

The female body politics in Platonic discourse: A feminist reading¹

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Abstract

Plato's *The Republic* is considered to be amongst seminal works throughout the history of philosophy. It consists of variety of subjects ranging from politics in general to human beings in particular. What makes *The Republic* groundbreaking is the fact that a variety of Platonic thoughts, one of which is about 'the presence of the female body in politics,' is introduced and represented in the book. On this regard, this study explores Platonic thoughts related to the female body politics within the scope of theoretical analyses. It is scrutinised that Angela Carter's authentic views challenge and subvert patriarchal ideology whose norms authoritatively determine 'the presence of women' and dictate 'the politics of their bodies.' Therefore, it is within the purpose of this study to explore how Platonic thoughts that are mere-fantasy which harms women ideologically are challenged and disregarded by Carter.

Keywords: Body politics, the female body, Plato, *The Republic*, Platonic discourse, Angela Carter, a feminist reading.

Platoncu söylemde kadın bedeni politikası: Bir feminist okuması³

Öz

Platon'un *Devlet*' adlı eseri, felsefe tarihinin en önemli başyapıtlarından biri olarak görülmektedir. *Devlet*, "Politika" adı altında genelden; "İnsan" olarak daha özele doğru çok çeşitli konuları içinde barındırmaktadır. *Devlet*'i çığır açan eser yapan önemli nokta ise çeşitli Platoncu düşüncelerden biri olan 'politikada kadın bedeninin yer almasının' tanıtılıp, aktarılmasıdır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmada, kadın bedeni politikası ile ilgili olan Platoncu görüşler teorik çerçevede incelenmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Angela Carter'ın, 'kadının yerini' otoriter bir şekilde belirleyen ve 'kadının beden politikalarına' dikte eden ataerkil düşünce sistemini yıkan, kendine özgün görüşleri ele alınmaktadır. Böylece, salt hayal ürünü olan ve kadınlara ideolojik açıdan zarar veren Platonik düşüncelerin Carter tarafından nasıl meydan okunduğu ve yok sayıldığının incelenmesi bu çalışmanın amaçları arasındadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Beden politikası, kadın bedeni, Plato, *Devlet*, Platoncu söylem, Angela Carter, bir feminist okuması.

1 I hereby declare that this study has been extracted from the dissertation of mine entitled "Body Politics in Angela Carter's Works" and it includes the literary and theoretical analyses scrutinised within the scope of my doctoral study.

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Introduction to Platonic views on the female body

In Plato's *The Republic* (380 B.C.), "Gynaecium" is called 'The Place of Women.' Plato regards the existence of women as significantly crucial in the formation of the ideal state because women's bodies show that there are no differences between women and men in politics. It can be seen in Plato's *The Republic* that otherness of women is disregarded. Monique Canto and Arthur Goldhammer, in their article titled "The Politics of Women's Reflections on Plato" (1985), analyse Plato's thoughts on women and their presence in *The Republic*. Hence, *The Republic's* "Phoenician Tale" is stated to express the existence of the female body in politics as follows:

A myth of foundation, according to which all citizens believe that they are brothers (414c-417b) – even the women, because, as political bodies, they are the same as men, and because, like the men, they work to drive otherness to the periphery of politics. This shows that within the city woman is in no sense the representative of otherness. It also shows that the civic space is apparently unable to tolerate the presence of any kind of otherness, not even to the extent of affirming the difference between men and women. But the city in which men and women have, so to speak, the same political body is a city that subsists outside history. It is also a city without images or desire. (1985, p.280)

As it is expressed in the passage above, women and men should ideally be active in the regulations of the politics regardless of differences and segregations. Moreover, women should not be alienated in the politics since they are not 'the others,' rather they are the equal parts of the civic body in which both men and women are represented mutually. However, in Plato's *The Republic*, the city in which women and men are equally accepted, may sound somehow utopic; but it is seen as a desire "[i]n the city composed of men and women, politically mingled, unions are celebrated and representations sacralized outside of real time; they are the expression of a desire for the same, which, so long as man and woman exist" (Canto & Goldhammer, 1985, p.281). Plato's thoughts on women and their existences in the city show that the female body is powerful enough to deal with the strong problematics just like the ideal state itself.

As Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserts, 'body politic' is used for the name of *The Republic*. [my italics added]. According to Rousseau, "[t]he Government is a miniature what the body politic encompassing it is on a large scale" (2012, p.43). Thusly, 'body politics' is represented in the Platonic formation of the state in which Plato creates a kind of a microcosm showing that the female body is a body politic and it procreates itself: "[w]hat remains, then of the astonishing idea put forward in the Republic? The idea that women and men are in the same position, that the female body is one reason why politics exists, and that it must be present in the center of the city as well as in war; the idea that the female body is a body politic that reproduces itself" (Canto & Goldhammer, 1985, p.282). In this sense, female body is seen to have significant position in converting body politics into a new space. As Susan Bordo expresses her thoughts, concerning the acute changing from 'the body politic' to 'the politics of body' in her *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993):

Feminism inverted and converted the old metaphor of the Body Politic, found in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and many others, to a new metaphor: the politics of the body. In the old metaphor of the Body Politic, the state or society was imagined as a human body, with different organs and parts symbolizing different functions, needs, social constituents, forces and so forth [...] Now, feminism imagined the human body as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control [...]. (1993, p.21)

As Bordo puts it in the quotation above, feminist ideology is responsible for changing of the old metaphor of 'the body politic' into 'the politics of body', since 'human body,' for the first time, as a

metaphor, is expanded into a new form through which it gains an existence in politics. Regarding that as Heidi Yeandle states in her *Angela Carter and Western Philosophy* (2017), though Plato favors women and finds the presence of women in his ideal state as crucially significant; Plato's *The Republic* legislates "for equality between the sexes but falls short of this by saying that women are inferior" (2017, p.28). It is for this reason that Angela Carter attacks Plato and his androcentric thoughts in which women can only be positioned as 'Guardians⁴' in the ideal state; while men are seen as the only authority possessing the sole power since "only the best become Philosopher Rulers, this position is not open to women, who are seen as inadequate in contrast to their male counterparts" (Yeandle, 2017, p.27). In this regard, Platonic views related to the ruling of the ideal state show that men have privileges and they have superior qualifications which enable them to become ideal rulers. On the contrary, women are not believed to have enough capacities to become rulers therefore, this position is not seen available for women. Yeandle expresses Carter's thoughts on Plato as follows:

Carter's accusation that Plato is 'the father of lies', who has infected Judeo-Christian culture with a series of falsehoods, or myths, corresponds to this aspect of the *Republic*, and one could argue that Carter's literary agenda [...] is indebted to undoing Plato's influence on Western civilisations. Here, she argues that Western social structures are constructed upon 'lies' and myths, and asserts that her aim is to expose and eradicate these in her work ... (2017, p.16)

As it is pointed out from the quotation above, Carter does not believe in the validity of Platonic influence on the enlightenment of human beings since, according to Carter, Plato's disciplines are full of deceptions which deceit the humanity. Moreover, for Carter, Platonic thoughts represented in *The Republic* consist of untruthful and dishonest statements and it is on this basis that Carter clarifies her purpose of demolishing Platonic disciplines in her works especially in *Heroes and Villains*.

To add more about the theoretical subject, the politics of human beings depends upon the politics of women in Plato's *The Republic*. For Plato, true politics seems to be depicted in unity in which it is played by women and men equally. In other words, it is through this very unification that the positions of inferiority and superiority between women and men are abolished. Therefore, in 'Platonic unity,' ontological human politics consists of the politics of women. It is described in *The Republic* that "both can and both should follow the same range of occupations and perform the same functions; they should receive the same education to enable them to do so. In this way society will get the best value from both" (Plato, 1974, p.157). Though Plato disregards 'the otherness' between the sexes; this otherness seems to be represented for the mutualisation and contribution between the sexes for the welfare of a state. As Canto and Goldhammer put it:

