

The Dialogue

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CAST:

Axiothea (15-25 yrs) – onstage and offstage

Lasthenia (15-25 yrs) – onstage and offstage

NOTES:

Axiothea and Lasthenia, dressed in togas, sit at the back of Plato's Academy. They are trying to pass as men because women are not allowed in school. Axiothea is furtive, trying to be inconspicuous; Lasthenia overcompensates and opts for a macho swagger; she sports a beard--and pink running shoes.

Their dialogue consists of notes being passed back and forth: the content is delivered by the offstage Axiothea and Lasthenia, as the onstage Axiothea and Lasthenia read (or write?) the notes. Perhaps for the longer notes, or when the conversation gets more excited, they break off with the note-writing and just whisper to each other.

AXIOTHEA: (tersely) Lasthenia, your beard is slipping.

Lasthenia rummages in her toga and finally takes out a primer sized pencil with an oversized Mickey Mouse tip on it (or some other such silly thing). Then she looks, foolishly, apologetically, at Axiothea--who gives her some paper. (This is not the first time.) She writes a note and passes it back.

LASTHENIA: (delightfully flippant) Why thank you.

Lasthenia straightens her beard, looks at Axiothea for an approving nod.

AXIOTHEA: Did you get the mathematics done?

Lasthenia grimaces, smiles for a moment (thinking of Axiothea being with her last night), but mostly shows frustration.

LASTHENIA: No. And I tried so hard after you left last night. I worked at it for another two hours. It's just not clear at all. Can you help me again tonight?

Axiothea pauses, thinking of her evening commitments, then responds.

AXIOTHEA: (happily) All right--I should be able to get away.

Lasthenia kicks up her feet as she writes this one and passes it with a flourish.

LASTHENIA: (exuberantly) Wonderful!

Axiothea looks around nervously, perhaps moves away a bit.

AXIOTHEA: (again tersely) Lasthenia, please be more discreet here at the Academy. People will begin to notice us.

LASTHENIA: Well maybe it's time they did. I get so angry--none of the other students have to pass notes. They speak freely to each other whenever they have something to say. Which is all the time.

AXIOTHEA: None of the other students have soprano voices. Or pink running shoes.

Lasthenia peeps over the desk edge to look endearingly at her pink shoes (she holds her feet in turned out ballet first position in the air). She then sighs.

LASTHENIA: None that we know of. Haven't you wondered about that new student? (jerks her head to the back.) The one who sits over there--never says a word--also has a beard.

Lasthenia strokes her beard and it almost comes off--she fixes it quickly, her face saying a goofy 'oops'.

Axiothea turns discreetly to look, then quickly turns back to face the audience again.

AXIOTHEA: Plato has come in.

They follow Plato with their eyes as he walks to the front of the room (that is, to the back of the audience); they also look a few others who come in and sit down, Lasthenia nudging Axiothea with querying eyebrows to take a good look at a few...

LASTHENIA: See that's the problem with this disguise. Not only does it cut us off from the men, it cuts us off from each other too.

AXIOTHEA: (a bit bored, as if she's been over this again and again--but with herself as well as with Lasthenia, also feeling the frustration Lasthenia feels) But otherwise we couldn't be here, and we'd be even more cut off. (getting angry) Now please! If Plato sees us, he'll think we aren't paying attention, and I'd hate to offend him!

Lasthenia sits still then, almost pouting. Then she remembers an exciting thought.

LASTHENIA: Do you think he's going to continue with the concept of justice? I was thinking about that on my way here this morning. And I think the problem is that we associate justice with goodness. Look what happens if we don't do that: something can be just without necessarily being good.

