

# FEMALE RULERS, MOTHERHOOD AND HAPPINESS: A RECONSIDERATION OF IBN RUSHD'S COMPARISON OF WOMEN TO PLANTS

## GOBERNANTES FEMENINAS, MATERNIDAD Y FELICIDAD EN IBN RUSHD: UNA RECONSIDERACIÓN DE SU COMPARACIÓN ENTRE MUJERES Y PLANTAS

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### Abstract

This article analyses Ibn Rushd's/Averroes' (d. 1198) views on motherhood in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*. The starting point for this inquiry is Ibn Rushd's comparison of the women in his society to plants. Ibn Rushd argues that performing the duties of motherhood, i.e. being children's primary caregiver, does not constitute nor involve any form of human virtue. Ibn Rushd's low esteem for activities of motherhood has hitherto been ignored. This paper argues that the comparison of women to plants does not hinge on societal criticism solely but on at least two additional factors: Aristotle on plants in *De Anima* and on this low appreciation for tasks of parenthood. Furthermore, this paper aims to show that the latter is incompatible with Aristotle's views in his ethics and biology, which emphasize, respectively, the friendship that characterizes the parent-child relationship and the intelligence and virtue needed to raise the next generation.

### Keywords

Ibn Rushd; Plants; Women; *Nicomachean Ethics*; Aristotle's Biology

### Resumen

Este artículo se propone elucidar las ideas de Ibn Rushd/Averroes (m. 1198) sobre la maternidad a partir de un análisis de su comentario de la *República* de Platón. El foco de la investigación es la comparación que estableció Ibn Rushd entre las mujeres de su sociedad y las plantas. Ibn Rushd sostiene que el desempeño de los roles maternos, es decir, el de ser cuidadora principal de los niños, no constituye ni implica ninguna forma de virtud humana. Hasta ahora, el tema del menosprecio de Ibn Rushd hacia las actividades maternas no ha sido abordado en profundidad. Este artículo argumenta que dicha comparación se debe entender no sólo como una crítica social, sino también en relación a las ideas de Aristóteles sobre las plantas contenidas en

el *De Anima* y al desprecio de Ibn Rushd hacia las tareas parentales. Además, se busca mostrar que este desprecio es incompatible con la ética y biología aristotélicas, en que se enfatizan la amistad que caracteriza la relación entre padres e hijos, así como la inteligencia y virtud necesarias para criar a las generaciones del futuro.

### Palabras clave

Ibn Rushd; plantas; mujeres; *Ética a Nicómaco*; biología de Aristóteles

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On the 12<sup>th</sup> century Iberian Peninsula, Ibn Rushd writes: “Since women in these cities are not prepared with respect to any of the human virtues, they frequently resemble plants in these cities.”<sup>2</sup> By “these cities”, Ibn Rushd targets the cities in the Andalusia of his time. He contrasts “these cities” with “this city”; i.e., the ideal city which is the subject of his Commentary on Plato’s *Republic*. Among the points of social criticism his political commentary delivers, there is a notable collection of statements about the position of women:

[...] since some women are formed with eminence and a praiseworthy disposition, it is not impossible that there be philosophers and rulers among them. [...] *The competence of women is unknown, however, in these cities since they are only taken ‘in them’ for procreation and hence are placed at the service of their husbands and confined to procreation, upbringing, and suckling. This nullifies their [other] activities. Since women in these cities are not prepared with respect to any of the human virtues, they frequently resemble plants in these cities. Their being a burden upon the men ‘in these cities’ is one of the causes of the poverty of these cities. This is because they are to be found there in double the number of men, while not understanding through [their] upbringing any of the necessary actions except for the few actions – like the art of spinning and weaving – that they undertake mostly at a time when they have need of them to make up for their lack of spending [power]. This is all self-evident.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by R. Lerner, *Averroes on Plato’s Republic*, 54.8–54.10, p. 58–59. Whenever reference is made to Ibn Rushd’s Commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, it belongs to Lerner’s English translation, see Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by R. Lerner, *Averroes on Plato’s Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 53.24–54.14, emphasis added, interpolation original.

What Ibn Rushd here presents to be self-evident might actually require some clarification. The most compelling question which stands out and sparked the idea for this research, is why he would claim that women – and it is clear that he means mothers specifically – would resemble *plants*. Only a few scholarly contributions on Ibn Rushd’s political views have paid any attention to this comparison. All of them unquestioningly posit the view that the criticism is directed at the state for their limiting treatment of women.<sup>4</sup> In Ralph Lerner’s introduction of his English translation of the commentary, the plant comparison is construed as indicative of the “unnatural treatment of human females” in Ibn Rushd’s society.<sup>5</sup> Nadia Harhash offers a similar, more poignant interpretation: “Truly concerned about women’s misery, Ibn Rushd wrote that women were so reduced in servitude that all their capacity for higher pursuits had been destroyed. He was distressed by their fate, stating that they only live like plants, looking after their men.”<sup>6</sup>

Erwin Rosenthal is probably the first to emphasize the remarkable contents of Ibn Rushd’s statement (cited above) in his paper of 1953, where he observes that

This pronouncement runs counter to Islamic teaching and practice and is the more remarkable since it is made by an orthodox member of the Muslim community which was ruled by the *amir al-mu`minin* [the Commander of the Faithful, i.e. the caliph], and moreover by a practicing lawyer steeped in *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence]. He openly attacks their 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.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, “The Place of Politics in the Philosophy of Ibn Rushd”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 15/2 (1953): 246-278, 252. Ralph Lerner, introduction to Ibn Rushd, *Commentary* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), xix. Catarina Belo, “Some Considerations on Averroes’ Views Regarding Women and Their Role in Society”, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 20/1 (2009): 1-20, 9-10. Nadia Harhash, “Ibn Rushd’s (Averroes’) views on women. Ibn Rushd’s work and Influences by Nadia Harhash”. URL: <<https://ibn-rushd.org/wp/en/2015/02/01/nadia-harhash/>> (2015), n.p. Catarina Belo, “Averroes on Family and Property in the Commentary on Plato’s “Republic””, in *Plato’s Republic in the Islamic Context: New Perspectives on Averroes’s Commentary*, edited by A. Orwin (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 113-132, 126-27.

<sup>5</sup> Lerner, introduction to Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, xix.

<sup>6</sup> Harhash, “Ibn Rushd’s (Averroes’) views on women”, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenthal, “The Place of Politics”, 252. Interpolations added.

Rosenthal does not rule out that it is precisely this attitude of Ibn Rushd that might have contributed to his exile, although, as Rosenthal also states, there is no unified account on why Ibn Rushd fell out of grace just a few years prior to his death.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, Ibn Rushd wrote in a politically hostile environment yet he did not hold back to display his dissatisfaction with the state on several instances throughout the text. Subsequently, his comparison of women to plants has been considered purely from this angle of social criticism. Whereas this perspective is essential for understanding the spirit of Ibn Rushd's commentary and appreciate his courage for undertaking it in the first place, this paper wants to shine a further, different light on the fact that Ibn Rushd associates women with plants. For what is lacking is Aristotle's philosophy, which Ibn Rushd was all too familiar with and clearly seems to be referring to. A philosophically solid starting point therefore lies in Ibn Rushd's broader philosophical framework and in Aristotle's *De Anima (On the Soul)*, on which Ibn Rushd wrote not just one, but three commentaries.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, there will always remain other possibilities as to what inspired Ibn Rushd's perceived similarity between mothers and plants. Notably, Ibn Rushd's friend Ibn Ṭufayl wrote a philosophical novel titled *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* ("Alive Son of Awake") in which the main character, "Ḥayy, contemplates the world around him and concludes that plants carry the basic functions of life".<sup>10</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185) was the protégé of the same caliph who commissioned Ibn Rushd to write commentaries on Aristotle, Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf. It is possible that Ibn Ṭufayl's fable contributed to Ibn Rushd's views, but, as this paper sets out to demonstrate, the roots of this idea once again lead us to Aristotle.