Women are necessary, then, to conceptualize the status of eros and to involve humankind in politics. In the mythology of the Symposium Plato even goes so far as to attempt a sort of amorous ontology which the need for women's political presence might be deduced. Above all, if love, subject as it is to time and desire, always seems to be directed toward the other, as the Symposium shows, the only way for love to discover its reality and truth is for the one and the other to be united, as in the union of both sexes in the city, for example, without which there is no true politics. Yet in this union otherness must remain present as a condition of thought: this is what the fact that men and women must remain warriors teaches us. Women especially must celebrate, in a banquet and by the act of their political and combative body, the reality of desire and time. Women must prove through war the reality of the other whom they represent. Apart from such a war, women's politics and women's liberation are inconceivable. (1985, p.288)

⁴ No matter how Plato's *The Republic* classifies the presence of women in his ideal state, it is also Plato, who "broadens the horizons for women in his ideal state; in a communal society, Plato advocates that Guardian women should have the same duties, and therefore the same education and training, as men, claiming that the reproductive difference of 'women bearing and men begetting' is redundant (284)" [my comment added] (Plato qtd. in Yeandle, 2017, p.27).

As it is depicted in the quotation above, love is one of the major platonic themes in Platonic unity. It is this very love between women and men that they are able to reach unification for true politics. Moreover, according to Plato, women should also be included in a war so that they can get their rights properly. In *The Republic*, it is written that “if we are going to use men and women for the same purposes, we must teach them the same things.’ [...] ‘We educated the men both physically and mentally.’ [...] ‘We shall have to train the women also, then, in both kinds of skill, and train them for war as well, and treat them in the same way as the men” (Plato, 1974, p.161). Similarly, as Canto and Goldhammer assert, the equality between men and women is only able to be secured politically, economically and socially as long as women become a political force: “[y]et to make women the equals of men [...] to give women the education and capabilities they need to govern with perfect confidence both the public and private spheres, the household and the state - is not possible unless they are also given access to all the resources of war. Only on that condition do they enter into political, as a force of otherness” (1985, pp.288-289). As it is expressed in the quotation above, for Plato, women’s political force as the other is only guaranteed, if women are given enough rights to make them active in their political existences especially in war.

A critique: Angela Carter’s rejection of Plato and overall conclusion

For Plato, a necessity of women is a political reality because “the question of women and politics is always inextricably bound up with that of political reality [...]” (Canto & Goldhammer, 1985, p.278). Even though Plato writes in *The Republic* that both men and women should be educated and trained equally since they have the same purposes in political life, the reality is not as it is expressed because Plato writes that “they should share all duties, though we should treat the females as the weaker, the males as the stronger” (1974, p.160). Thusly, in Plato’s *The Republic*, women are expected to be as active as men in all fields of life equally. It seems as if there were no differences, superiorities or inferiorities between men and women in Plato’s ideal state. However, it is not as it is depicted since Plato writes that “[t]he only difference between men and women is one of physical function – one begets, the other bears children” (1974, p.157). Moreover, the same thematic point can also be observed in Aristotle’s *The Politics*. To justify this view, Aristotle states that in the marriage relationship “[...] the male is more fitted to rule than the female [...] As between male and female this kind of relationship is permanent” (1981, p.92). Depending upon these controversial statements uttered by Plato on women and their body politics, Carter presents her subversive attitude on Plato and his Platonic thoughts. As Yeandle puts it, “Plato’s influence on Western cultural values hinders female liberation and needs to be erased in order to achieve equality; for Carter, as Platonic thought is untangled, women’s societal position improves” (2017, p.13). Plato is considered to be the sole myth-maker, and his creation of a utopic society in his *The Republic* is, therefore, a mere fantasy which harms women. That is why Carter calls Plato “the father of lies” in her “Notes from the Front Line” (1998, p.28). As Yeandle writes, “Plato is depicted as a mythmaker whose ideal society has limiting roles for women, and whose notions of knowledge and reality are ultimately flawed” (2017, p.14). Furthermore, Carter positions Plato “as the initiator of this tradition, and her ‘demythologizing business’ is targeted at breaking down Plato’s influence over the Western world. She is both demythologizing and (de)philosophizing” (Yeandle, 2017, p.17).

