In this chapter I shall argue that Plato’s attack on poetry, and particularly on tragedy, in the Republic is related to his exclusion of the feminine. This manifests itself in a variety of different, but inter-related ways:

1. His censorship of literature involves censorship of behaviour associated with the female, especially lamentation. Lamentation is associated with women, and with tragedy.

2. Plato is suspicious of tragedy’s mode of presentation: there is a sense in which he regards dramatic impersonation as dangerous in itself. And I am going to suggest that his suspicion is not unconnected with the fact that tragedy very often involves men impersonating women.

3. Tragedy (and probably not just in Plato) is associated with the female (a) explicitly in various statements I shall look at; (b) implicitly through imagery.

4. The abolition of the family is central to Plato’s conception of the ideal society. Plato equates the family with strife, and family strife is, of course, a major focus of Greek tragedy. The connexion between tragedy, family conflict and the breakdown of society is underlined by the theatrical imagery which Plato uses to structure his narrative of the degeneration of the ideal state.

I should make it clear from the start that I am not suggesting that Plato deliberately sets out to exclude the feminine, or even that he is especially interested in issues of gender outside Book V; but if we read attentively we shall see that he cannot escape from the cultural assumptions of the society in which he lived.

In Book V of the Republic Plato makes the radical proposal that women in his ideal state can be rulers alongside men. The only significant difference between men and women, he maintains, is that the female bears children,
whereas the male begets them (454e). But it does not follow from this biological difference that men and women are suited by nature to perform different functions in society. In fact there is no administrative job in a community which is peculiar to woman as woman or to man as man. ‘Natural capacities are distributed similarly between the two sexes’, says Socrates at 455d–e, ‘and women naturally take part in all occupations as well as men, although in all the woman is weaker than the man’. The point seems to be that, although women are in general the weaker sex, there are many women who are better than many men at many things (455d). It would therefore be ridiculous to restrict all occupations outside the house to men only—it would simply be a waste of talent and resources. Women who have the requisite natural capacities to become rulers or guardians should receive exactly the same training, both intellectual and physical, as their male counterparts, and should share equally in the task of guarding and administering the state.

In effect Book V attempts to put forward a view of human nature which dispenses with the notion of gender: men and women are to be treated in exactly the same way and to perform exactly the same functions. Halliwell argues in his commentary on Book V that ‘the radicalism of the idea of female guardians resides not so much in the specifics of a way of life, as in the degree to which Plato’s case approaches a gender-neutral interpretation of human nature ... what is at issue is not a view of women, but a philosophical conception of human beings as creatures to whose lives biological gender can be made largely irrelevant’. I think he is right; but at the same time I cannot help feeling that what is required of the female guardians is that they should simply turn themselves into men, since the paradigm of human nature that Plato is dealing with is a masculine one. As Rousseau so elegantly put it: ‘Having dispensed with the individual family in his system of government and not knowing any longer what to do with women, [Plato] finds himself forced to turn them into men.’

In order that these guardians (and it is important to remember that we are talking only about the lives of the guardians, both rulers and auxiliaries, throughout this discussion) should fulfil their function as

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1 Translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.
2 Halliwell (1993), 15. In addition to this commentary, works relating to Book V which I have found particularly useful include Annas (1976), Bluestone (1987), and Okin (1979).
3 *Émile*, 4.699–700.