

# **СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЫЙ ИСЛАМСКИЙ КОММЕНТАРИЙ НА «РЕСПУБЛИКУ» ПЛАТОНА: ВЗГЛЯДЫ ИБН РУШДА НА ПОЛОЖЕНИЕ И ПОТЕНЦИАЛ ЖЕНЩИН**

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Статья исследует комментарий XII века, написанный Ибн Рушдом (Аверроэсом), на «Республику» Платона. Данный комментарий является единственной интерпретацией «Республики» с мусульманской точки зрения. Написанная около 375 г. до н.э., «Республика» Платона посвящена организации справедливого города-государства и содержит революционные для своего времени идеи о положении и качествах женщин – идеи, которые оставались неоднозначными и для периода, в котором жил Ибн Рушд. В научной литературе этот мусульманский философ известен прежде всего как наиболее уважаемый комментатор Аристотеля. Однако из-за отсутствия арабского перевода «Политики» Аристотеля Ибн Рушд обратился к политической теории его учителя и составил комментарий на «Республику» Платона. В своем комментарии Ибн Рушд берет на себя смелость проводить параллели между контекстом, описанным Платоном, и современным Ибн Рушду мусульманским обществом. Примечательно, что когда мусульманский философ отклоняется от текста, он делает это вовсе не в сторону более патриархальных, типичных для Аристотеля интерпретаций. Напротив, Ибн Рушд утверждает, что женщины способны быть правительницами и философами, что их качества не проявляются в полной мере из-за недоступности им образования, и что неучастие женщин в общественной жизни пагубно сказывается на процветании городов. Данная статья направлена на критический анализ утверждений Ибн Рушда о положении женщин, а также восприятия его комментария в научной литературе.

**Ключевые слова:** Ибн Рушд, Аверроэс, женщины, Платон, Республика, Аристотель

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# THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC COMMENTARY ON PLATO'S REPUBLIC: IBN RUSHD'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE POSITION AND POTENTIAL OF WOMEN

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24848/islm1g.11.1.02>

*This paper investigates the twelfth-century commentary on Plato's Republic by the Andalusian Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Ibn Rushd is considered to be the only Muslim philosopher who commented on the Republic. Written around 375 BC, Plato's Republic discusses the order and character of a just city-state and contains revolutionary ideas on the position and qualities of women, which remained contested also in Ibn Rushd's time. This Muslim philosopher is primarily known as the*

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*most esteemed commentator of Aristotle. However, for the lack of an Arabic translation of Aristotle's Politics, Ibn Rushd commented on the political theory of Aristotle's teacher, i.e. Plato's Republic, instead. In his commentary, Ibn Rushd juxtaposes examples from Plato's context and those from contemporary Muslim societies. Notably, when he diverges from the text, he does not drift off toward more patriarchal, Aristotelian interpretations. On the contrary, he argues that women are capable of being rulers and philosophers, that their true competencies remain unknown as long as they are deprived of education, and that this situation is detrimental to the flourishing of the city. This article aims to critically analyse Ibn Rushd's statements on the position of women, as well as their reception in scholarly literature.*

**Keywords:** *Ibn Rushd, Averroes, women, Plato, Republic, Aristotle*

How did the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 594/1198) reflect on the ideas that Plato expressed in his *Republic* regarding the potential of women? The first part of the present contribution discusses Ibn Rushd's possible motivations for producing a commentary on Plato's work, and considers Ibn Rushd's body of thought and the methodological problems encountered when analysing Ibn Rushd's text. Ibn Rushd's reflections on the position of women as expressed in his commentary on Plato will be discussed in the second half of the paper, followed by concluding remarks.

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1. This paper is part of the 4-year project "Women in Medieval Arabic Philosophical Texts: Ibn Rushd in Context", which is funded by FWO (Research Foundation – Flanders), project number 1183619N. The host institution is Ghent University, the supervisors for this project are Prof. Dr. Danny Praet and Prof. Dr. Caroline Janssen.

## WHY DID IBN RUSHD COMMENT ON THE *REPUBLIC*?

Ibn Rushd is the only medieval Islamic philosopher who wrote a commentary on Plato's *Republic* (Butterworth, 1976, p. 575), the latter being a very influential Platonic dialogue (featuring Socrates) that deals with the topic of the ideal state. Ibn Rushd selected Plato's work because he could not get his hands on what would have been Ibn Rushd's first choice for commenting upon: Aristotle's *Politics*. Though many works of Greek philosophy and science had reached the medieval Islamic philosophers by virtue of a massive translation movement that took place between the years 750–1000,<sup>2</sup> it seems that the *Politics* was missing and that no Arabic translation was ever done.<sup>3</sup> As Ibn Rushd noted, the *Politics* had “not yet fallen into our hands”, and therefore he decided to comment on Plato's work on political science instead (22.3–5).<sup>4</sup> Plato's *Republic* was the last work Ibn Rushd ever commented upon, probably because until late in his life he kept on hoping that Aristotles' *Politics* would surface (Black, 2011, p. 123).

### PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

Interestingly, Plato's *Republic* is one of the earliest works containing “feminist” thought (Vlastos, 1994; Ward, 1996). To be sure, the notion of “feminism” is complex, and to apply it to an ancient or medieval text is anachronistic. However, Plato's *Republic* is indeed known for its defiance of classical family and gender roles. An indication of how much this went against customary gender roles can be grasped from the fact that in the fifteenth century, the Italian humanist Leonardi Bruni was still unwilling to translate the *Republic* into Latin because he thought some of its aspects would be too disturbing to his Florentine audience (Blue-stone, 1994, p. 110). But three centuries earlier, in twelfth-century al-Andalus, Ibn Rushd did not shy away from discussing this work in the form of a commentary and was open to reflect upon a range of political ideas that were most unconventional also for his time and culture.

The central questions in Plato's *Republic* are the nature of justice (*dikaíosunē*) and the organisation of the just state that produces righteous citizens. For discussing the question of justice, Plato introduces Socrates as his main character, making him raise philosophical questions to his interlocutors. Their replies solicit more questions, leading to a Socratic dialogue. In the conversation, Socrates argues that the perfect, just state allows each person to do what he or she is best in. Most people belong to the class of artisans and farmers. Outstanding men join the military and become the “guardians” of the state. Because everything in the just state is harmonious and optimal, also women should occupy the positions to which they are best suited. The best women can become guardians and are even obliged to do so if being a guardian is what they excel at; this is the principle of justice (*Republic* 454e).<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, the idea of female guardians is quite remarkable, also in light of the fact that respectable Greek women used to live very secluded lives.

In the *Republic*, all guardians — male or female — participate in joint physical exercises (an activity carried out in the nude) (452b). Furthermore, there is sexual communism:

2. For the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, see Gutas, 1998; Adamson, 2016.

3. The absence of the *Politics* in Arabic has been puzzling specialists for decades, see Brague, 1993; Leaman, 1997; Mahdi, 1991; Pines, 1975. According to Mahdi (1991), the *Politics* were hidden on purpose because of its contents. The problem with this assumption is that there are great similarities between the *Politics* and other Arabic sources such as al-Fārābī, al-ʿAmīrī and Miskawayh. Cf. Leaman, 1997.

4. All references to the commentary in this paper stem from Lerner's translation (Lerner, 1974).

5. Here and elsewhere in the text, we use the translation by Reeve (2004). The references indicate the Stephanus pages.

temporary marriages are arranged to stimulate new generations of pure guardian offspring (459e-460a). A rigged lottery is to ensure that the right pairs are formed and that the best women breed with the best men. No married guardians are to live privately together, and the marriage becomes annulled as soon as pregnancy occurs. The (healthy) offspring will be brought to special nurseries in order to be then raised by the state (460c). All family ties are disrupted in order to create unity and to avoid nepotism. This also means that children will not know who their parents are, nor will parents know the identity of their children (457d).

In this conversation with Socrates, the interlocutors arrive at these points in a quite natural manner, and every point is worked out in more detail. The topics of the *Republic* are not limited to the ones mentioned above, but these are the main revolutionary ideas in relation to the topic of women.

At any event, Ibn Rushd decided to interpret a work that must have been quite challenging also to his own cultural context in twelfth-century Al-Andalus. In this respect, already Rosenthal (1958, p. 191) and Urvoy (1998, p. 152) emphasised Ibn Rushd's courage. It should be noted that Ibn Rushd operated from a unique perspective. Coming from an influential Andalusian family, he enjoyed an extensive education that enabled him to develop his talents and excel in different disciplines. He combined several careers, serving as a philosopher, court physician and *qāḍī* of Córdoba and Seville. Already his father and grandfather had been respected *qāḍīs*, hence the nickname *al-ḥafīd*, "the grandson".