Consequently, Plato’s *The Republic* as the ‘ideal state,’ his utopic, androcentric and the position of women in this ideal state can all be considered to be the primary sources for Carter’s demythologising and dephilosophising business. Platonic thoughts, which are expressed related to the presence of the female body in *The Republic*, are, therefore, intentionally deconstructed by Carter in her works especially in *Heroes and Villains*. In *Heroes and Villains*, Marianne, escapes from her home land, the

land of Intellectuals, to the forest, the land of Barbarians. As Dani Cavallaro writes in her *The World of Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation* (2011), “Carter’s ideologically subversive heroine, Marianne, declares her independence of spirit in the most radical fashion imaginable within the novel’s parameters. She forsakes the rational and orderly culture of the Professors, in which she has been born and raised, in order to elope with a member of the rival culture, the magic-oriented Barbarians [...]” (2011, p.79). In this regard, Marianne’s problematic desire shows that she cannot stand living amongst the land of Professors since she is against orderly system in which everything is rationally and systematically constructed, though she is a part of that rational system by birth. As Carter puts it, “Marianne chops off her golden plaits, burns her father’s books, drowns his clock in the swamp, flees her protective white tower and, in the company of her brother’s killer, ventures into the dark and mysterious forest beyond the fringes of her known world” (2011, p.vii). Thereby, Marianne’s alienation from the society, in which she has had her upbringing, makes her decisive enough to leave the ‘white tower’ though it is the land of Intellectuals. Thusly, Carter, thanks to Marianne, demolishes the norms of Platonic ideal society in her *Heroes and Villains*⁵. According to Yeandle, “Carter’s appropriation of the *Republic* in a dystopian setting in *Heroes and Villains* enables her to assess Plato’s utopia and exploit its limitations, particularly in relation to the role Plato gives to women in his fantasy state” (2017, p.24). In a similar vein, Carter, in her *Heroes and Villains*, tests the limits of Platonic society through Marianne, whom puts to use the characteristics and the conditions of women described in Plato’s ideal state in his *The Republic*. Therefore, Platonic thoughts, which consist of ‘lies and myths,’ are in relation to the social structure in general and the existence of women in particular, make Carter decisive enough to eradicate and exploit them in her *Heroes and Villains* purposefully. Carter demythologises the presence of the female body in the state through the female body politics represented by Marianne, which can be considered to be one of the Platonic themes in *The Republic*. As Carter puts it, Marianne’s:

ruling passion was always anger rather than fear.’ This is a girl who is bored with the impotent intellectual life of the Professors, hates their community festivals and rituals, including marriage, and disdains their self-referential language -- a ‘severe’ child who won’t play the games of others, upending the little boy who in his somewhat nasty innocence, only wants to play the hero, leaving him yowling in the dust. The boy calls her a Barbarian and a villain, and she becomes one (2011, p.vii).

Marianne is against daily-life systematic parameters conducted by the Professors. She does not favor the traditions nor does she keep an orderly life in which pre-defined rules and rational neatness are obsessively impressed. Therefore, she becomes the Barbarian by eloping with one of the Barbarian raiders. Carter depicts the collapse of the ideal state in her *Heroes and Villains* which parodies the existence of Platonic theme through Marianne’s perverse and subversive attempts. As Yeandle states, “in *Heroes and Villains*, a parody of Plato’s *Republic* is central to the novel, in which Carter questions the structure of Plato’s ideal state, provides a damning response to the place women are given in this regime, and critiques his definition of the Philosopher Ruler by allocating the novel’s female protagonist *Marianne* a version of this role” [my italics added] (2017, p.23). In other words, it is through Marianne’s presence and existence that Platonic thoughts concerning the place of women in the state is parodied and demolished. Due to the fact that Marianne shows and proves that a woman can also be “the ‘Tiger Lady’ and rule the men with a rod of iron” (Carter, 2011, p.163). In a similar vein, Anna Katsavos writes that “*Heroes and Villains* illustrates Carter’s definition of ‘speculative fiction’ as ‘the fiction of asking “what if?”’ (Katsavos 11), as the novel questions what would happen if Plato’s theory was put into practice” (Katsavos qtd. in Yeandle, 2017, pp.23-24). As a result, it can be concluded that *Heroes and Villains* is, in fact, a parodic disposition of how Platonic ‘Heroes’ are turned into Carterian ‘Villains.’

⁵ For further details, see Carter’s *Heroes and Villains* (1969), introd. Robert Coover, Penguin Modern Classics (2011).

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