



## SHORTER NOTES

### THE MALE WEAVER IN PLATO'S *STATESMAN*\*

#### ABSTRACT

*In Plato's Statesman, the stranger compares the statesman to a weaver. The modern reader does not know a priori how the statesman and the weaver resemble one another and therefore could be compared, but Socrates the younger reacts as if the comparison is natural. This note suggests, with reference to the gender division of labour in ancient Greece, that the male 'weaver' did not do much weaving but was a supervisor, which means that the fundamental similarity between a statesman and a weaver is that both managed subordinates. This cultural knowledge explains why the comparison seems natural to Socrates the younger.*

**Keywords:** Plato; Statesman; weaving; gender; statecraft; femininity

In Plato's *Statesman*, Socrates the younger (henceforth 'Socrates') and a stranger from Elea try to define statesmanship. After a few abortive attempts, the stranger proposes that they use as a model another art that resembles statesmanship but is smaller in scope (is 'very small', *σμικρότατον*) and therefore easier to define; the lessons learned could then help them define statesmanship. The art proposed as a model for statesmanship is weaving. The choice is a success: the interlocutors conclude that just like the weaver meshes warp and woof to make robust textiles, the statesman creates a strong political community by 'weaving' together temperate and courageous citizens, whose virtues complement and moderate each other.

While the analogy eventually fulfils its promises, there are hardly any *a priori* similarities between weaving and statesmanship, at least not to the modern reader. Yet when the Eleatic stranger suggests that weaving be used as a model for statesmanship, Socrates does not question him; instead, he responds with a simple 'why not?', *τί γὰρ οὐ;* (279b), as if it were self-evident that weaving is 'the same type of activity as statecraft', *ἔχον τὴν αὐτὴν πολιτικῆ πραγματείαν* (279a).

The stranger, who may have come to the discussion with the analogy fully prepared and the plan all thought out, can be excused for suggesting the comparison. It is, however, more difficult to understand why Socrates the younger accepts the proposal without argument: in other passages he is quite eager to question the stranger, to contradict him or to ask him to clarify. It seems, then, that there is something about the 'activity', *πραγματεία*, of weaving which Plato's contemporaries found obviously similar to that of statecraft but which eludes modern readers.

Some scholars have attempted to explain what this shared *πραγματεία* is. Blondell suggests it consisted in an 'ability to generalize, discriminate, and exercise good

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judgement, based on due measure and good timing'.<sup>1</sup> This is, however, not specific enough to suggest an obvious similarity between statecraft and weaving to the exclusion of other crafts. Bronstein has suggested that the shared *πραγματεία* is 'intertwining' (*συμπλοκή*), which only seems intuitive if one knows how the dialogue will end.<sup>2</sup> The contributors to Dimas et al. note that 'caring', *ἐπιμέλεια*, is an important shared feature of statecraft and weaving, which is called 'the art caring for clothes' in the dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Following this, Frank and Greenberg have suggested that the shared *πραγματεία* is the 'art of care'.<sup>4</sup> This, too, seems too vague to merit the immediate recognition by Socrates.

We will return to this observation about care later. In the meantime, most commentators do not acknowledge that Socrates is surprisingly quick to accept the analogy.<sup>5</sup> However, they frequently point out that there is something strange about using weaving as an analogy to politics; for although the weaver in the dialogue is male—like the statesman—weaving itself was considered feminine. Almost all Greek literary depictions of weaving are also depictions of women. From epic poetry we know as weavers Helen, Andromache and Penelope. Their weaving is symbolic of womanhood and its place in the world.<sup>6</sup> Helen's status in the household of Paris is highlighted by her sitting at his loom (*Il.* 3.125); reunited with Menelaus, she is spinning yarn (*Od.* 4.130–1). When Hector imagines what will happen if Troy loses the war, he envisions Andromache sitting by the loom of another man (*Il.* 6.456); and when Andromache receives news of Hector's death, that is, news about the destruction of her family, she is plying the loom (*Il.* 22.440). Penelope's constant weaving represents her fidelity to Odysseus and the integrity of the household, while her constant undoing of the web can be seen as her 'nullifying the role that the patriarchal symbolic order has assigned to her'.<sup>7</sup> The acme of connecting weaving to womanhood is reached by Hesiod, who points out that the first thing learned by Pandora, the first woman, was how to weave (*Op.* 64), making weaving part of the female essence. The female connection is clear on ceramic depictions of weaving: everyone plying a loom is a woman.<sup>8</sup> When men appear—probably spouses—

<sup>1</sup> R. Blondell, 'From fleece to fabric: weaving culture in Plato's *Statesman*', *OSAPh* 28 (2025), 23–75, at 57. Repeatedly cited works, besides Blondell, include P. Acton, *Poiesis: Manufacturing in Classical Athens* (New York, 2014); D. Bronstein, 'Learning from models: 277c7–283a9', in P. Dimas, M.S. Lane and S. Sauvé Meyer (edd.), *Plato's Statesman: A Philosophical Discussion* (Oxford, 2021), 94–114; S.D. Bundrick, 'The fabric of the city: imaging textile productions in Classical Athens', *Hesperia* 77 (2008), 283–334; M. Harlow and M.-L. Nosch (edd.), *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Oxford, 2014), 236–59; M.S. Lane, *Method and Politics in Plato's Statesman* (Cambridge, 1998); J. Scheid and J. Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric* (Cambridge, MA, 1996) and N. Tuana (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Plato* (University Park, PA, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Bronstein (n. 1), at 95.