This paper also wants to address another, more important issue. Subsequent to the perception that Ibn Rushd's statements on women proceed exclusively from his opposition to the norms and customs of his society, it seems to have gone unnoticed that Ibn Rushd shows a negative appreciation towards the human value of motherhood and the various capacities involved in raising the next generation. Ibn Rushd – a father himself – suggests that taking up the typical tasks of procreation and parenthood does not contribute to a flourishing human life. Taking care of a home and children seems to imply a serious downgrade as it involves not a single human virtue and induces a

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<sup>8</sup> Rosenthal, "The Place of Politics", 252. According to Dominique Urvoy, Ibn Rushd's exile was the unfortunate consequence of a political action by the caliph, see Dominique Urvoy, *Ibn Rushd (Averroes)* (London: Routledge, 1991), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Rushd's commentaries are of three types, i.e., short, middle and long commentaries. Ibn Rushd wrote all three types of commentary on only five of Aristotle's works: *Metaphysica*, *Physica*, *De Caelo*, *Analytica Priora* and *De Anima*. He wrote 38 commentaries in total, two of which are not on Aristotle: the middle commentary on Plato's *Republic* which is discussed here, and the middle commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Ṭufayl, *The History of Ḥayy ibn Yaqzan*, translated by S. Ockley (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1929), 78.

plant-like existence. This judgment bears serious implications because virtue is considered necessary for happiness; the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* or *sa'āda* in Arabic.<sup>11</sup> This concept does signify a state of feeling happy, but it means one is truly living well, i.e., “wellbeing”, “flourishing”.

One curious observation is that Ibn Rushd misrepresents Plato's guidelines on the preferable age for reproduction. Plato's *Republic* states that the best age for women is between 20 and 40, and between 25 and 55 for men.<sup>12</sup> Ibn Rushd's commentary says that a woman's prime years are from 20 to 30 and a man's from 30 to 55. This cuts women's reproductive window in half: 10 years instead of 20. It seems appropriate to wonder whether this adjustment has some bearing on Ibn Rushd's opinion that – at least in his native Al-Andalus – motherhood impacts women negatively and places their happiness or true well-being (*eudaimonia*), or what political philosophy aims to secure for as many people as possible, out of reach.

The modest amount of scholarship that has been carried out on Ibn Rushd's views on women has put its main focus on the part where he states that it is not impossible that there are women with a disposition for philosophy and political rule.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, what has been emphasized most of all is Ibn Rushd's belief in the positive potential of women beyond motherhood and household work. This is understandable and perfectly legitimate because Ibn Rushd indeed makes an incredibly strong statement given the historical and cultural context he is operating in, and he puts it in a very straightforward manner too. Unlike some of the other instances where he speaks out on the position of women, there is no obstructing vagueness, no reference to other women from this or that geographical region, no questionable comparison.<sup>14</sup> On that account, several scholars contend that Ibn Rushd is sincere and could be considered an early feminist theorist.<sup>15</sup> However, Ibn Rushd's reasons for recommending the

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<sup>11</sup> Mauro Zonta, “Philosophical Terms for ‘Happiness’ in Languages of Culture in Medieval Near, Middle, and Far East”, in *The Pursuit of Happiness in Medieval Jewish and Islamic Thought, Studies dedicated to Steven Harvey*, edited by Y. Halper (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2021), 69-75.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 460e.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 53.24-27.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Rushd shows hesitance on several occasions to spell out to the reader what he means. In regard to the topic of women, see for instance the question of whether a female could be imām (or imāma). To this question, which Ibn Rushd raises himself, he says that some Laws would allow it and others would not (53.26-29), Lerner p.58. For an analysis of Ibn Rushd's enigmatic reference to groups and/or regions where allegedly female skills for warfare are demonstrated, see also Tineke Melkebeek, “Warrior Women in Ibn Rushd's Commentary on Plato's Republic: Mythico-Barbarian Geography in the Case for Female Guardians, an Unsolved Passage”, *Al-Masāq Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean*, 34/3 (2022): 1-22.

<sup>15</sup> Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline* (Cambridge: CUP, 1958), 191; Al-Halim Atiyah, “Ibn Rushd on the Question of Women: Preliminary Remarks”, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 16 (1996): 145-162; Harhash, “Ibn Rushd's (Averroes') views on women”, n.p.; Lerner, introduction to Ibn Rushd; Charles Butterworth, “Ethics and classical Islamic philosophy: a study of Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic” in *Ethics in Islam*

advancement of women might be diverse, and they might not necessarily display a genuine concern for, and appreciation of, women and the feminine. Several scholars have taken note of Ibn Rushd's utilitarian attitude.<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to note that this anachronistic example of feminist theory suffers the same fundamental flaw as Plato's feminist proposals. By allowing some women to become like men, gender equality becomes attainable at the cost of downgrading traditionally female roles of motherhood and caretaking.<sup>17</sup> It is from this angle that we would like to shed light on the passage presented above: Ibn Rushd states that home service involving the care for children is not an area of competence and does not constitute, nor involve, any human virtue. He adds that being confined to "procreation, upbringing, and suckling" nullifies the women's (potential other)

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(California: Undena, 1985); Charles Butterworth, *Philosophy, ethics, and virtuous rule: a study of Averroes' Commentary on Plato's "Republic"* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1986); Natalie Harris Bluestone, "Why Women Cannot Rule: Sexism in Plato Scholarship" in *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, edited by N. Tuana (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Dominique Urvoay, *Averroès: les ambitions d'un intellectuel musulman* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998); Miguel Cruz Hernández, introduction to Ibn Rushd, *Exposición de la "República" de Platón* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1998); Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, introduction to Ibn Rushd, *Averroes' commentary on Plato's Republic* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969); Tineke Melkebeek, "The Medieval Islamic Commentary on Plato's Republic: Ibn Rushd's Perspective on the Position and Potential of Women", *Islamology* 11/1 (2021); Belo, "Averroes on Family".

Prudence Allen notes that Ibn Rushd appears conflicted on the topic of women, see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1997). She states that Ibn Rushd takes a sex-unity position in the commentary on the *Republic*, but that he adopts a sex-polarity theory about human identity that is derived from a study of Aristotelian arguments in the *Metaphysics*, *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Generation of Animals* (344-45). Allen's analysis contains a mistake, however, as she contends that Ibn Rushd had access to Aristotle's *Politics* (349). Nausikaa Schirilla concluded in 1996 that a more detailed analysis of Ibn Rushd's views on women is needed in order to draw any conclusions, see Nausikaa Schirilla, *Die Frau, das Andere der Vernunft? Frauenbilder in der arabisch-islamischen und europäischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: IKO, 1996), 139.

Oliver Leaman finds any conclusions in regards to Ibn Rushd's opinion on women unwarranted, see Oliver Leaman, "Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic, and the Missing Politics" in *Across the Mediterranean Frontiers* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1997), 199.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenthal observes it in Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam*, 191 and 295, n. 47. See also Rosenthal, "The Place of Politics", 252.

Thérèse-Anne Druart observes Ibn Rushd's concern for the City's welfare and the burden of people who are not useful (i.e., women without income), see Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Philosophy in Islam", in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003). Catarina Belo draws attention to the fact that Ibn Rushd's concern for women's underutilized potential might also be linked to the Christian military threat (i.e., the endorsement of female soldiers to save Al-Andalus from the Christian armies who kept moving south), see Belo, "Averroes on Family", 126-27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Rushd identifies these tasks as female and says nothing about men caring for their offspring, except that they are unfit for the tasks of "upbringing, procreation, and the like" (53.7-8), p. 57.

activities.<sup>18</sup> This needs to be examined in contrast with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (further *NE*). This choice is not random: as Ibn Rushd explains at the beginning of his commentary, the *NE* contains the theory to the practice of Aristotle's *Politics*.<sup>19</sup> When Ibn Rushd speaks of the "first part of this science", he is referring to the *NE*. The reason that he selected Plato's political theory, then (the *Republic*), as the counterpart to the *NE*, and not the *Politics*, is because the latter was unavailable to him:

The first part of this art is in Aristotle's book known as the *Nicomachea* and the second in his book known as the *Governance* [*Politics*] and also in this book of Plato's that we intend to explain since Aristotle's book on governance has not yet fallen into our hands.<sup>20</sup>

The assumption that the content of Plato's *Republic* would be sort of similar to Aristotle's *Politics* is, however, sorely incorrect. Ibn Rushd certainly was aware of this.<sup>21</sup> At this time he had already read and commented on Aristotle's *NE*, where Aristotle announces a sequel – the *Politics* – at the end. Central to our inquiry is that the *NE* presents a very different, overwhelmingly more positive view on what parenthood means for a person's completeness, virtue and happiness.