This section, on the concept of justice, is sometimes done quickly, with spurts of an idea, and sometimes done with deceptive languidity, as they 'pay attention' to the class proceedings, occasionally 'taking notes' (Axiothea more than Lasthenia) (Lasthenia doodles), while simultaneously ruminating over their discussion. Axiothea, in fact, isn't terribly involved in the discussion (her mind wants to pay attention, but manners forbid it) until the end--she's really gripped by the conclusion she reaches. And Lasthenia doesn't quite grasp the importance, the value, of it; she doesn't take it, or herself, quite as seriously as Axiothea does--it's fun but that's about it.

AXIOTHEA: (anger disappearing) That's an interesting idea. So the person to whom the guns were entrusted gives them back when the owner, though no longer in his right mind, requests them--the action can indeed be just, but not good.

LASTHENIA: And, for example, it can be just to charge everyone the same amount for medical services, but not good.

AXIOTHEA: But that doesn't get us any closer to defining justice, to deciding what is and is not just.

LASTHENIA: Well to me, it's a lot like mathematics.

AXIOTHEA: (smiling at Lasthenia) Meaning you don't understand it?

LASTHENIA: (smiling back) Very funny. No, meaning it's a matter of equations, of strict equivalences.

AXIOTHEA: Go on.

LASTHENIA: Well strict equivalence is all very fine with numerical relations, but it's impossible in human relations--unless we treat people like numbers. But where for one child, taking away a toy is punishment, for another, the mere suggestions of it is enough.

AXIOTHEA: (following and continuing) Because the children are different emotionally, the impact will be the same even though the action needs to be different.

LASTHENIA: Right, see numbers just have quantity, but people have quality as well--emotional quality, physiological quality, situational quality.

There is a bit of a pause here as Axiothea works to a conclusion.

AXIOTHEA: So are we saying justice has no place in human relations?

Unfortunately at this point both of their wandering gazes are caught by point A (in audience, right), as if something of interest has just been said by a class member there. Then they simultaneously look to point B (in audience, left) as another student has countered, then they look back to point A, then to B (following the discussion), then to point C (beside them), then to B. Then Lasthenia looks at point D (behind them).

LASTHENIA: (angrily) Oh gods, Aristotle's getting up to speak. If he rants and raves about women again like he did yesterday, i swear i won't be silent this time!

Alarmed, jarred out of her focus on points A, B, and C, Axio twists to point D.

AXIOTHEA: No, Lasthenia, you mustn't! If you speak out--especially now--all will be lost!

LASTHENIA: If I don't, all will be lost! He can't be allowed to continue uncontested--you know how he can talk!

They listen--Lasthenia reacts with disgust and quickly folds a piece of paper into an airplane and sends it in his direction.

LASTHENIA: And his daddy's rich.

AXIOTHEA: So?

LASTHENIA: Well, don't you see? Plato is getting old--unless he names a successor, the Academy will close, then Aristotle will open his own school. He knows Plato will never name him successor, his ideas are too different. And as far as I know, he hasn't named anyone--has he sent any word to you about it?

AXIOTHEA: (surprised) To me?

LASTHENIA: (with admiration and real pride) Well why not? According to Speusippus, Plato said "Axiotheo alone has the mind bright enough to grasp my ideas."

AXIOTHEA: (pleased) Yes but that doesn't mean he's going to name me his successor. Sometimes I think he knows I'm really Axiothea--and he knows as well as I that if the next director were a woman, the state would stop its funding. And unlike Aristotle, my father is not physician to the king--I have no private backing to keep a school going.

There is a pause of concession on Lasthenia's part.

LASTHENIA: What about Samothea? She was head of the Hyperborean university in Cornwall--you know, where Pythagoras got his degree.

AXIOTHEA: True enough--I don't know how she managed--I would think enrolment as well as funding would decrease--but she's a Briton, things must be different there. (discouraged) No, Plato would be wise to name Lycurgus or Demosthenes.

LASTHENIA: (appalled at her suggestion as well as at her discouragement) Those airheads! Maybe they speak well, but they say nothing!

AXIOTHEA: How would you know? You never listen--you're always too busy distracting me with these notes!

