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The Courage to Obey: Aristotle on Gender-Integrated Militaries

“Silence is a woman’s glory” (*Politics* 1.8). Quoting the illustrious Socrates, Aristotle employs this phrase in order to describe his view of the proper role of women in ancient Grecian society. In the 4th century BCE, during which Aristotle wrote, few if not only one Greek city-state, Sparta, could boast of providing near-equal rights for their female residents. In Athens, women were not considered to be citizens (Kapparis). The radical Sparta allowed its women (who were full citizens) to own property, collect inheritance, and even serve in the military during times of extreme peril (Thompson). Yet in Athens and most other Greek city states, women were confined to the household, denied citizenship, and were praised for their “silence.” Now, in the postmodern era, over two thousand years after Aristotle first picked up his quill, women have still not achieved total equality with their male counterparts. The United States government has sought to rectify a small part of this injustice by passing legislation which requires that women be integrated into all combat positions by the close of 2016. The United States Marine Corps, however, has fought this government-sanctioned integration. Through careful analysis and critique of Aristotle’s *Politics,* this work will reappropriate the ancient philosopher’s misogynistic philosophies, many of which reflect modern gender stereotypes, in order to show that the United States Marine Corps is unjust in attempting to bar the gender integration of the United States military.

In order to properly analyze the works of Aristotle in relation to this issue, one must first come to understand the general debate between the Marine Corps and the United States government. As previously stated, the Obama administration has passed legislation which requires all branches of the United States military to become gender-integrated by the end of 2016, though branches may apply for integration exemptions within select special forces squads (Philipps). While most branches of the United States military have followed these instructions to the letter, the United States Marine Corps has openly disputed and resisted the Obama Administration’s legislation. In September of 2015, the Marine Corps released the results of a nine-month, thirty-six million dollar study which concluded that gender-integrated units suffered more injuries, moved more slowly, and were overall less-effective than their all-male counterparts. Yet Ray Mabus, the Secretary of the Marine Corps, openly disavowed the study’s findings, stating that the results were biased, selected from a larger study which was conducted for the sole purpose of barring gender integration (Philipps). According to Mabus, “My belief is that you set gender-neutral standards related to the job Marines have to do, and you adhere to them. It doesn’t matter whether the marines who meet those standards are male or female” (Philipps). Mabus’ belief is one shared by the Obama administration and many of the branches of the United States military which have followed orders and begun integrating women into their forces. For instance, in an official statement on the Navy’s decision to begin the integration of women into submarine units, Vice Admiral Michael Connor stated, “Integrating female officers into the submarine force has increased our talent pool and subsequently the force's overall readiness, ensuring that we will remain the world's most capable force for ensuing decades” (Copeland). The Marine Corps, however, does not share this sentiment. The common argument against integration of women into Marine combat units relies on the belief that the presence of women in combat will undermine the general morale, fellowship, and overall killing power of the unit in question (Narula). As accurate research regarding the benefits and disadvantages of gender-integrated military units has yet to be produced, perhaps the ancient philosophies of Aristotle could help to reconcile this disagreement.

According to Aristotle, women should feel inclined to “obey,” as they are less inclined to command than men. While this work in no way condones such a misogynist understanding of women, Aristotle’s philosophy can be reappropriated for the female benefit. Aristotle states, “Clearly, then, moral virtue belongs to all of them; but the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying” (*Politics* 1.8). It is important to note that Aristotle believes the ability to obey constitutes an act of courage. The United States military expresses a similar sentiment in that it requires that all enlisted members of all its branches swear the following oath, “I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice” (“Oaths of Enlistment and Oaths of Office”). Therefore, every member of the United States military, even the Secretary of the Department of Defense, the highest ranking member of the military, despite his capacity to command, answers to the President of the United States. As such, the United States military outwardly stresses the fact that obedience is to be considered a virtue of the utmost importance in both its soldiers and commanders, just as Aristotle believes that obedience is an act of courage. Therefore, every member of the United States military, man or woman, according to Aristotle, embodies courage by obeying the orders of their superiors. Such seems rational, as one could certainly argue that in order to obey the order of a superior, an individual must place his or her faith and, in some cases, his or her life, in the hands of that commander, which undoubtedly requires courage. Moreover, it would seem that, if Aristotle is correct in stating that women are adept at obeying (unlike the Marine Corps), and thus being courageous, then women would make, at the very least, adept soldiers who will undoubtedly obey orders. This reappropriation, however, does not solve the issue of women assuming leadership roles within the military.