The aim of this paper is twofold: 1. to critically engage with the question of why Ibn Rushd compares women to plants and 2. to illustrate that his evaluation of motherhood is incompatible with the first part of political science, the *NE*.

Correspondingly, the paper is divided into two parts. We first present some considerations on why Ibn Rushd drastically suggests that women occupied with homemaking and child-rearing resemble the lowest thing on the scale of being. This is a key point: Ibn Rushd's comparison is rather extreme, even in his medieval context. It could have been an option for Ibn Rushd to work out a parallel between stay-at-home mothers and slaves or animals known to be prolific in terms of procreation, or other forms of life believed to be less compatible with the attainment of full human virtue. But he goes well beyond – or rather: below – these social and biological categories by comparing mothers to plants. In observing this, we must also aim to answer the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 54.7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle announces the *Politics* at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 22.3-6, interpolation original.

<sup>21</sup> Muhsin Mahdi 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", see Muhsin Mahdi, "Philosophy and political thought: reflections and comparisons", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 1/01 (1991): 16.

For the differences between the *Politics* and the *Republic*, see also Robert Mayhew, *Aristotle's criticism of Plato's Republic* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

question: why does he not compare the women of Al-Andalus to slaves or animals to address the injustice of their position?

Second, we look at what the cited passage of Ibn Rushd's entails, especially in light of the virtues and fulfillment that lie in motherhood as discussed in Aristotle's *NE*.<sup>22</sup> Of main concern for us is book VIII which is about love and friendship, and also features discussions of different types of rule which are a central topic of Ibn Rushd's commentary on Plato. The virtues and fulfillment that lie in motherhood as discussed in this book are in sharp contrast to Ibn Rushd's conclusion about the mothers of Al-Andalus. The *NE* can be read to suggest that bringing up children is a part of a well lived human life, instead of as something harmful that ruins the parent's path to happiness, opportunities for other things or even poses a threat to their humanity. This matters for what Ibn Rushd says about the plant-like mothers and caretakers in his Al-Andalus, and the fact that their activities are understood to be in opposition to the cultivation of any of the human virtues. Although what applies to mothers might generally apply to all parents and caretakers, Ibn Rushd's consideration is about the women in his society, and for this reason we will use the terms "mother(s)" and "motherhood/maternity".

## 2. The Allegory of the Household: On Ibn Rushd's Comparison of Stay-at-Home Mothers to Plants

Why would Ibn Rushd claim that the women of 12<sup>th</sup> century Al-Andalus often resemble *plants*? This occurs as a perfectly valid question, yet it is not so obvious how to approach this curiosity given the enormous historical, cultural, philosophical and linguistic gap between the plant-like women who are the subject of Ibn Rushd's brief excursus and the modern reader.

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<sup>22</sup> We will not refer to the Greek text of Aristotle, but to the Arabic/English translation edited by Anna A. Akasoy and Alexander Fidora, see *The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by A. A. Akasoy and A. Fidora (Leiden: Brill, 2005). The Arabic text is preserved in the Fez manuscript dated 619/1222. The translation goes back to the 9<sup>th</sup>, at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The translation of the *NE* that Ibn Rushd used was basically the same as the one in the Fez manuscript. Apart from a few fragments, Ibn Rushd's Middle Commentary on *NE* has been lost in Arabic. It has been preserved in Hebrew and in the Latin translation of Hermannus Alemannus (June 1240). The Latin text is currently being edited by Frédérique Woerther, see Frédérique Woerther, "Averroes' Goals in the Paraphrase (Middle Commentary) of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*", in *Interpreting Averroes: Critical Essays*, edited by P. Adamson and M. Di Giovanni (Cambridge: CUP, 2018). See also Frédérique Woerther, "Les fragments arabes du Commentaire moyen d' Averroès à l' Éthique à Nicomaque", *Oriens* 47/3-4 (2019): 244-312. Steven Harvey and Frédérique Woerther, "Averroes' Middle Commentary on Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*", *Oriens* 42/1-2 (2014): 254-287.



One issue we are facing is that the commentary is not extant in the original Arabic. Fortunately, the text survived through Hebrew manuscripts.<sup>23</sup> Modern editions with translations in several languages have appeared during the past seventy years.<sup>24</sup> All of these translations make use of a term corresponding to “plants”, but there is no absolute certainty pertaining to Ibn Rushd’s choice of Arabic word.<sup>25</sup>

A second obstacle is that the line between Plato and Ibn Rushd’s views is often blurred throughout the commentary. In following Plato’s exposition, which Plato in his Greek dialogue reveals through the character of Socrates, the distinction between Ibn Rushd’s own opinions and his reporting on Plato’s is not always clear.<sup>26</sup> The text Ibn

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<sup>23</sup> For the characteristics of the preserved Hebrew manuscripts, see Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by E. I. J. Rosenthal, *Averroes’ Commentary on Plato’s Republic* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969), 2-7. There are two Latin translations based upon the Hebrew: one by Elia del Medigo in 1491 and one by Jacob Mantinus in 1539. For the latter, see Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by J. Mantinus, *Paraphrasis in libros Platonis de Republica*, *Jacob Mantino interprete*, in *Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois Commentariis*, 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> Twice in English: Erwin Rosenthal published his Hebrew-English edition in 1956, with revisions in 1966 and 1969. Another English translation was published by Ralph Lerner in 1972. The translation of Lerner will be used consistently throughout this paper, unless indicated otherwise.

The commentary was translated in Spanish: Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by M. C. Hernández, *Exposición de la “República” de Platón* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1998), Portuguese: Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by R. H. De Souza Pereira and A. L. De Almeida Prado, *Comentário sobre a república* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2015), German: Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by S. Lauer, *Kommentar des Averroes zu Platons Politeia* (Zürich: Spur Verlag, 1996), and twice into Arabic: Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by A. Chahlane and M. A. al-Jabri, *Al-darūr fī s-siyāsa: mukhtaṣar kitāb as-siyāsa li-Aflātūn* (Beyrouth: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1998), and Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, translated by H. al-Ubaidi and F. al-Thahbi, *Muhāwarat al-Ġumhūriyya: Talkhīṣ as-Siyyāsat li-Aflātūn* (Beyrouth: Dar al-Talia, 1998).

For the challenges of retranslation in absence of the Arabic manuscript, see Abdenour Benantar, “(Re)traduction et Restitution du Texte d’Ibn Rushd dans sa Langue d’Origine : Commentaire de la République de Platon”, *Noesis* 21 (2013): 163-186.

<sup>25</sup> The Arabic translation presented by Jabri en Chahlane is, p.125, الاعشاب (al-‘shāb), “(green) herbs”. Lane Arabic-English Lexicon, vol. 5, p. 2050.

The other translation into Arabic by Obeidi en Kathem says: p. 126, النباتات (al-nabātāt), “plants”.

The other available translations for this passage are:

Mantinus (Latin) p. 349 §L-M: “plantis”

Rosenthal (English) 1956, 1966, 1969 p. 166: “plants”.

Lerner (English) 1972: “plants”.

Cruz Hernández (Spanish) 1986, p. 59: “plantas”.