In the field of legal works, he wrote the *Bidāyat al-mujtabid wa nihāyat al-muqtaṣid* – a sizable summary that elaborates on views of different legal schools about particular topics. In this work, Ibn Rushd also lays out the basics of lawmaking for legal scholars to practice *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) in cases that have not yet been exhaustively discussed (Dutton, 1994, p. 191). He himself was also a qualified doctor and became court physician in 1182 after the passing of his friend Ibn Ṭufayl who held the position before him. Ibn Rushd contributed significantly to neuroscience, as he discovered the existence of Parkinson's disease and was the first to disclose that the retina – and not the lens – is the sensory part of the eye (Belen & Bolay, 2009, pp. 378-380). He composed the *Kitāb Kulliyāt fī ṭ-ṭibb* (known in Latin as the *Colliget*), an encyclopaedia of medicine based on Aristotelian concepts. In addition, Ibn Rushd also compiled the works of Galen, wrote a commentary on Avicenna's *Qānūn fī ṭ-ṭibb*, and another on Aristotle's biology. His contributions to medical knowledge and the transmission thereof are, however, overshadowed by his name as a philosopher.

With the Greeks, Ibn Rushd shared an appreciation of reason and of philosophy as the highest forms of human perfection. As Delgado puts it, "[t]he intention of the Cordovan thinker was to ascertain the truth, thus confirming his confidence in the ability of the human mind to comprehend the world" (Delgado, 2012, p. 328). Ibn Rushd wrote several works that touch upon philosophy and its relation to the law. In his *Kitāb Faṣl al-maqāl* ('On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy', Hourani (1976)), he investigated the relationship between Islam and philosophy. He characterised "philosophy" as the activity of studying the world around us in order to come closer to its creator. To learn and make the proper observations, one needs to know logic and strategies of how to reason correctly. By this, Ibn Rushd meant an accurate interpretation of the works of the ancient Greeks. According to him, the encouragement for attaining knowledge is evident from the Qur'an: for example, verse 59:2 states that "Learn from this, all of you with insight!". For Ibn Rushd, practising philosophy is obligatory for believers who have the intellectual capacity to do so

(Hourani, 1976, p. 45), but it is forbidden for the majority who lack this capacity (Hourani, 1976, p. 145) – the danger being that philosophy would confuse them, and ultimately lead them into disbelief.

Philosophy might lead astray those who are poorly equipped or lack guidance, but this does not make philosophy negative in itself: for Ibn Rushd, to reject philosophy would be like withholding water from a thirsty person just because somebody else once choked on a sip of water (Hourani, 1976, p. 51).

Ibn Rushd fiercely defended the practice of philosophy, which before him experienced a heavy blow, in particular, from the theologian al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), author of *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*.<sup>6</sup> Ibn Rushd's response, titled *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* ("The Incoherence of the Incoherence"), is probably his most famous philosophical work, in which he defends the *falāsifa*, Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī, and aims to show that the "real" Aristotle was not in conflict with the revelation.<sup>7</sup> In a nutshell, we can say that Ibn Rushd's philosophical project was to clear Aristotle's thought from the many layers of Neoplatonist interpretation that it had accumulated over the centuries, and to reconcile his philosophy with Islam.

In fact, Ibn Rushd became famous as *the* commentator on Aristotle. As he was an admirer of Aristotle, the Sultan Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf (r. 558–80/1163–84) ordered Ibn Rushd to write commentaries on Aristotle's works to clarify the Greek sage's stance on a wide range of topics. Taken together, Ibn Rushd produced 38 commentaries on Aristotle, of which most are lost in the Arabic original. Starting in the thirteenth century, many of his commentaries were translated into Hebrew and Latin and became of crucial importance for the study of Aristotle (Walzer, 1970, p. 27). In the Latin West, Ibn Rushd became known simply as "the commentator", or by his Latinized name: Averroes. The radical aspects of his thought helped to shape the philosophical curriculum in Western and Central Europe and made way for the development of modern philosophy (Leaman, 2002, p. 29).

His philosophy received no significant follow-up in the Arabic world. A few years before his death in 1198/594, Ibn Rushd was sent into exile to Lucena, a Jewish settlement nearby Córdoba. We do not know the particular circumstances that led to his exile: the available information suggests that Ibn Rushd's orthodoxy was called into question, and the Sultan might have dismissed him – despite Ibn Rushd being the Sultan's personal physician and friend – to keep the situation under control (Kukkonen, 2011, pp. 495–496). Urvoy argues that "Ibn Rushd was thus the victim of a political gesture, and was sacrificed by the Sultan in order to win over the masses" (Urvoy, 1991, p. 35). It has been suggested that Ibn Rushd's criticism of the state and the position of women therein in his commentary on the *Republic* aggravated the public doubt that was cast on him and led to his exile (Rosenthal 1953, p. 252). At any event, his expulsion was short, but while his honour was restored, he did not regain his former functions and titles (Urvoy, 1998, p. 186). Ibn Rushd was brought to the Sultan's court in Marrakesh, where he died a few months later. The story goes that a mule carried his remains back to Córdoba, balanced by the weight of his books.