<sup>3</sup> Dimas et al. (n. 1), *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> J. Frank and S.B.K. Greenberg, 'Weaving politics in Plato's *Statesman*', in S. Brill and C. McKeen (edd.), *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Ancient Greek Philosophy* (New York, 2024), 235–52, at 235.

<sup>5</sup> Some consulted works that do not comment specifically on Socrates' readiness to accept weaving as a model include Bronstein (n. 1); Lane (n. 1); X. Márquez, *A Stranger's Knowledge: Statesmanship, Philosophy, and Law in Plato's Statesman* (Las Vegas, 2012); M.H. Miller, *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague, 1980); K. Sampson, 'The art of politics as weaving in Plato's *Statesman*', *Polis (Exeter)* 37 (2020), 485–500; K.M. Sayre, *Metaphysics and Method in Plato's Statesman* (Cambridge, 2006); J. Scheid and J. Svenbro (n. 1); G. Seeck, *Platons Politikos. Ein kritischer Kommentar* (Munich, 2012); and D.A. White, *Myth, Metaphysics and Dialectic in Plato's Statesman* (London, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> 'To describe the loom as a gendered object in the Homeric world is to state the obvious': R. Bertolin, 'The mast and the loom: signifiers of separation and authority', *Phoenix* 62 (2008), 92–107, at 92.

<sup>7</sup> A. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1995), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Bundrick (n. 1), *passim*.

they sometimes contribute by bringing raw materials, but they do not weave.<sup>9</sup> When Herodotus (2.35) and Sophocles (*OC* 337–41) discuss Egyptians, they point out the strange fact that among the Egyptians it is the women who trade at the market and the men who stay at home weaving.

The gendering is, however, lopsided; since the female dominance of weavers in literature and art coexists, strangely enough, with the fact that before the second century A.D., there are no attested words for female weavers. When Plato speaks of weavers in the *Statesman*, he uses ὑφάντης, which is masculine. No ὑφάντης is ever found near a loom, however; in fact, he is rarely found as the subject of the verb ‘to weave’, ὑφαίνω.

Scheid and Svenbro list a few instances of men supposedly weaving: ‘The existence of male Greek weavers seems to be attested by Plato, *Hippias Minor* 368c4 (Hippias of Elis weaving his own clothing), *Phaedo* 87b, and *Republic* 369d (*huphantēs*), as well as by Aristotle, *Politics* 1291a13’.<sup>10</sup> But these passages are not conclusive. In *Hippias Minor*, Hippias’ weaving is mentioned when Socrates (the older) says that he once heard Hippias boast that he had made everything that he wore: a ring, strigil, oil-flask, sandals and so forth. This is hyperbole intended to illustrate the pompous nature of Hippias and clearly cannot count for evidence. In the *Republic* and in the *Politics*, the weaver is indeed mentioned but there is no mention of his weaving. *Phaedo* 87bc is a bit different: Socrates (the older) argues, in an argument about the body, the soul and death, along the lines that it would be silly to say that a deceased weaver is not dead but alive if the clothes which the weaver wore and have woven himself still exist. This is a clear Classical-era reference to a Greek male person weaving, but it is hypothetical.

What, then, to make of male weaving in the *Statesman*? Lane discusses three options, here given in reverse order. The third option, which she settles for, is that weaving is simply neutered in the dialogue.<sup>11</sup> Her second option is that there is something subversive about the use of femininity.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars have instead suggested that the use of weaving in the dialogue may even be the opposite of subversive, that is, an appropriation of a female enterprise for male, presumably patriarchal, purposes.<sup>13</sup> But if either of these hypotheses is true, the stakes are raised: how can Socrates be so ready to accept that the Greek political life, patriarchal as it was, be described with reference to a womanly task, whether the purpose is appropriative or subversive? The first option, deserving special consideration here, is that women wove for the domestic market whereas men wove for commercial purposes—meaning that there were male weavers. This idea was suggested by Thompson, who gleaned such a

<sup>9</sup> Bundrick (n. 1), 305–7.

<sup>10</sup> Scheid and Svenbro (n. 1), 181 n. 75. They also mention ποικιλτής ἄνθρωπος (Aeschin. 1.97), translating ‘weaver of designs’, but that is rather an embroider than a weaver.

<sup>11</sup> Lane (n. 1), 168.