LASTHENIA: You know, they say Samothea invented letters. Figures. Anyway, I listen when there's something worth listening to-- (She looks with disbelief in Aristotle's direction.) And Aristotle is not worth listening to!

She slingshots an elastic at him.

AXIOTHEA: (aghast) Lasthenia! What are you doing?

LASTHENIA: Setting him free, dragging him up out of the cave--did you hear what he just said? (She fires off another elastic.) Axio, I have to speak out!

She fidgets restlessly.

Axiothea puts one hand on Lasthenia's arm (as if to hold her down gently, and stop her from shooting yet another elastic).

AXIOTHEA: No, Lasthenia, be careful of winning a battle only to lose a war--the time isn't right!

LASTHENIA: (angrily) The time is never right!

AXIOTHEA: That's not true! Wait until this mess with the Macedonians has passed. Everything's at loose ends now, our voice will get lost.

Lasthenia practically rips the paper writing this next note.

LASTHENIA: But when everything's tight, there's no room for our voice!

She looks anxiously back at Aristotle.

AXIOTHEA: No, listen, we have to wait until the men feel secure. If we rise now, we're just one more threat--their response will be irrational, flung out of fear. When things are settled, when they are sure of their own position, then they can listen to the arguments about ours.

LASTHENIA: No! They were 'secure' last century. And look what happened. Already Aspasia and Diotima are unacknowledged, forgotten. We hear only of Socrates, not of the women who taught him. Aspasia can talk circles around him--that's where he learned the art of rhetoric. And Diotima's social philosophy and her theories on nature have never been surpassed. And what about elipinice and aglaonice--what has happened to them, to their works?

(She tears off the sheet to continue on the next page.)

The surer the men get of their 'position', the surer they are to 'put us in ours'! Perictyone alone is remembered, her papers are still read--but only because she's Plato's mother; you watch, as soon as he's dead, she'll be buried too!

AXIOTHEA: (now she is beginning to get angry) No, that won't happen, I don't believe it!

LASTHENIA: It will! Axio, it has! Who is credited with the golden mean concept? Pythagoras, not Theano! Her husband for god's sake! She was the brilliant one! Mathematics, medicine, physics, psychology--she was named successor to his institute at Croton--but is her name ever mentioned? And Damo, Theoclea, and Myia, Arignote--Axio, it's gone on long enough! We have to do something (she pounds her fist on the desk)--we have to speak out!

Axiothea looks around hoping no one is noticing them/Lasthenia. She seems to wait a bit for Lasthenia to calm down, follows the class discussion perhaps.

AXIOTHEA: We?

Lasthenia pauses and thinks. Her tension and anger subside.

LASTHENIA: No--you're quite right--you!

AXIOTHEA: Me?! You're crazy! Why me?

LASTHENIA: (pauses and looks as if she can't believe Axiothea doesn't get it) Because I'm the alternative! But you--if Axiotheo stands up as Axiothea--you're his favourite, Plato will have to acknowledge you, he'll have to support you! And so will all the other students who have held Axio in esteem--either that or retract their past judgements, admit error--you know how unlikely that is.

AXIOTHEA: Yes--that is unlikely. But you don't know what you're asking. As I said, I think Plato knows. And if I expose myself, I expose him. I'd be putting him in a very awkward position. You're right, he is old, and what with the way things are now, he may lose the Academy altogether if I--no--I owe him, he's let me attend his classes, even though I am a woman.

Lasthenia is really upset by Axiothea's answer and for a minute she can't even put her thoughts/feelings into words.

LASTHENIA: You'd be putting him in an awkward position? (Lasthenia gestures to themselves as if to say 'we look ridiculous'.) Do you hear what you're saying? Would you thank a man for whipping you, because he could've killed you? (sarcastically) But didn't, even though you are a woman-- You owe Plato nothing! He has given you less than you deserve--that is no cause for gratitude! Don't you see that?