Lauer (German) 1996, p. 70: “Pflanzen”.

De Almeida Prado and De Souza Pereira (Portuguese) 2015, p. 90: “Vegetais”.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Rushd’s commentary does not feature the dialogue form and Book I, the first half of Book II and Book X are left out.

Rushd had before him is also undetermined.<sup>27</sup> In this instance, however, Ibn Rushd's digression on the situation in Al-Andalus leaves no doubt that he is moving away from his source text and is speaking for himself.

Another reservation pertains to methodology. Should we approach the comparison with suspicion?<sup>28</sup> What are our expectations of Ibn Rushd "the early feminist"? During the U4 Winter School "Challenge and Response" (Rome 2019), where I had mentioned that the plant comparison had caught my attention but that I didn't know what to make of it, another researcher aptly remarked: "Well, it's obviously not a nice thing to say". This judgment does not merely stem from the keen, present awareness of what was written about women before – indeed, it must not have been a nice thing to say 800 years ago either. In order to study the topic of women in old texts, we must be aware of this distinction and of our heightened sensitivity to anything related to the topic of women. This sensitivity is a good thing and allows us to discover and compose the intriguing field of history and philosophy of sex and gender, but sometimes our thoughts would never have occurred to the author. So it could perhaps be argued that there is nothing sufficiently unusual about the comparison of women to plants to dedicate a paper to it. One could simply be happy to reflect on a long-established tradition of sexual symbolism that links women to passive, seductive plants, with fruits ready for the taking.<sup>29</sup> Or, maybe Ibn Rushd deplors that the women of his time are in a vegetative state. However, by dismissing the question because of this or that association, one is in fact already unpacking what it means to be a plant; i.e., it is an interpretation nonetheless.

As mentioned in the introduction, we suspect that an important key to clarifying the origin and meaning of Ibn Rushd's comparing women to plants lies in Aristotle.

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<sup>27</sup> It seems that no complete translation of Plato's *Republic* was ever made in Arabic, see David Reisman, "Plato's Republic in Arabic. A Newly Discovered Passage", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14/2 (2004): 263-300. Alexander Orwin convincingly problematizes the view that Ibn Rushd based his commentary on Galen's summary of the Republic in the Arabic translation of Hunayn ibn Ishaq; see Alexander Orwin, "Introduction", in *Plato's Republic in the Islamic Context: New Perspectives on Averroes's Commentary*, edited by A. Orwin (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2022), 1-16.

<sup>28</sup> More plant-like people have made their way in medieval Islamic works of political philosophy. Does Ibn Rushd's comparison have some bearing on the fact that two of Ibn Rushd's esteemed predecessors, the Islamic philosophers al-Farabi and Ibn Bajja, also happen to use plant-terminology to describe certain categories of people? As this question falls outside the scope of this paper, this inquiry will not be addressed here. For further reading, see Ilai Alon, "Fārābī's funny flora: al-Nawābit as "opposition"", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 121/2 (1989): 222-251. See also Michael Kochin, "Weeds: Cultivating the Imagination in Medieval Arabic Political Philosophy", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60/3 (1999): 399-416.

<sup>29</sup> See Nadia Harhash' master thesis on gender debates in medieval and contemporary Islamic sources: Nadia Harhash, "Debating Gender: A Study of Medieval and Contemporary Discussions in Islam. Al Ghazali, Averroes and Ibn Taymiyyah views on Women with an overview of Nawal Sa'adawi and Fatima Mernissi", 2016, n.p.

More specifically in his theory of the soul, *De Anima*, a highly influential work which Ibn Rushd wrote no less than three commentaries on. He also refers to *De Anima* in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*. In his investigation of what constitutes human happiness, Ibn Rushd first repeats Aristotle's thesis that there are three classes of compound bodies, i.e., beings made up of both matter and soul: ensouled, living beings:

As for what man [all humans] has in common with the compound bodies, why it was explained there that it necessarily is a soul. These bodies are of two kinds: plants and animals. The plants have in common with him the nutritive, vegetative, and generative soul.<sup>30</sup>

Ibn Rushd points to the soul of plants in *De Anima* 2.4: "For the nutritive soul belongs already to all the others; it is the first and most common potency of soul, the one through which living belongs to all things."<sup>31</sup> Aristotle's influential study of the soul is not about the mental vs the physical realm (as is more characteristic of modern conceptions of soul), rather, it divides the living from the dead.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it could be considered a work on biology as the soul is the principle of life. Plants constitute the lowest level of life, which is caused and governed by the power of the vegetative soul (also referred to as "nutritive soul" or "plant soul"). This soul accounts for nutrition, growth and reproduction. All plants have this nutritive and generative capacity *only*. They come into being, they find nourishment through their roots, grow, and in most cases leave behind a new flower, plant, shrub or tree just like them.<sup>33</sup>

Nonhuman animals are higher up on the scale of being, as they also partake in the sensitive soul in addition to the vegetative soul. This means that nonhuman animals can also receive sense impressions and react to them, even if they only have one perceptive power and not the others. For example, the sea sponge is an animal and has sense-perception, yet it is not self-moving.<sup>34</sup>

Aristotle says that animals "become plants, as it were" when they unite for procreation in order to fulfill their necessary task as living beings.<sup>35</sup>

Ibn Rushd thus clearly seems to allude to Aristotle's theory on the life and soul of plants in his assessment of the tasks of mothers: they are at the service of their husbands (this is the element of social criticism) and they are occupied by procreation

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<sup>30</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 67.26-68.5, Lerner, 83-84, interpolation added.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima* 2.4, 54. We use the following translation: Aristotle, *De Anima*, translated by M. Shiffman (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Co, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Everson, "Psychology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, edited by J. Barnes (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 168-194, 168.

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle says that some trees are sterile, such as the willow and the poplar. See Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, I.18, 726a7-8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, translated by R. C. Taylor and T.-A. Druart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 125 §16.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, I.23, 731b5-8.

(reproduction), upbringing (growth) and suckling (nutrition) – all three capacities of the vegetative soul of plants in a row. In this interpretation, two of the three capacities of the vegetative soul, growth and nutrition, are not merely understood as activities the organism carries out to sustain itself but also to care for its offspring.

Aristotle's *De Anima* postulates that humans differ from the lower beings owing to the fact that they partake in the third faculty of soul: the rational soul that gives them mind; the power of thought. But as the example of the sea sponge illustrates,<sup>36</sup> the division of categories is not fixed. Also, and more problematically, Aristotle and Ibn Rushd believed that not all humans partake in the rational soul in the same way. Slaves for instance, have the rational soul because they are humans, but their level of understanding was not theorized to be equal to that of free, adult men.

Aristotle is very explicit on the inferiority of slaves in the *Politics* and notoriously claims that natural slaves are born to be enslaved.<sup>37</sup> He states that slaves cannot deliberate (i.e., they are intellectually impaired but this is normal because of their natural condition) and compares them to tamed animals.<sup>38</sup> Although this work was unavailable to Ibn Rushd, Aristotle's opinion on slaves can easily be derived from the *NE* as well, for instance in the statement that "there is no friendship for what is inanimate, not any justice either, nor from those things which have souls, however it happened, like an ox in its character of being an ox, or a slave in his character of being a slave, because the slave is an animate tool, and the tool an inanimate slave".<sup>39</sup> Slavery was common practice in both Ancient Greek society and Medieval Iberia.<sup>40</sup> Precisely the ubiquity of strict social and legal hierarchies makes it all the more remarkable that Ibn Rushd was able to envision women in other roles than they were given at that place and time. He states no less than twice that some women might be fit for rule.<sup>41</sup> Yet as the

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, IV.5, 681a13-28.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, I.V, 1254a16-22. Aristotle contends that Greeks that have fallen into slavery by cause of war or debt, are not natural slaves but are slaves by law. Aristotle, *Politics*, I.VI 1255a3-5, 28-35.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, I.XIII, 1260a4-14, I.V 1254b21-25. Aristotle says that the faculty for rational thinking in women is "akuron" ("lacking authority") (*Politics*, I.XIII 1260a12-13). On this puzzling topic, see for instance Robert Mayhew, *The Female in Aristotle's Biology: Reason or Rationalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Dana Jalbert Stauffer, "Aristotle's Account of the Subjection of Women", *The Journal of Politics* 70/4 (2008): 929-941; Sophia M. Connell, *Aristotle on Female Animals: a study of the generation of animals* (Cambridge: CUP, 2016); Mariska Leunissen, *From natural character to moral virtue in Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.11 1161b, p. 464.