6. Al-Ghazālī attacks the philosophers, Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī, on 20 points, three of which he considered especially problematic and heretic. These three points are that the philosophers, according to al-Ghazālī, believe in the eternity of the world, claim that God has no knowledge of particulars, and that there is no bodily resurrection after death. See *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, translated by Kamali (1958).

7. The fact that Ibn Rushd considered both the Qur'an and philosophy as the paths to the truth even when they might seem contradictory at first was later misunderstood as the "doctrine of double truth", meaning that something could be true in religion but false in philosophy, and vice versa. This is not what Ibn Rushd meant; he meant that there are different ways to attain the same, one truth. On the double truth doctrine, see Dales (1984).

ARISTOTLE'S COMMENTATOR ON PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

With reference to topics of women and gender, the substitution of Aristotle for Plato is quite ironic and fascinating, as the two Greek sages' views on women, family and society do not align at all.

If in Plato's perfect city, not only guardians but all groups of citizens have no private households, Aristotle, in his *Politics*, deems a family to be the building block of the city (*Politics* I.3 1253b1-1253b23).<sup>8</sup> In general, Aristotle, as Plato's disciple, raises in his work many objections to the *Republic*. So, as Aristotle's most eminent commentator, could Ibn Rushd not have sensed that Aristotle would have had a different idea of the ideal city? It has been argued that Ibn Rushd must have been well aware of this (Mahdi, 1991, p. 16).<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, the absence of the *Politics* also implies that Ibn Rushd missed Aristotle's sexist characterisation of the female: "the relation of male to female is that of natural superior to natural inferior, and that of the ruler to the ruled" (*Politics* I.V 1254b12-15).

Aristotle further defines the female deliberative faculty as "akuron" [ἄκυρον], i.e., as lacking authority. He notoriously stated that "[t]he deliberative part of the soul is entirely missing from a slave; a woman has it but it lacks authority; a child has it but it is incompletely developed" (*Politics* I.XIII 1260a4-14). Markedly different is the view that Plato expresses in his *Republic*. In fact, the supposed "gender equality" between male and female *guardians* in Plato's *Republic* has sparked abundant scholarly attention for its feminism *avant la lettre* (Vlastos, 1994; Ward, 1996; Townsend, 2017).<sup>10</sup>

So what did Aristotle's commentator make of Plato's female guardians? Before moving on to this question, we must mention that the Arabic manuscript of Ibn Rushd's commentary on Plato's *Republic* did not survive. The text has only come down to us through Samuel ben Judah's translation into Hebrew, of which eight manuscripts have been preserved,<sup>11</sup> and two Latin translations based upon the Hebrew: one by Elia del Medigo from 1491 and one by Jacob Mantino ben Samuel (Mantinus) from 1539 (Lerner, 1974, p. vii; see, in particular, footnotes 1 and 2). Two English translations of Ibn Rushd's commentary on the *Republic* have been made from the Hebrew translations, one by Rosenthal in 1956 and the other by Lerner in 1974; in the present paper, we will follow Lerner's translation of the commentary.<sup>12</sup>

Another methodological problem lies in the uncertainty about which text Ibn Rushd actually held in his hands. It is unlikely that he had a complete Arabic translation of Plato's *Republic* at his disposal. At any event, not a single complete Platonic work in Arabic has been transmitted to us (Reisman, 2004, p. 269).<sup>13</sup>

8. We rely on Reeve's translation of Aristotle's *Politics* for all citations; see Reeve (1998).

9. Mahdi (1991) explains that "He gave no indication that this substitution presented certain problems or that Plato's *Republic* might not agree with the spirit or letter of Aristotle's *Politics* - things he, as the most knowledgeable student of Aristotle's works, must have known. He read and commented on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he could find (in bk. 6) Aristotle's main discussion of practical and political science, and on the *Rhetoric*, where he could find Aristotle's classification of the regimes. He was in a position to form a clear idea of Aristotle's view of political science" (p. 16).

10. While Plato's account of women is important for this topic, the complexities of modern-day interpretations of whether Plato's thought is feminist or not cannot be incorporated here.

11. For information on these manuscripts, see Rosenthal (1969, pp. 2-6).

12. The commentary has also been translated into other languages, including Spanish, Portuguese and German. The commentary has also been translated into Arabic twice, both appeared in the same year, see al-Ubaidi & al-Thahbi (1998) and Chahlane & al-Jabri (1998). On the attempt to reconstruct the text in Arabic, see also Benantar (2013).