AXIOTHEA: (angry at Lasthenia for making her admit what she's been denying, she seems not to focus directly on Lasthenia's comments) But you're exaggerating about Aristotle. His system of formal logic, remember his seminar last week? You must admit that what he proposes is an excellent way of thinking!

Lasthenia pulls a pea shooter and a bag of peas out of her toga pocket and punctuates each of her statements with a shot.

LASTHENIA: Does he think we're capable of it? (pea shot #1)

AXIOTHEA: But what about his three types of soul--vegetative, sensitive, rational--

LASTHENIA: Ask him which type women have! (pea shot #2)

AXIOTHEA: Happiness as the aim of all human action--

LASTHENIA: Whose happiness? (pea shot #3)

AXIOTHEA: Lasthenia, he's not that bad! (Now it's her turn to pound a fist!)

LASTHENIA: Axio listen to him! "For the female is, as it were, a mutilated male." Not that bad?

She whips the bag of remaining peas at Aristotle--and with it goes her Mickey Mouse pencil.

They take a much needed pause, each seeming to follow the class proceedings for a bit (for no doubt, a few students have turned to them in annoyance). Their tension subsides a little.

Lasthenia is less angry, more pleading now. When she realizes she doesn't have anything to write with, Axiothea hands her her stylus (they grin in spite of themselves at this 'comic relief').

LASTHENIA: Axio, I beg you--think of Arete. She's eleven now, in a few years, she'll be ready to come to the Academy, she can't learn everything from her father--she's very bright, you know that. I gave her Perictyone's paper on wisdom to read a while ago--do you know, she understood it? And questioned very well! Do you want her to bind her breasts too, and learn to swagger--do you condemn her as well to silence in school?

There is another pause. Axiothea considers. Then she takes her stylus back from Lasthenia.

AXIOTHEA: (to Lasthenia) Enough! (to herself, in recognition) Enough. But Lasthenia, I can't stand up to Aristotle!

Lasthenia grabs the stylus from Axiothea's hand.

LASTHENIA: What do you mean you can't stand up to Aristotle! His logic is so weak, even I could make it collapse. And for a man interested in empirical data, he seems positively blind to the reality of women. Just tell him the facts, tell him what we can do, what we are.

Axiothea seems almost ready; Lasthenia continues to encourage her.

LASTHENIA: Axio, I've heard you speak. You're intelligent, you're articulate-- (there is love in Lasthenia's eyes now as she continues to whisper) Just pretend you're speaking to me, as you do every evening--go on, you can do it!

Axiothea reaches for her stylus, but Lasthenia keeps it and urges Axiothea again to stand up and speak.

The lights go out then as Axiothea raises her hand and stands--simultaneously--not as if she'll wait for permission to speak; Lasthenia stands up beside her a split second later.

Notes:

There seems to be some controversy over the status of women in 4th Century Athens. French (p. 144), footnoting Chicago (p. 123), describes women on a par with slaves, a state of affairs which required women to disguise themselves as men in order to attend school. An item in Lefkowitz, "two of Plato's women disciples were said to have worn men's clothing" (Diog. Laert. 3.46), seems to support this, and many other fragments in Lefkowitz seem to me to reveal an attitude of misogyny and a reality of women as second class citizens. But Davis (p. 186-194) and Boulding (p. 258-265) say this view is inaccurate, and they describe classical Greece as a free state: women could and did hold property, have the right to unilateral divorce, contest and succeed in courts, carry on a business, and attend schools (undisguised).

I wrote "The Dialogue" to be in 359 B.C.--Plato would be around 68, Aristotle 25, Arete 11. Also, some kind of upheaval involving Macedonia was imminent at that time.

The opening discussion between Axiothea and Lasthenia concerning justice stems from *Book I* of Plato's *Republic* in which he posits the following situation: "Suppose that a friend when in his right mind has deposited arms with me and he asks for them when he is not in his right mind, ought I to give them back to him?"