<sup>40</sup> For slavery in Al-Andalus, see Carol Graham, "The Meaning of Slavery and Identity in al-Andalus: The Epistle of Ibn Garcia", *The Arab Studies Journal* 3/1 (1995): 68-79; Manuela Marín, "Women and Slaves", in *The Routledge Handbook of Muslim Iberia*, edited by M. Fierro (London: Routledge, 2020), 228-248; Debra Blumenthal, "Slavery in Medieval Iberia", in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 2: AD 500-AD 1420*, edited by C. Perry, D. Eltis, D. Richardson and S. L. Engerman (Cambridge: CUP, 2021), 508-530.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 53.24-26, 78.13-15.

women in his society resemble plants, it seems they have a long way to go. It appears that he wanted to make a powerful statement but felt some reserve to compare women to slaves or animals. Why is this? The similarities between the women he describes and slaves or trained animals are immediately apparent: they are no candidates for any of the human virtues and their lives also revolve around service. Furthermore, a state not treating its citizens befittingly is an insult to itself. There are textual examples in Aristotle where the barbarity of other peoples is based precisely on the fact that they improperly treat non-slaves like slaves.<sup>42</sup>

However, certain non-slaves are already compared to slaves in Ibn Rushd's commentary, namely the inhabitants of the tyrannical city, which is the city most opposite to the Virtuous City:

As for the truly tyrannical cities, they are the cities through the association and efforts of whose citizens the completion of a single aim is intended, namely the aim of the tyrant to attain the end he has set for himself. [...] Hence they resemble slaves; indeed they are truly slaves.<sup>43</sup>

This aligns with the distinction that is made between king and tyrant in Aristotle's *NE*: "As for the declension of kingship, it is tyranny. Both of them are monarchies, but between them is much difference, because the aim of the tyrant is what is best for him, while the aim of the king is what is best for those under his rule."<sup>44</sup>

Ibn Rushd brings the *NE* to his commentary on Plato and says that the tyrant treats the citizens like slaves by granting them their necessities to the extent that they serve him.<sup>45</sup> Thus, although Ibn Rushd does not shy away from reprimanding the politics of his time to be tyrannical, he cannot associate the position of Andalusian women with slavery without offending the ruler specifically, and personally.<sup>46</sup>

It also might not be an option for Ibn Rushd to compare Andalusian women to animals, because his discussion of the guardians of the Ideal State already contains a strong comparison to animals maintained throughout, and that is a comparison of guardians to dogs. This comparison allows Socrates to introduce his unconventional idea for female guardians in the first place: good guard dogs can be male or female

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<sup>42</sup> Aristotle speaks of the Persians and condemns the tyrannical rule of the father (*NE* Arabic, VIII.10 1160b p.460). In the *Politics*, the uncivilizedness of the barbarians is illustrated by the fact that women and slaves are treated the same: "Among non-Greeks, however, a woman and a slave occupy the same position." (*Politics*, I.II 1252b4-9).

<sup>43</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 85.7-13.

<sup>44</sup> *NE* Arabic, VIII.10 1160b, p. 45.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 85.19-22.

<sup>46</sup> "All these actions of the tyrants are manifest in this time of ours not only through argument but also through sense and evidence." (98.3-4), Lerner 1974, 135. See also (84.21-24), 112; (86.9-12), 115; (96.22-27), 133.

because there is no relevant difference for tasks of guarding.<sup>47</sup> Female dogs are used for guarding and hunting all the same, regardless of the fact that they rear puppies and are generally smaller and weaker than their male counterparts. Ibn Rushd insists on the validity of this analogy and of its extension to humans:

This is already clear from investigation of the animals – i.e., that it is fitting that there be female guardians. This refers to the animals to whom we previously compared the guardian. We see this in female dogs who guard what their males guard and strike at hyenas just as their males strike at them, save that they are weaker at this.<sup>48</sup>

In what follows, Ibn Rushd bolsters Socrates' argument with Aristotle's study of animals:<sup>49</sup>

That is why nature sometimes, but rarely, gives the male an instrument with which he can fight that is not in the female, 'as is the case with the boar'. But since the fighting instruments of those animals whose wont it is to fight are for the most part common to the male and the female, it [sc. Nature] intends that the female also perform this activity.<sup>50</sup>

Ibn Rushd seems to refer to Aristotle's discussion of horns in male animals, and the horns and strong appearance of the wild boar in particular.<sup>51</sup> He elaborately expounds on Socrates' comparison of the guardians to dogs and consistently traces back the characteristics of the guardians who protect the State to the characteristics of guard dogs.<sup>52</sup> Because of the leading presence of this analogy, the comparison of uneducated mothers with animals would seem inappropriate, and therefore, the comparison with any kind of humans – useful or not, educated or not – appears to be off-limits too.

Ibn Rushd is eager to stress that nature does not impede a certain equality between the sexes in the tasks they can be assigned. Certain outstanding men, and certain outstanding women, have what it takes to become philosophers and rulers and stand

<sup>47</sup> Ibn Rushd is unaware of the fact that Aristotle believes that the analogy of guardians to dogs does not make sense because dogs don't have a household to run, see Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), II.5 1264b3-6.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 53.28-54.2.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn Rushd was well acquainted with Aristotle's zoology, which was known in the Arabic world as *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (*The book on Animals*), which contains Aristotle's *History of Animals* (treatises 1-10), *Parts of Animals* (treatises 11-14) and *Generation of Animals* (treatises 15-19). Ibn Rushd wrote commentaries on the *Generation of Animals* and *Parts of Animals*.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 54.3-5, interpolation original.

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *History of Animals*, II.I 499a1-9.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 28.29-30, see also 58.15-17.

The guardian must be naturally spirited, which means he should be able to be instantly ready to attack, or to repel. The guardian is a person of two extremes, who can both love and hate fiercely. Ibn Rushd: "An example is the dog of strong dispositions, who is formed with a similar nature. He is one of the most companionable of things toward one who frolics with him and the opposite of this toward whomever he does not recognise", see Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 28.21-3.

out above the multitude. Ibn Rushd sets out that there are different classes of people with different degrees of intelligence, and the people with the lowest intellectual skills are described as “the multitude”, “the masses”, “the common people”, and the management of them appears to be an important topic to Ibn Rushd, not only in the commentary on Plato’s *Republic* but also in his *Fasl al-Maqal* (“On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy”). A large part of the art of governing comes down to ruling this type of people – and Plato and Ibn Rushd believe this to be the majority – because they are naturally less intelligent and need to be lorded over. Plato’s Ideal City is modeled on the soul: all parts must perform their function and the lower faculties must obey the higher in order for the whole to be well and healthy, and this is beneficial for all its parts.<sup>53</sup> The difference between lord and subject is that the lord has the *highest form of reason*: “The lord will be lord by a disposition in him by [virtue of] which he is better than the one being lorded over. This being so, this disposition is nothing other than the part of reason called theoretical.”<sup>54</sup>

Again, we see that humans are not equal on account of sharing in the rational soul, i.e., that which constitutes their humanity. People vary greatly in their natural inclination towards intelligence and virtue. According to Ibn Rushd, this natural variation is good: “The usual situation is that each and every kind of human ‘is disposed’ toward some particular one of these perfections. This is clear from investigation of individual humans.”<sup>55</sup> People are in need of others because of this natural variation in virtues and skills, hence they are political by nature.<sup>56</sup> Ibn Rushd explains Plato’s opinion that it is best that everyone focuses on a single skill they naturally excel at, because this is the way to reach the best results for that given activity.<sup>57</sup> This regulation of “one occupation per person” constitutes justice: “It is nothing more than that every human in the city do the work that is his by nature in the best way that he possibly can.”<sup>58</sup> Justice is closely related to virtue: doing the best one can, in the best way one can. Just like a good knife and a good strawberry have different qualities responsible for their excellence, the natural difference in people’s activities also generates a difference in virtue. Ibn Rushd presents Plato’s discussion on justice with an Aristotelian twist by claiming that if everyone was potentially prepared for all human perfections, nature would have done something in vain, and nature does nothing in vain.<sup>59</sup>

But natural aptitude does not determine the outcome of a person’s potential. A favorable environment seems to be just as important, and this is the responsibility of the city: “If the proper place and nutriment are not found [...], the seeds of the best

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<sup>53</sup> (23.18-24) p. 7, (23.30-24.6) p. 7-8

<sup>54</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, 69.26-29, interpolation original.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 69.9-12.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 22.16-29.