As Aristotle indicates subtle connections between the status of women and slaves, the desired reconciliation seems distant at best, as how could someone in a position similar to that of a slave somehow become an effective commander? While this work in no way condones such a misogynist understanding of women, Aristotle’s philosophy can be reappropriated for the female benefit. According to Dr. Dana Stauffer, professor of political theory at the University of Texas at Austin, “Aristotle . . . does indicate important similarities between the two [women and slaves] . . . the threat of physical force that helped bring about the rule of men over women continued to underlie and to shape the relations between the sexes” (930). As such, one could make the argument that if women allowed themselves to be ruled by men by threat of violence, how could they ever be expected to lead anyone, especially men? Yet the rebuttal to this assertion comes from Aristotle’s own writings, namely when he states, “He who has never learned to obey cannot be a good commander” (*Politics* 3.4). If women are naturally adept at obeying and throughout history have expressed courage through their willingness to obey, by extension they would then be similarly adept at commanding, which, according to this philosophy, means that women could effectively serve as both soldiers and commanders with equal success, perhaps even more so than their male counterparts. An astute reader of Aristotle, however, could easily argue, as men and women are fundamentally different in the sense that they possess different virtues (according to Aristotle), that women’s key virtues might prohibit them from effectively commanding. According to Professor Stephen G. Salkever, a leading researcher of Aristotle’s influence on modern political theory, “The virtues of males are said to be [by Aristotle] moderation and virility while the virtues of females are moderation and industry. Moderation is thus the common human virtue, although a woman's moderation (mixed with industry) will be different from a man's (mixed with virility) (*Politics* 7.1)” (Salkever 243). If Aristotle is correct in these gender-based virtues, one can analyze the relationship between these key gender-based virtues and effective command through the United States Army’s “Warrior Ethos” or “Soldier’s Creed,” by which every soldier is called to live. Every United States Army soldier must know and embody the phrase, “I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade” (“Warrior Ethos”). These statements could certainly be associated with virility. Staring into defeat and refusing to concede arguably involves strength and vitality, attributes often associated with manliness. Similarly, the act of physically carrying a fallen comrade will undoubtedly be associated with an individual’s physical ability and masculine strength. Yet each of these statements can similarly be embodied through industrious behavior. An industrious individual would see a victory where others see inescapable defeat, a reason to fight when others are ready to surrender. An industrious individual would surely give his or her mission the highest priority, and a similarly industrious individual would allocate resources to ensure that his or her fallen comrades would not be left behind. As such, even if men naturally possess virility while women are naturally industrious as Aristotle claims, these differing virtues would not diminish the ability of women to fulfill command roles within the military. Just as two men equally-endowed with virility could devise unique yet equally-successful strategies for a given combat situation, so too could a woman who possesses industry devise her own unique strategy to rival that of male commanders.