13. For Plato in the Arabic tradition, see Gutas (2012). For the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, see Gutas (1998) and Adamson (2016).

Ibn Rushd's commentary omits the dialogical element and also the context described by Plato. Supposedly, the actual text that Ibn Rushd worked with gave no clues about the general structure of Plato's original text. Most likely, Ibn Rushd wrote his commentary on the basis of just a paraphrase of Plato's work. One such paraphrase had been produced by the philosopher-physician Galen (a text of which only two fragments have come down to us). It is possible that Ibn Rushd, in fact, relied on Galen's work, which was available to him in the form of an Arabic translation made by Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (Walzer, 1951, p. 2).

Ibn Rushd states clearly that he does not intend to cover every part of the *Republic*, which consists of ten books. He only wishes to deal with the scientific arguments of the work and, therefore, disregards all dialectical issues. He leaves out book one, the first half of book two, and book ten. He deems these parts unnecessary "for this science" and only briefly states what "these stories" are about (105.12). He takes the liberty of eliminating certain parts of the *Republic* and of diverging from others. Particularly notable is his deviation from Plato's text on the topic of women, where he does not simply comment on the text but also adds his own examples. Importantly, Ibn Rushd does not drift off into a more patriarchal, Aristotelian direction. On the contrary: he states that female rulers and philosophers are possible (53.24-27) and that women's competence is unknown because they do not get the necessary education (54.5-8). He judges this situation as detrimental to the flourishing of the city, and identifies it as one of the causes of the city's poverty (54.10-11).

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE IDEAL STATE

The fragment on women is located in the chapter that Ibn Rushd called the "First Treatise"; it is there that he discusses Plato's/Socrates' striking proposal for guardian women, as presented in Book V of Plato's *Republic*. The context of the fragment is, according to Ibn Rushd's introductory statement, "the inquiry concerning how they [the guardians] copulate, the upbringing of their children, and the manner of their procreation" (52.26-29), that is, as understood by Plato/Socrates. Ibn Rushd does not always make clear when he is merely paraphrasing the text and when he adds his own reflections, but it is generally assumed that when he starts with the words "we say" he is speaking for himself,<sup>14</sup> while the words "he says" are used to introduce Plato's opinion (Lerner, 1974, p. xvi).

Ibn Rushd starts by saying that in order to preserve the guardian nature, the guardians must copulate with women that have a similar nature and training (52.29-53.1). In Book V of the *Republic*, the concept of "nature" is a central matter because the just state consists of everyone doing what he or she does best, i.e. functions according to his or her *nature*. At first, Socrates says that different natures must have different pursuits and that men and women have different natures (453 e). Here, "nature" indicates something that is in accordance with the body's biological sex, of which there are two: male and female.

Further on, however, the meaning of "nature" changes as Socrates says that a male and a female whose *souls* are suited for medicine have the same *nature* (454d). This time, "nature" is associated with what is not bodily visible: inner qualities, not dependent on whether a person

14. Lerner notes that "we" is not only used as a "*pluralis maiestatis*" but "may also mean something like "we moderns" (35.12, 18-19) or "we investigators" (53.19, 29) or "we adherents of the *shari'a*" (63.3; 66.15) or "us Muslims" (66.22; 81.4) or "us men" (72.8) or "we Andalusians" (66.21, 97.6), or "we Córdobaans" (84.22; 96.24)." He adds that this list is not exhaustive, see Lerner (1974, p. xvi).

is male or female. According to this view, there could be male and female guardians because a guardian nature can be present in either of the sexes.<sup>15</sup>

Ibn Rushd deems the question of male and female natures important for political science and adopts this matter in his commentary. He states that it is “[a subject] fit for investigation whether there exist among women natures resembling the natures of each and every class of citizens — and in particular the guardians — or whether women’s natures are distinguished from men’s natures” (53.3–4).

Just like Plato, Ibn Rushd recognises that women are generally better at some tasks. Plato mentions cooking and weaving; Ibn Rushd points out that women are better at performing music. And just like Plato, Ibn Rushd adds that even though women excel at some tasks, they are generally weaker and should be given “less recondite” tasks (53.15–19).<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of this important fragment hinges on the kind of task that Ibn Rushd has in mind. Does he mean that they are physically weaker (smaller bones, less muscle mass) or that they are weaker in a metaphorical sense, i.e., intellectually?