<sup>57</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 22.28-30.

<sup>58</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 23.32-24.1.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 22.29-23.5, 69.4-9.

plants will turn into the very worst of the bad kinds. Such is the case with the virtuous natures when they grow up in these cities and are badly educated.”<sup>60</sup>

Once more, Ibn Rushd’s explanation singles out his own society. The nature of his criticism is coherent with his declaration on the situation of women: that their competence is unknown due to their circumstances.<sup>61</sup> As Ibn Rushd tells us in other words, respectable Andalusian women were confined to their homes and led no autonomous or public lives.<sup>62</sup> The historical reality of the women of medieval al-Andalus is similar to Plato and Aristotle’s Ancient Greece in the sense that a high socioeconomic status meant low freedom, and vice versa.<sup>63</sup> The plant-like women Ibn Rushd compares to plants live a separate, private life, and in historical reality hardly ever go outside. So the anachronistic concept of the stay-at-home mother applies quite literally in this context. It is meaningful that Ibn Rushd did not miss Plato’s comparison of the tyrant to a woman who is stuck in her house.<sup>64</sup> The tyrant has nothing but enemies and needs to watch over his shoulder, worried his own slaves might turn on him. Ibn Rushd says that the tyrant “has great hunger ‘within’ himself and cannot rule himself. Hence he cannot go wherever he wishes nor look at whatever he wishes, but rather only lives the life of a woman.”<sup>65</sup>

The women’s unfavorable conditions could be compared, somewhat dramatically, to those of the people inhabiting Plato’s famous allegorical cave. The Allegory of the Cave, which is described in Book VII of the *Republic*, illustrates the effects of uneducated people who are not virtuous to any degree. They are kept inside a cave which they have never left, and they see only shadows of things in the outside world projected in front of them.<sup>66</sup> The household, like the cave, then, is not a good place to be for people – either male or female – who have the capacity for philosophy or rule.

<sup>60</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 64.1-6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 54.5-10.

<sup>62</sup> Darío Fernández-Morera, *The myth of the Andalusian paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic rule in medieval Spain* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2016), 156-177. For women in Islamic Spain, see also Manuela Marín, *Mujeres en Al-Ándalus* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000); María J. Viguera Molins, “Reflejos cronísticos de mujeres andalusíes y magrebíes”, *Anaquel de Estudios Árabes* 12 (2001): 829-841; María J. Nadales Álvarez, “Mujeres en Al-Andalus”, *Isla de Arriarán: revista cultural y científica* 28 (2006): 159-184.

<sup>63</sup> Women in Medieval Iberia who were educated in crafts, medicine, literature, singing, etc., were slave women, see Darío Fernández-Morera, *The Myth*, 156-177.

<sup>64</sup> He is “mostly stuck in house, living like a woman, envying any other citizen who goes abroad and sees some good thing,” *Republic* 579b-c. Plato, *Republic*, translated by C. D. C. Reeve, *A Plato Reader, Eight Essential Dialogues* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 267-574, 530.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, 102.2-4.

<sup>66</sup> It has to be observed that these unfortunate, fictional people are not compared to plants or anything else that is noticeably lower on the scale of being. Ibn Rushd refers to them as “the multitude” and “these people”. Even the people believed to lack all potential for becoming virtuous or who are too old for this because they have grown up under a bad governance, are still labeled as persons, albeit dumb and brutish ones (27.17-23) p.14-15.



Ibn Rushd's negative evaluation of the women in his own context, whose lives are closely connected to running the household and raising its youngest members, appears connected to his investment in explaining Plato's radical proposal for the prohibition on male-female cohabitation and the dissolution of family units. Instead, the State is like a big household.

Aristotle has another view; the household is like a microstate and the head of the household lords over his children like a king over his subjects.<sup>67</sup> It is natural for a human being to be part of a household in the first place, and then be part of a city. "One human" doesn't really exist for Aristotle in the sense that a human can only be fully human in relation to other people and in the larger whole of the polis. Humans naturally form pairs as they have the natural desire to reproduce themselves.<sup>68</sup> And in taking up parenting responsibilities, people can realize their own good.

### 3. Maternity, Love and Happiness: *Nicomachean Ethics* vs *Republic*

At the heart of the *Republic* lies a discussion about the nature of *justice* (*dikaíosúnē*) and how it is achieved in the Ideal State. Ibn Rushd agrees with Plato that justice "is nothing more than that every human in the city do the work that is his by nature in the best way that he possibly can."<sup>69</sup> This constitutes human virtue. As Ibn Rushd explains, the women of Al-Andalus resemble plants because they are not prepared for any of the human virtues, and vice versa.

Human excellence can be achieved in four domains: Ibn Rushd says that there are theoretical virtues, cogitative virtues, moral virtues and the practical arts. Impossible for one person to attain all of them, people need other people and are political by nature.<sup>70</sup> The interesting point here is that Ibn Rushd contends that "procreation, upbringing, and suckling" does not involve any kind of human virtue.<sup>71</sup> Not even the moral virtues or practical arts are in any way connected to the upbringing of new citizens. This opinion curiously minimizes the value of such an extensive part of Ibn Rushd's own inquiry, i.e., the discussion pertaining the generation, suckling and education of the guardians.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, drawing on the work of Sophia M. Connell, we will show that Ibn Rushd's view is incompatible with the Aristotelian model for the ethics of parenting which emphasizes the intellectual work that is involved in raising

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<sup>67</sup> NE Arabic, VIII.10, p. 460.

<sup>68</sup> NE Arabic, VIII.12, p. 468.

<sup>69</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 23.32-24.1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 22.16-29.

<sup>71</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 54.7-8.

<sup>72</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, pp. 57 and 60-64 (generation), 19 and 62 (suckling), 22-32 (education of the guardians).

the next generation.<sup>73</sup> The intelligence that is required to raise offspring well and safely is even displayed in the behavior of certain animals, and Aristotle provides several examples of this in his zoology. The deer, for instance, gives birth alongside roads to make sure that wild beasts, who are not fond of humans, keep their distance, and the female cuckoo goes intelligently about reproduction by invading another bird's nest.<sup>74</sup> Non-human parents are described as intelligent and possessing practical wisdom, even though they cannot be properly virtuous because they are animals, and not humans.<sup>75</sup>

According to Ibn Rushd's assessment of women's status in Andalusia, typical tasks of motherhood and homemaking fail to involve intelligence and are inimical to cultivating one's natural dispositions for something worthwhile. For those women who have a similar nature to the best of men (i.e., those fit for philosophy and rule), gender equality is attainable, but only on an important condition: by leaving behind all tasks relating to parenthood. Socrates' inclusion of female guardians is supported by the assumption that the nature of women who are eligible for guardianship is different from men's nature *only* in their capacity to bear offspring.<sup>76</sup> A problem that plagues Plato and Ibn Rushd is that this difference should not be completely leveled. Of all the possible reasons Plato's Socrates might have had to include women among the guardians in the *Republic*, it has been suggested that they were needed in order to generate guardian offspring and that this is in fact Ibn Rushd's interpretation of Plato as well.<sup>77</sup>

Ibn Rushd starts off ("we say") by stating that in order to preserve the guardian nature, it is necessary for the guardians to copulate with women that have a similar nature and training.<sup>78</sup> Ibn Rushd seems convinced, as is maintained in the dialogue by Socrates and his interlocutors, that in order to obtain great offspring, it is necessary that both parents are among the best.<sup>79</sup> Ibn Rushd describes the matter in Aristotelian terms again by declaring the difference between the sexes one of degree; men and women "differ only in less or more."<sup>80</sup> This statement has been interpreted as an exclamation of a kind of gender equality that would benefit women collectively. This

<sup>73</sup> Sophia M. Connell, "Mothering and Intelligence in Aristotle's Biology and Ethics", in *Proceedings of World Congress, Aristotle 2400 Years, May 23-28, 2016*, ed. Demetra Sfendoni-Mentzou (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 122-127.