Serving as either common soldiers or commanders, women would be required to participate in combat, which according to Aristotle might constitute an issue as he believes that women begin to decline at a very young age. While this work in no way condones such a misogynist understanding of women, this philosophy can be reappropriated for the female benefit. According to Aristotle, “Women should marry when they are about eighteen years of age, and men at seven and thirty; then they are in the prime of life, and the decline in the powers of both will coincide. Further, the children, if their birth takes place soon, as may reasonably be expected, will succeed in the beginning of their prime” (*Politics* 7.16). It is important to note that this passage mirrors two modern gender stereotypes; the first being that women are not as strong as men, and the second being that women should be having children, thus occupying a traditional gender role. Firstly, if one is to accept the basic theme of Aristotle’s argument (that women are generally not as strong as men), information which is backed by scientific evidence, this does not mean that every woman is weaker than every comparative man (Burton). This fact implies that, in general, an average man will be stronger than an average woman. Yet this fact does not diminish the effectiveness of women in the military if enlisted soldiers, male and female, were governed by the “gender-neutral standards” for which Ray Mabus advocates. Therein, an individual, male or female, would not be able to become a soldier in the United States military unless he or she met all of the designated standards for combat. Just as not every man can meet the standards required for the United States Special Forces Operational Detachment (90% of those who apply are rejected), not every woman will be able to meet the standards that are required to join the United States military (“Special Operations Education Training”). Therefore, although men are often more physically capable than their female counterparts, this does not mean that the United States lacks women who can meet or exceed the standards which are expected of a member of its military. As such, as long as the standards that are required of every individual desiring to enter the United States military are not lowered, those courageous and able-bodied women who meet the appropriate criteria should be welcomed into military service. Secondly, in regard to the notion that women should devote their time to homemaking and raising children, this work will not argue that there is anything wrong with this traditional mode of life. On the other hand, however, as this work has already stated, if women are indeed courageous (as expressed through obedience) and industrious, as posited by Aristotle, then certainly women have the innate capacity to serve a nation further than producing its next generations of citizens. As Aristotle was concerned with directing human beings toward attaining the greatest good, it would make sense that Aristotle defended the confining of women to their households. As summarized by Marguerite Deslauriers, professor of philosophy at McGill University, “The household is for the sake of the city, and women are restricted to the sphere of the household, and so the deliberative reason of women is subject to the authority of the deliberative reason of free men” (218). In this sense, Aristotle seems to suggest that women can best serve the city (for this work’s purpose, the nation) by maintaining their respective households and obeying their superiors. Yet previous arguments made in this work have shown that, through Aristotle’s own reasoning, women have virtues which enable them to serve their nation beyond maintaining a household. In this sense, the order of nature is in no way being disrupted by women serving their nation outside of the household. In the words of Aristotle, just as a female caretaker maintains the home and embodies the will of a patriarch, a female soldier maintains the homefront and embodies the will of the nation wherever she goes. Therefore, it would seem that women would serve exceptionally within any branch of the United States military.

The ancient Athenian philosopher, Aristotle, once said, “Silence is a woman’s glory” (*Politics* 1.8). Yet this work has shown that, on the basis of Aristotle’s own philosophies, that women can serve their nations through more than just silence. As women have been placed in a somewhat subservient role throughout history, they possess a distinct ability to obey, which according to Aristotle, constitutes an act of courage. As both courage and obedience are virtues which the United States military respects in and requires of its members, it would seem that women are predisposed to serve. Similarly, as women have an inherent ability to obey, they can efficiently operate as commanders, as to be an exceptional leader, according to Aristotle, one must first come to obey. Furthermore, while women will have to participate in combat situations among other strenuous physical feats serving as either common soldiers or commanders, only women who meet the standard qualifications for acceptance into the military will consequently be enlisted. As such, while Aristotle states that women are generally less physically capable than their male counterparts, this does not mean that every woman is weak. As such, it would seem that women would make exceptional soldiers, even as Marines. This work makes a bold claim in accusing the United States Marine Corps of abetting an injustice by resisting the gender integration of the United States military, yet based on Aristotle’s understanding of justice, this claim is true. According to Dr. Michael Sandel, professor of philosophy at Harvard University, “[Aristotle] believes that justice consists in giving people what they deserve, and that a just society is one that enables human beings to realize their highest nature and to live the good life” (“Harvard University’s Justice”). It would not be just to lower the current military standards in order to accept more women into military service. It is just, however, to allow both men and women who have a burning desire to defend their nation to be protectors and orchestrators of the good, to embody the virtues of their nation in lands foreign and domestic, and the opportunity to attempt to join the United States military. If the Marine Corps has the courage to obey and thus embody justice, they will cease to resist the gender integration of the United States military.

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