According to Catarina Belo, he means “merely physical strength, not intellectual ability” (Belo, 2009, p. 8). Belo argues that the difference in strength is the only difference between the genders that Ibn Rushd perceives (p. 11), and that they are “undoubtedly equal and identical” intellectually (p. 10). She further states that “[e]ven the physical differences between men and women do not ultimately detract from that essential identity between the genders, since women, like men, are fully rational” (p. 20).

The meaning of “essential identity”, however, is far from obvious (analogous to the concept of “nature” that was mentioned before). “Full rationality” is also rather problematic: in *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, Ibn Rushd argues that philosophy is obligatory for those who are intellectually capable of exercising it and forbidden for those who have a weaker rational faculty, all the while we can assume that for Ibn Rushd, both groups have an equal “essential identity” as humans (Hourani, 1976).

In this context, it might be worth recalling that according to Aristotle, not all humans are equal intellectually: the rational part in the soul is entirely missing in slaves; it is present in women where it however “lacks authority” (it is “akuron”); and it is also present in children,<sup>17</sup> but in them it is not yet matured (*Politics* I.XIII 1260a4–14).<sup>18</sup>

Ibn Rushd did not read this quote from the *Politics*, but it is an idea present throughout Aristotelian ethics and throughout Greek philosophy. As Ayubi has shown, the notion that women are deficient in rationality is also present in Islamic ethical texts (Ayubi, 2019, pp. 76, 103–104). This categorisation is also maintained in Islamic law; besides being Muslim, one must be male and *baligh* (must have attained *bulūgh*, the age of puberty) to qualify for guardianship (as Ibn Rushd himself noted in his *Bidāyat al-mujtahid*, p. 13), although officially documented opinions do not capture informal dynamics of authority and agency in the household and society.

15. It might be interesting to note that this view opposes Plato’s antropogenesis in the *Timaeus*, which was written after the *Republic* and was very well known in Arabic philosophy (Gutas, 2012). Ibn Rushd was familiar with this dialogue as well (Badawi, 1978, pp. 62–63). The *Timaeus* explains that women first came into being as reincarnated men that had led a cowardly, unrighteous life (*Timaeus* 90e–91a). In this view, being a woman is the opposite of a cover of one’s inner qualities: it is the very visible mark of moral inferiority, the punishment for cowardice.

16. The statement that women are weaker in almost everything is often repeated in the *Republic* (451d–e, 455d, 455e, 456a, 457a–b).

17. We can assume that Aristotle means male children here.

18. Many scholars discussed this quote from the *Politics* and attempted to interpret and elucidate what Aristotle might mean by declaring female reason as “lacking authority”. Cf. e.g., Horowitz, 1976; Mayhew, 2004; Fortenbaugh, 2006; Stauffer, 2008; Connell, 2016; Leunissen, 2017; Melkebeek, 2016, 2020.



Bauer points out that there probably was more room for discussion in philosophical texts, as opposed to juridical works that deal with the subject of women (Bauer, 2010, p. 10). Ibn Rushd seems to seize this opportunity for debate with both hands. He does not consider everyone capable of practising philosophy, not even all Muslim adult men. He reserves this possibility for specific, outstanding men, and he observes that there exist extraordinary women, too. From this point, he concludes that it is not impossible that there can be female philosophers and rulers (53.24-27). He also hints at the issue of women being eligible for becoming *imāma* and says that some laws denied women to be priests, whereas others rejected this restriction (53.24-29). He does not elaborate, nor does he share his own opinion, but his position on female philosophers and rulers makes the reader assume that Ibn Rushd does deem some women fit for religious leadership. However, as *Belo* and al-Jābirī have observed, Ibn Rushd is careful in any case to make sure that his philosophical commentary is not averse to Islamic law (al-Jābirī, 1995, p. 141; Belo, 2009, p. 13).

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN

IT seems that Al-Andalus had a reasonably women-friendly climate compared to other parts of Europe that were under Roman law. Medieval Andalusian women had more rights in some cases than formally specified in the *sharīʿa*, for instance, regarding marriage contracts (Coope, 2013, p. 79). Some women were also involved (directly or indirectly) in political affairs and administration and were educated in various sciences (Sidik, Sidek, Arshad & Bakar, 2013). The emancipated status of some women could have facilitated further discussion on the social position and rights of all women. Also, some women's participation in intellectual tasks could have demonstrated to men that the former could excel in other things besides household management and childcare. Ibn Rushd says that the competence of women is unknown due to the fact that they are “placed at the service of their husbands and confined to procreation, upbringing and suckling” (54.6-8). He adds that this is why women in “these cities” (the cities of his time) are often like plants (54.8-10). He possibly uses this term because of the Aristotelian concept of a “plant soul” that is occupied with three things only: nourishment, growth, and reproduction.