<sup>74</sup> See Aristotle, *History of Animals* VII (IX).5 611a15-23, VIII (IX).29 618a26-29. Both examples are given by Sophia M. Connell, see Sophia M. Connell, "Mothering".

<sup>75</sup> Sophia M. Connell, "Mothering".

<sup>76</sup> Plato, *Republic*, V 454d-e.

<sup>77</sup> See Elena Duvergès Blair, *Plato's Dialectic on Woman: Equal, Therefore Inferior* (London: Routledge, 2017), 88.

<sup>78</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 52.29-53.1.

<sup>79</sup> Plato, *Republic*, V 459a. Ibn Rushd does not indicate that this eugenic program conflicts Islamic law (*sharī'a*). According to Ralph Lerner, his silence on this matter carries significance, see Ralph Lerner, introduction to Averroes, *Commentary*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>80</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 53. 9-11.

view is mistaken and does not fit with the spirit of Ibn Rushd's philosophy: we must not forget that Ibn Rushd claims that the rational capacities of most adult Muslim men are insufficient to safely engage in philosophy, and philosophical works should be banned for unlearned minds in order to prevent them from falling into disbelief.<sup>81</sup> Ibn Rushd believes that *some* women have what it takes to become rulers or philosophers and states this twice in his commentary.<sup>82</sup> It would be a misrepresentation of Ibn Rushd to present the view that this applies to many women, as it does not even apply to a large number of men: "[...] for not every man is fit to be a warrior or an orator or a poet, let alone a philosopher."<sup>83</sup>

From Ibn Rushd's Aristotelian standpoint, which he declares "the indubitable truth", that a gradual difference can make *all* the difference. It is what sets apart a cat from a lion, slave from freeborn, a farmer from a guardian. The key "feminist" point in Ibn Rushd's commentary is that he does not foster a harsh division between men and women based on sexual difference, and hereby goes against common practice in all areas of his society and in his profession as a jurist.

Like in Plato, the difference between the sexes is minimal in the guardian class. No distinction is made in the upbringing of guardian boys and girls. Ibn Rushd (like Plato) believes that their superior characteristics are ensured because of their parents' excellence. Nevertheless, he admits that it might occur that a child is born to the guardians that is not fit to be a guardian, and likewise, it might happen – although Ibn Rushd stresses that this too is uncommon – that someone fit for guardianship is born in another class.<sup>84</sup> In these cases, the child must be transferred to the right class. A certain story serves to convince the parents.<sup>85</sup> Adherence to this principle seems extremely important to Ibn Rushd, as it is one of the few instances where he calls upon the authority of God and of the Prophet.<sup>86</sup>

The guardian mothers will not lay eyes on their offspring, as the children will be taken away immediately after birth to be raised by the State. Ibn Rushd is brief about how the newborn guardians will be cared for after they are separated from their mothers:

And we shall beware, as Plato says, of accustomating their souls to, and leading them by, base fables even more than we beware them of 'the harm to their bodies from snow'

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<sup>81</sup> Ibn Rushd, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, translated by A. Hourani, 142. URL: <<http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ir/fasl.htm>>

<sup>82</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 53.24-54.14 and 78.13-15.

<sup>83</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 23.6-7.

<sup>84</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 39.27-40.2. Plato, *Republic*, 415a-c.

<sup>85</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 40.7-24. The story is that God mixed gold in the being of the guardian class, silver in the auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the craftsmen, Plato, *Republic* 414d, e.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 40.24-26, 41.1-3.

– this [especially] when we hand them over while they are ‘yet’ small to wet-nurses, who train them.<sup>87</sup>

Whereas great emphasis is put on how the young guardians should be selected, educated and trained, who exactly raises them does not seem to matter. The city has many children, parents and grandparents and they are all communal.<sup>88</sup>

This is in sharp contrast to the parent-child relationship described in Aristotle’s *NE*, which does not only involve the parent’s use of practical reason and intelligence, but also constitutes happiness. The *NE*<sup>89</sup> characterizes the relation of parent to child as a lifelong friendship. A child is like another self.<sup>90</sup> The bond between them is natural because parents are naturally fond of their offspring. This applies not only to humans but to birds and other animals as well.

Aristotle’s *NE* discusses three kinds of friendship; friendships for advantage (utility), for pleasure, and based on resemblance. Perfect friendship exists only between men who are alike in virtue, and this is hard to come by. Therefore most friendships in life – and a good life is never devoid of friends – are of the unequal type. This means that the friendship exists between people who are not equals: like the friendship between father and son, man and woman, and chief and subject. The inequality between both parties is compensated as the superior one is more loved, and the inferior one loves more: “When the child is kind to his parents, as is right for parents, and the parents are kind to the children, as is right, the friendship of these is permanent and meritorious.”<sup>91</sup>

But even when children are unpleasant or disappointing, they are positive assets, because friendship is more in the one who loves. Seeing that the child is doing well is sufficient for the parent:

Thus they rejoice in being loved, since friendship is chosen for itself. It is thought that it is more likely to be in the one who loves than the one who is loved. The proof of that are mothers, who take pleasure in loving. For some of them allow that what is theirs should be less. They love with knowledge and do not seek a requital of love, if both are not possible, but it seems that it is sufficient for them to see the good state of the children, and they love the children, even if they are not kind to the mother in any of the things in respect of which she ought to be treated kindly, on account of ignorance.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 30.18-21, interpolation original.

<sup>88</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary*, 56.4-15.

<sup>89</sup> To work with the *NE* that Ibn Rushd has read, we use the Arabic/English translation of the Fez manuscript: *The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by A. A. Akasoy and A. Fidora (Leiden: Brill, 2005). The *NE* contained in this manuscript is the same as the translation of the *NE* that Ibn Rushd used, 51-52.

<sup>90</sup> *NE* Arabic VIII.12s 1161b, p. 466.

<sup>91</sup> *NE* Arabic, VIII.7 1158b, p. 448.

<sup>92</sup> *NE* Arabic, VIII.8 1159a, 450-52.

The Arabic translation of the *NE* omits Aristotle's opinion that the wellbeing of the child affects the reputation of the parent posthumously, perhaps because it goes without saying in an Islamic context that pain and pleasure exist beyond death.<sup>93</sup> The loss of children was evaluated differently in the Ancient Greek and the Islamic context. Infant and child death were a severe problem for medieval Muslim society, which is also reflected by the blossoming of the unique literary genre of consolation treatises for grieving parents. One hadith report promises that parents who had lost three children are admitted by God to Paradise.<sup>94</sup>

The parent is more concerned with the children than vice versa, because the child is like a product and the parent its producer: "[...] fathers love their children as soon as they are born, while the children only love after time passes. And they know their parents either by the understanding or by sense. It is plain from this that mothers love more than others."<sup>95</sup>

Maternal love is linked to the discomfort and pain the mother has put into the process:

And also all men love what has come to them with trouble more than anything else, like money, for those who have made money love it more than those who have received it freely. It may be thought that to have good done to one involves no trouble, but to do good is a trouble. Hence mothers love their children more, because birth was more painful, and they love the children more than themselves.<sup>96</sup>

Ibn Rushd does not deny that mothers love their children. The commentary indirectly discusses maternal love on a few occasions. He appeals to maternal love and the fact that parents just want to see their child do well in adopting Plato's story that is used to misguide parents in order to convince them, in the odd event that their child does not belong to the parents' class, to transfer their offspring to the class they belong to. His recommendation, also adopted from Plato, that guardian mothers should not see their children but should be parted immediately after birth, is also telling.