Of interest - again after I finished the piece, I read (again in Carroll) that Axiothea had become a teacher of philosophy, and that "her reputation has suffered from the association of her name with that of Lasthenia" (p. 312) who, he goes on to suggest, became 'promiscuous' with the male students (including Speusippus), but 'nevertheless' "possessed some reputation as a philosopher" (p. 312).

Axiothea (4th Century B.C.) - a Philasian, student of Plato; Plato did indeed praise Axiothea as described (French p. 144, footnoting Chicago p. 123), but as indicated below, it's unclear whether or not he knew she was a woman (even if she was disguised, he might've known)

Lasthenia (4th Century B.C.) - a Mantinean from Arcadia, student of Plato

Aglaonice (5th Century B.C.) - astronomer, astrologer

Arete (370-340 B.C.) - head of a school in Cyrene with many distinguished students, a prolific writer (40 works attributed to her include pieces on philosophy, agriculture, and history), daughter and disciple of Aristippus of Cyrene

Arignote (6th-5th Century B.C.) - daughter of Theano and Pythagoras

Aristoclea a.k.a. Theoclea a.k.a. Themistoclea (6th Century B.C.) - head of priesthood at Delphi, taught Pythagoras, Pythagoras' sister

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) - studied at Plato's Academy from 367 to its closing (Plato's death) in 347; in 334 he opened his own school, the Lyceum. The line ascribed to Aristotle in "The Dialogue" ("the female is, as it were, a mutilated male") is from his "De Generatione Animalium". I have since read "a woman is, as it were, an *infertile* man" (my emphasis)-- assuming that to be a translation of the same line, I cannot judge Aristotle as harshly. However, his overall misogyny seems to survive various translations. The other ideas ascribed to him (formal logic, the three types of soul, happiness as the aim of all human action, the emphasis on empirical data) are indeed his.

Aspasia (470-410 B.C.) - taught Socrates rhetoric and philosophy

Damo (6th-5th Century B.C.) - daughter of Pythagoras

Demosthenes (4th Century B.C.) - student of Plato, orator

Diotima (5th Century B.C.) - taught Socrates social philosophy and philosophy of love

Elpinice (5th Century B.C.) - intellectual

Lycurgus (4th Century B.C.) - student of Plato, orator; I chose to have Axiothea suggest Lycurgus as Plato's successor only because I was sure he was one of Plato's students at the time, but my choice became ironic as I later read that Lycurgus "wanted to bring the women under his laws"--they resisted and he gave up (Lefkowitz); however, another item (in Lefkowitz) placed Lycurgus in the 7th Century B.C., so since there was probably more than one person by that name, the one quoted above is perhaps not Plato's student; and after all of that, I later read that Speusippus was Plato's successor (Carroll, p.311)

Myia (6th-5th Century B.C.) - daughter of Theano and Pythagoras

Perictyone (5th Century B.C.) - philosopher, writer (works include *On Wisdom* and *On the Harmony of Women*, which deals with the relationship between body and spirit, thought and action), mother or sister of Plato

Plato (427-347 B.C.) - directed a school called The Academy in Athens, Greece (opened in 387 B.C.); philosophy, physics, mathematics, and natural sciences were studied there

Pythagoras (582-500 B.C.) - philosopher, known for the 'golden mean' concept, directed a school in Croton (around 530 B.C.)

Samothea - a Briton, invented letters, astronomy, science, and was head of the Hyperborean University at Cornwall where Pythagoras is supposed to have studied

Socrates (470-399 B.C.) - Plato's predecessor, immortalized in Plato's *Dialogues*

Speusippus (4th Century B.C.) - student of Plato, and his successor

Theano (540-510 B.C.) - brilliant mathematician, and expert in early psychology, physics, and medicine, Pythagoras' successor as head of the Institute, supposed originator of the 'golden mean' concept, wife of Pythagoras

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