Ibn Rushd discusses the negative effects of denying women the opportunity to develop their skills and competencies, and says that this situation is damaging to the city. Women's unemployment places a burden upon the men, which leads to the cities' poverty (54.10-11). Rosenthal observes that Ibn Rushd “openly attacks their [the members of the Muslim community] way of life as the result of the official attitude. It is clear that Plato's ideas must have drawn Averroes' attention to the wastage of human labour so detrimental to the State, and led him to advocate a reversal of orthodox Muslim policy. It is the more surprising that this realistic criticism of the position of women in Islam and its bad effect on the economic health of the nation should have gone unnoticed [...]” (Rosenthal, 1953, p. 252). Rosenthal's astonishment about scholarly disregard of this aspect of the commentary dates from 1953. With the rise of feminist projects in the past decades, it becomes increasingly unthinkable *not* to notice how progressive Ibn Rushd's remarks were in the twelfth century.

As Butterworth (1985, p. 26) argues, Ibn Rushd “berates his fellow citizens for the role they ascribe to women and points to the evils such a policy engenders”. Butterworth also stresses that Ibn Rushd wanted the reader to know that he is speaking for himself: “To underline that he is speaking in his own name, Averroes frequently employs the first person plural and

points to the evils existing in the cities of his day because of the way women's capacities are understood." (p. 39).

The liberty Ibn Rushd takes in deviating from the text and transcending his role of a mere commentator on Plato may indicate that the position of women was meaningful to him personally (Schirilla, 1996, p. 139). Belo (2009) says that "[t]he contribution of women to society is necessary for the advancement of the state. Most clear and noteworthy is Averroes' condemnation of the relegation of women's role to procreation since they become thereby a burden on society" (p. 11). She also states that "He urges society, in particular his Muslim contemporaries, to allow women a greater role in public affairs, for the benefit of the entire state" (p. 20).

And indeed, Ibn Rushd's blaming the city for not maximising women's employment can also be interpreted as a concern exclusively about the wastage of human labour, and his insistence on advantages for the state if women are drawn fully into economic life. The assertion that women could fulfil other roles for the good of the city does not necessarily entail raising their status.

Druart observes that Ibn Rushd follows al-Fārābī in neglecting those who are not "useful" to the city (Druart, 2003, p. 106). Also Lerner suggests that in Ibn Rushd's commentary, "the implications for the chronically ill — whether in body or in soul — are quickly drawn, though with a certain ambiguity as to whether killing or suicide is indicated (37.15-38.18)" (Lerner, 1974, p. xix). This implies Ibn Rushd saw no need to care for people with chronic defects, as they would never attain complete virtue and be fully *just*. Going further into this direction Ibn Rushd deems it to be the physician's task to distinguish chronic defects from curable ones. People with chronic defects who wish to live their lives while not being productive are called "idlers" by Ibn Rushd. He adds that some people think they should be killed, and others think they should be spared (38.13-17). As in the question of female priesthood, Ibn Rushd is cautious about disclosing his own opinion.<sup>19</sup>

Besides criticising his own society, Ibn Rushd also inserts another example to make his point, albeit a strange one: he says that from the inhabitants of the "City of Women", some women are fit to participate in guardian tasks (53.19-24). To be sure, no mention is made of any "City of Women" in Plato's *Republic*. Lerner considers this example as "evidence to show that women can hold their own in war" (Lerner, 1974, p. xix). This is certainly an unexpected piece of evidence, even more so because Ibn Rushd explicitly said he intended to only deal with scientific arguments, not with "stories". He doesn't say that some women from, say, Córdoba, are fit for warfare, but women from the City of Women apparently are. It is puzzling that Ibn Rushd adds this kind of example: a fictitious place where there are no men, presumably far beyond the borders of al-Andalus and even beyond the Islamic world. Obviously, this "City of Women" is a reference to a mythical realm, functioning as a contrast to the situation of his own city. Again, we wonder whether Ibn Rushd wanted to express something that could not be articulated more clearly.

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19. In Medieval Islamic (political) philosophy, an obscurity in formulations is frequently maintained on purpose. The *falāsifa* were often working under unsympathetic conditions and had to be careful to present their views as perfectly in line with Islam (Leaman, 2002, p. 210) (this type of thoughtfulness was of course not limited to Islamic philosophers specifically, cf. Siger of Brabant or Boethius of Dacia, the so-called "Latin Averroists"). It follows that the philosophers were skilled in writing their texts in such a way as to appease the ignorant, but to enable the dedicated, persistent reader to get across a layer of orthodoxy and to receive the real message and intentions. This "esoteric interpretation" or "esoteric hermeneutics" has been developed by Leo Strauss (Drury, 1985; Parens, 2016).