We might wonder whether the question occurred to Ibn Rushd if maternal love was something that nature did do in vain. Whereas certain elements from Aristotle's biology are brought to Plato's discussion to state that Nature *intends* that the female joins in

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<sup>93</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.10.1100a19-23. How children are doing affects parents posthumously because the realization of the "product" impacts the "producer", see Dominic Scott, "Aristotle on Posthumous Fortune," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 17 (2000): 211-229, cited in Connell, "Mothering".

<sup>94</sup> Gil'adi Avner, *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 86-87.

<sup>95</sup> *NE* Arabic, VIII.12 1162a, p. 464-66. That mothers love their children more is also stated in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, VII.8 1241b1-9, but this work was not translated into Arabic in Ibn Rushd's time.

<sup>96</sup> *NE* Arabic, IX.7 1168a, 508.

guarding (54.3-5, p. 59) based on the physical fighting instruments of both sexes, it seems this line of reasoning is missing entirely here. The fact that breast milk comes in after a mother gives birth, for instance, might manifest to Ibn Rushd Nature's intention that an infant stays with the mother for a while. However, as the children are communal, Ibn Rushd has in mind that the mothers' milk is for all the children, and – very much contradictory to Aristotle's ethics of parenting – so is her love.<sup>97</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Departing from a passage from Ibn Rushd's Commentary on Plato's *Republic* and the question "why would Ibn Rushd compare Andalusian woman to plants?", we aimed to demonstrate two related points. First, we have explained that Ibn Rushd's comparison of Andalusian women to plants has been viewed exclusively in light of his discontent with the political climate and the position of women in his native Al-Andalus. However, it is not rightfully deductible from Ibn Rushd's commentary that this particular statement merely targets his own society. Although societal criticism is one piece to the puzzle, attentive reading of the passage makes it clear that Ibn Rushd's statement bears connection to at least two other considerations: Aristotle's psychology in which the plant soul accounts for the most basic tasks of sustaining life, and Ibn Rushd's disregard for tasks of motherhood, caregiving and household management as morally insignificant tasks. Ibn Rushd states that these activities do not constitute, or involve, any form of human virtue. The implication is that there is no thriving, no happiness (*eudaimonia*) in living this life. Ibn Rushd tells us himself that there are twice as many women as men in his society<sup>98</sup>, so it seems his opinion applied to a great number of people.

Aristotle's psychology and the nutritive soul of plants in *De Anima* presents us with a solid motivation for Ibn Rushd's to compare women to plants. The soul that accounts for plant life accounts for the basic tasks of generation, nutrition, and growth. There is no capacity for free movement, desire, or rational thought. This parallels Ibn Rushd's assessment of Andalusian women as docile beings who are stuck in one spot (societal criticism) who do not have significant things to do (low regard for the intelligence and virtue needed to complete tasks of motherhood). On Ibn Rushd's account, mothers are occupied with procreation (reproduction), upbringing (growth) and suckling (nutrition): the three capacities of the vegetative soul which humans and animals have in common with plants. We see that the comparison of women to plants and Ibn Rushd's low esteem for child-rearing are connected: living a good human life is not about the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 56.2-7.

<sup>98</sup> Ibn Rushd does not elaborate on this odd piece of information. We are unaware of whether this means that there is a surplus of women (e.g. the import of female slaves) or whether many men have left (e.g. away on a military mission or other).

activities we share with the lower beings, such as the creation and nurture of offspring (although these activities are necessary for the continuation of human life).

This opinion could also explain Ibn Rushd's enthusiasm to comment at length on the ideas of Plato's *Republic*, in particular the elimination of private households and families, and of course – in connection to this – the existence of female guardians. For it is not only the comparison of guardians with dogs, but also the dissolution of the private household that opens up room for the feasibility of guardians of the female sex. The guardians do produce the new guardians, but they do not raise them. This political proposal exposes a tension inherent to the gender equality of the guardians: the more likely a woman is to climb the social and intellectual ladder, the more her offspring is desired, but the less advantageous it is that she spends her time and energy raising it. The activity she is supposed to carry out is not being a caring mother, as this is not what she is best at. We might even detect the motherhood penalty *avant-la-lettre* here, or the belief that mothers, i.e., primary caregivers to children, will not perform as well as non-mothers in the workplace. Maybe it is precisely because this rings a bell that Ibn Rushd's assessment of mothers is left out completely in recent scholarship in favor of an explicit emphasis on the feminist ideology which his commentary on Plato's *Republic* contains – it is perhaps not what we wish to see alongside his remarkably progressive thoughts on the advancement of elite women. We might wonder if it would be more comfortable to acknowledge the full scope of Ibn Rushd's statements on women if the social reform necessary for satisfactorily and justly combining roles as both mothers and members of the workplace would be commonplace by now, instead of exceptional.

Secondly, we have made apparent that Ibn Rushd's understanding of tasks of motherhood and caretaking stands in sharp contrast to the views expressed in Aristotle's *NE*. On a certain reading of the texts, the *NE* gives an account of how the parent-child relationship contributes to living a meaningful and good human life and stresses that one's own good cannot exist without the *noble art* of household management.<sup>99</sup> This opposition is somewhat problematic owing to the fact that the *NE* and the *Republic* are understood to make up a larger whole: the *NE* contains the theory, and Aristotle's *Politics* contains the practice but is replaced by Plato's *Republic*.

This brings us the interesting fact that both Plato's *Republic* and Ibn Rushd's commentary thereupon contain proto-feminist thought. Ibn Rushd's keenness on the idea of guardian women is apparent. He is eager to demonstrate what happens if women are not given the opportunity to see where their competence lies, as he even takes the reader on an excursus of the bad effects of women's usual unemployment in his society. He manages to even bring elements of Aristotle's biology to the discussion to argue in favor of Nature's intention in the egalitarianism of the guardians – something Aristotle would never have subscribed to. Ibn Rushd is not merely influenced by Plato in his opinion on the potential of women. This can be deduced from his digression on Al-

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<sup>99</sup> *NE* Arabic, I.2 1094b, VIII.7 1158b, VIII.8 1159a.

Andalus, and also from the fact that he states twice that some women could rule. As has been argued in this paper, it is a mistake to hold that Ibn Rushd's views benefit women as a class, but it should be recognized that the idea that *at least some women* are just as capable of reign and as philosophic in nature as *the best of men*, and to have this stated unambiguously and repeatedly in a Medieval work on political philosophy, is atypical and genuinely astounding.

It is reasonable to wonder: would these exceptional women also be able to care for their children? Ibn Rushd's fervent endorsement of Plato's principle of "one task for each" tells us that the answer is negative. The ideology of one task per person is the cornerstone of the regulation that guardian women do not engage in child rearing responsibilities: they have higher virtues and talents and their best life lies in the exercise of them. They can be mothers only in a very narrow, biological sense of the word, as they are needed to secure "golden", guardian offspring. Their roles as mothers can be outsourced, but their contributing to the generation of new offspring cannot. It is therefore ironic to conclude that in this regard, guardian women seem to have more in common with plants in the activities by which they support the next generation – in both the Aristotelian and symbolic sense of docile organisms used for harvest – than other women in the conceived Ideal State do.

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