<sup>12</sup> The idea that the *Statesman* expresses the subversive thought that philosophers, like women, belong to the private sphere and that politics in *The Statesman* is the domain of the philosopher—something that apparently de-masculinizes politics—is expressed in A. Saxonhouse, ‘The philosopher and the female in the political thought of Plato’, in N. Tuana (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Plato* (University Park, PA, 1994), 67–86, at 80–1. This interpretation seems far-fetched and does not account for how readily Socrates the younger accepts weaving as a model for statecraft.

<sup>13</sup> Blondell (n. 1), 67–8. See also M. Schofield, *Plato: Political Philosophy* (London, 2006), 169. For possible such appropriation of Plato in other contexts, see P. duBois, ‘The Platonic appropriation of reproduction’, in N. Tuana (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Plato* (University Park, PA, 1994), 139–56.

division from Plato's dialogues.<sup>14</sup> Lane states that evidence for male weavers, while existent, is 'surprisingly scant'. Furthermore, she dismisses as inconclusive Scheid and Svenbro's list—although she holds that there is 'no good reason to believe that there were not male Athenian weavers'.<sup>15</sup> Blondell, subscribing to the idea that the domestic production of textile was the domain of women, while the commercial production was the domain of men, suggests the latter is the 'model that lies behind the visitor's *paradeigma*', with its 'male weaver, epitactic structure, and specialized division of labour'.<sup>16</sup> But the evidence for these two different domains is scarce: 'Our division between the workplace as a sphere of production and the household as a sphere of consumption was entirely absent from classical Athens', says Acton.<sup>17</sup> And when Meo discusses archaeological investigations of textile production in Hellenistic Herakleia, he concludes that 'weaving took place inside the houses and not inside special workshops'. Despite this, textile production was 'not only a simple domestic activity but a real economic activity . . . weaving processes would be developed in domestic circles and fibre would be delivered to women from a trader who subsequently would collect the fabrics produced, only paying for the labour'.<sup>18</sup> Whether in Athens or Herakleia, domestic production was intertwined with commercial production.

I propose instead that the integration of domestic and commercial production, and the strong feminine association with weaving, suggest that free men, due to their being heads of the household, partook in the weaving process as managers, meaning that weaving as such is characterized by an 'epitactic structure'. Those men portrayed on certain ceramic depictions could possibly be such manager-types: they do not so much weave but are concerned with commissioning workers, providing capital and material, overseeing external relations and the like, while ultimately being in charge of the enterprise. Although many crafts can have a hierarchic structure, the strong gender division of labour, characteristic of weaving specifically, makes weaving a striking example of a hierarchically organized craft. There are indications in other texts. In his book on manufacturing in Athens, Acton names as male weavers capemaker Demeas of Collytus and cloakmaker Menon, both mentioned in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (2.7.6).<sup>19</sup> As pointed out in that dialogue, Demeas and Menon can make beautiful clothes because of their foreign slaves. In other words, it seems that neither Demeas nor Menon did much manual work.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned above, it has been suggested that the *πραγματεία* shared by statecraft and weaving is 'care'. Though this translation of *ἐπιμέλεια* is not wrong, it is too narrow, for the word also connotes 'management': when Xenophon discusses the organization of Cyrus' army in the *Cyropaedia* (8.1.14), the

<sup>14</sup> W. Thompson, 'Weaving: a man's world', *CW* 75 (1982), 217–22. Thompson is followed by e.g. Blondell (n. 1). A similar view is held by M. Harlow and M.-L. Nosch, 'Weaving the threads: methodologies in textile and dress research for the Greek and Roman world—the state of the art and the case for cross-disciplinarity', in M. Harlow and M.-L. Nosch (edd.), *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Oxford, 2014), 1–33, at 10.

<sup>15</sup> Lane (n. 1), 167 n. 5, commenting on Scheid and Svenbro (n. 1), 181 n. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Blondell (n. 1), 67.

<sup>17</sup> Acton (n. 1), 276.

<sup>18</sup> F. Meo, 'New archaeological data for the understanding of weaving in Herakleia, Southern Basilicata, Italy', in M. Harlow and M.-L. Nosch (edd.), *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Oxford, 2014), 236–59, at 256.

<sup>19</sup> Acton (n. 1), 154–5. He also mentions legendary Cypriot weavers Acesas and his son Helicon, but no details about how they worked are known.

<sup>20</sup> Acton (n. 1), 152, says that men did the fulling, which is important for producing clothes; however, it is a different craft from (and in the context of the *Statesman*, subordinate to) weaving.

different steps in the hierarchy of officers are denoted with reference to who ‘cares for’ (ἐπιμελέομαι), that is, commands or supervises, whom.

The male weaver, then, was primarily not so much a craftsman as a CEO of sorts, that is, a figure of authority supervising subordinates and, by virtue thereof, akin to the statesman.<sup>21</sup> This explains why Socrates the younger is not surprised by the stranger’s proposal, which would be neither subversive nor appropriatively patriarchal: it would be conventional.

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to say all types of managing fell to men: it is highly likely that women supervised servants within the household. I thank the anonymous reviewer for raising the question of female management.