In conclusion of his discussion of Plato's views on the guardians, Ibn Rushd repeats that it is evident that if women and men are to perform the same tasks as guardians, they are selected because of their similar natures and should receive the same training (54.14-18).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS ON IBN RUSHD'S STATEMENTS CONCERNING WOMEN

**N**O trace of Aristotle's notoriously discriminating views on women is to be detected in Ibn Rushd's commentary on Plato. Discussing the *Republic*, Ibn Rushd takes the liberty to deviate from Plato's text — while commenting upon the *Republic* or on a summary of it — and inserts a few notable statements. Ibn Rushd says a lot more than any reader could expect, and claims that we cannot really assess the potential of women as long as women do not fully participate in social life and do not work as men in the cities of his time. He is remarkably outspoken about the effects of excluding women from education and work; he goes as far as to say that, in such a way, they become a burden to men and the city's welfare. At the same time, Ibn Rushd treads carefully, for instance, when he brings up the question of female priesthood or mentions possible attitudes towards disabled people, refraining from giving his own judgment. As for the functions that women could fulfil, Ibn Rushd shows no hesitation and unequivocally states that capable rulers and philosophers can live among the female kind.

Several scholars have claimed that Ibn Rushd "agrees" with Plato, as if some unequivocal, clearly pronounced statement is the object of his approval. Some side notes have to be made about the proto-feminist thought in Plato's *Republic*. The elite women that Plato imagines do away with their femininity in several respects in order to join the guardian class, and they are selected as guardians precisely for their similarity to men (Price, 1997, p. 167; Buchan, 1999, p. 80). In this light scholars have argued, among other things, that the *Republic* does not elevate the status of the female, that the best woman does not surpass the level of the second-best man, and that typically female skills like cooking and weaving are ridiculed.<sup>20</sup> Much of the discussion about feminism in Plato essentially boils down to the question of what constitutes feminism (Sheppard, 2009, pp. 74-75). Therefore, the point of view that Ibn Rushd "agrees fully with the Platonic thesis of gender equality" (Urvoy, 1998, p. 152) is problematic and unsatisfactory.

Ibn Rushd can be credited for his open-mindedness and courage, regardless of whether he agreed or disagreed with the ideas that Plato put into Socrates' mouth. After all, the notion of female guardians was shocking even to Plato's fellow Athenians, and the *Republic*'s contents were shunned by other scholars even centuries after Ibn Rushd freely discussed them in his commentaries.

Ibn Rushd's professional versatility — philosopher, medical doctor, and jurist — allowed him to develop a dynamic perspective on the gender question as well as on political organisation in general. This includes an insistence on the vital role of the specialist: at one point, he says that it is the physician's task to discern whether someone is "chronically defective" or not, and thus whether someone could be of use to the city or not. His main argument for the education of women can be interpreted in this sense, too, as an expression of his concern for the

20. Socrates puts it this way: "Do you know of anything practiced by human beings, then, at which the male sex is not superior to the female in all those ways? Or must we make a long story of it by discussing weaving and the preparation of baked and boiled food - the very pursuits in which the female sex is thought to excel, and in which its defeat would expose it to the greatest ridicule of all?" (*Republic*, 455c-d; also, Blair, 2017, p. 85; Sissa, 2002, p. 99).

waste of labour force inherent to half of the city's population. Possibly, Ibn Rushd's perspective on the position and potential of women was also influenced by his medical profession or motivated by his experiences as a *qāḍī*.

The issue of women is not the centrepiece of the commentary, although it draws increasingly more attention because we attach great value to it. Several scholars have interpreted Ibn Rushd's statements as expressing a certain political agenda, arguing that he wanted the community to discover women's talents or that he felt strongly about improving women's lives (ʿAṭīyah, 1996; Harhash, 2014, 2016). But we know nothing of Ibn Rushd's motivations, and any further judgment must be suspended. Leaman (1997, p. 199) even accuses certain scholars of trying to manipulate Ibn Rushd's language in favour of the conclusion that he was an early feminist.<sup>21</sup>

The uncertainty about Ibn Rushd's underlying motivations and influences does not detract from the value of his reflections on the possibilities for women. If the progressive principle of similar education for people with similar skills — regardless of sex — had been turned into policy, the history of women (of Al-Andalus, at least) might have been very different.

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21. Leaman speaks of "the clever ways in which Butterworth, Lerner and Rosenthal all seek to manipulate the forms of language in which he expressed himself" (Leaman, 1997, p.199).

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