had tried to achieve by designing it as he did. In other words, he should ask of the monument the artist's questions, not his own. Only in that way might he learn from the monument. I took this to apply not only to artistic productions but also to the texts I was reading. I—we—shouldn't ask of Plato, for example, is he a feminist when he declares that women can engage in the same ruling powers or same gymnastic exercises as the men. That's our question: rather, we should ask *why* he makes this argument. What is he telling us about human nature that we reading his work in the

twenty-first century perhaps do not attend to sufficiently, blinded as we are by our liberal prejudices and understanding of equality?

I began to look for the appearance of (or allusions to) women or their absence in the traditional canonical works to help me, help us, understand how the assumption, let's say, that the language of "man" and the male pronoun did not simply include the female and that it mattered whether the Greek word was *anêr* (male) or *anthrôpos* (human being). Those linguistic forms marked a particular understanding of the nature of political life. And that awareness of those distinctions could lead to spotting how significant even brief and seemingly incidental references to the female and the family (such as that in the *Ajax* quote in *Politics* 1) were to capturing the meaning of the texts we were reading.

The challenge was to try, as Collingwood urged, to get into the questions that the philosophers of the past ask and neither condemn them for their benighted ideas nor claim that they understood the world as I did. Either approach meant I would not learn from them. Their role (as I understood it) was, rather, to challenge my view of the world, not reinforce it. The task Collingwood established was that while embracing an interpretive stance that would investigate the place of women in the canonical works, it was important not to do so by asking our own questions but by relying on the authors of those texts to guide us to their perceptions of how the existence of the female influences (or does not influence) how we are to think about the nature of political life and its goals.

The other aspect of the issues surrounding women and the canon that I want to address briefly is the construction of the canon. Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* initiated the debates of the late 1980s and 1990s about the place of the canonical texts in the education of the young. By raising the debate in the fashion that he did, Bloom was harking, consciously or not, to the work of Matthew Arnold, who in the mid-nineteenth century had turned to the classic texts as a resource for the moral education of the young. The secularization of society had suggested a more limited role for the Bible as *the* text to be read for that purpose. The canon of moral and philosophical works alongside works of scientific inquiry

was to replace the Bible in this sense. But then the question arises as to *which* texts of moral and philosophical thought; at least in the area of political theory, the rostra of works to be read was readily identified: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and on up through John Stuart Mill, Marx, and Lenin. Textbooks such as George Sabine's *A History of Political Theory*, Strauss and Cropsey's *The History of Political Philosophy*, and even Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision* toed that line, making their way through the familiar list of male writers. Questions, though, arose about *why* these particular authors should define the canon of political theory texts. The 1978 *American Political Science Review* published an article by John Gunnell that challenged what he called "the myth" of the political theory canon, arguing that such a canon was constructed by modern theorists who had their own particular agendas. The list of authors traditionally read in political theory courses and the subject of scholarly articles was merely, he claimed, the construct of the profession. Such texts lacked any inherent cohesion and had no claim to special attention by those writing in the field.

Although Gunnell's work may have been directed specifically at the work of Leo Strauss, it was Strauss who in some sense cracked open that mythical line (if there was such a line) by introducing authors who had not usually been included in the list of canonical works. Xenophon appeared, and significantly—well before I was accused of "Aristophanic outrageousness"—Aristophanes was ripe for him for theoretical analysis. This expansion of the canon was critical, especially for those of us who were interested in bringing the female into the ken of political theorists. Specifically, for me it meant the opening up of dramatic works of ancient Athens, but for others there were other literary genres and even the visual arts and films, looking to them for the ways in which they might illuminate the issues that confront political theorists. One did not need to read treatises explicitly dedicated to expounding political theories such as Locke's *Treatises* and Hobbes's *Leviathan* to gain insight into ways of interpreting the political world. Plato's dialogues had already revealed that. The range of literary genres from our history could open previously ignored aspects of political life to analysis and exploration.

Already in the 1960s and 1970s Sophocles's *Antigone*, along with Plato's *Crito*, surfaced as a resource for addressing the issue of civil disobedience. Antigone's speech about Zeus's higher law, one that voided the power of Creon's human law, found favor among those looking to justify civil disobedience in the face of laws that discriminated against African Americans or to oppose a war many considered illegitimate. But there was another important aspect to the *Antigone* not immediately noted by those enamored by Antigone's powerful speech about obedience to Zeus's law. That was the gendered way in which tragedy progressed, highlighting the tensions between male and female, family and city, and especially birth and death. The play was available for theoretical consideration through what might be called the gender lens. There was not only *Antigone*; for me, there was the whole theater of ancient Athens. Those plays, both the comedies and the tragedies, often addressed issues of the female caught within the net of political exigencies and the interpenetration between the family and the polity. By capturing those tensions through the actions and choral songs on the public stage, the ancient playwrights presented for their audiences the many layers of political life that went well beyond the performative deeds of their political leaders. I don't want to suggest that these dramatic works illuminate only the role of the family and the female; they obviously can be plumbed for much more, but the expansion of the canon to nontraditional works had revealed a whole new range of resources for those of us interested in the intersection of politics and gender, of family and city, of private and public.

Peter Euben's piece on Aeschylus's *Oresteia* in the *American Political Science Review* of 1982 may have been the first to break the barrier in the flagship journal of the political science profession. By now it is not unusual to find articles on ancient playwrights, tragedians, and even Aristophanes in the major political science journals. They will not all focus on gender. For instance, the articles by John Lombardini, Paul Ludwig, and Matthew Landauer all find in Aristophanes aids to thinking about the nature of citizenship in democratic regimes. But the works presented on the ancient

stage do often present the opportunity to investigate the complex relation between the female and the political, the family and political life, thereby creating a whole new space for engagement with texts where the presence of women provides for new and revealing perspectives on our lives as political animals and thereby for revolutionizing the field of political theory.

I subtitled this article “The (R)evolution of a Field.” The explosion of an interest in women in the field of political theory from the 1970s does entail, I think, a revolution. The female emerged from obscurity or invisibility to often becoming the center of many political theorists’ interests, overturning the almost universal assumptions that they weren’t there at all. But there has also been an evolution from the initial focus on the misogynist and patriarchal readings of the canonical works to a far greater, and I believe more important, willingness to look beyond the apparent misogyny and find in those texts the deeper issues of the polity’s need to acknowledge the female and reproductive issues. This willingness has been accompanied by, and has perhaps precipitated, the expansion of the works we turn to in our explorations of the political theoretical questions, works such as literary productions where women may figure more prominently than they do in the canonical texts that once, not so long ago, filled our syllabi and research agendas.

Notes

1. Italics added.
2. I admit here to assuming that the reviewer was male.

