

Emanuela Bianchi

*The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos*

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The project of this book is to explore "the role of sexual difference in the constitution of the Aristotelian cosmos--from the biological through the physical, cosmological, divine and metaphysical, and into the human world" (2-3). Emanuela Bianchi is interested not only in the account of the role of the female parent in the generation of offspring and the characterization of the female as a deviation from the male that we find in Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*. She inquires also into the way in which the physical and metaphysical distinctions drawn between material, formal, final, and efficient causation and between the capacity to act and the capacity to be acted upon are associated with the feminine or the masculine. Moreover, she considers psychoanalytic and deconstructive analyses of sex and gender in Aristotle's works along with Aristotle's own claims in their ancient context.

It might not be clear to every reader what the title means. The "symptom" in question is a transliteration of the Greek *sumptôma*, which Bianchi renders as "the inexplicable coincidence . . . of causal orders" (4), and aleatory matter is "apparently self-moving, disruptive, exterior to any teleological unfolding, . . . [it] acts against nature" (3). Aristotle believed that change in the natural world occurs generally for the sake of some end or final cause, intentional or otherwise. The movement toward such an end can be interrupted--for example, by the interference of another causal chain, or by matter that is recalcitrant in some way. Bianchi is interested in these interruptions, cases that Aristotle treats as accidental or chance events; at one point she describes the feminine symptom as "this inexplicable confluence of errancy and teleology" (223). She considers in this book the different ways in which the female and the feminine are represented in Aristotle's work as accidental, and as situated outside of the teleology that is so central to philosophical explanation in the Aristotelian tradition. This allows Bianchi to develop an understanding of the feminine that makes clearer how it can be both a kind of incompleteness or absence in causal systems, and also a source of disruption and unexpected outcomes.

*The Feminine Symptom* is divided into six chapters followed by a coda. Five of the six chapters (1, 2, 4, 5, and 6) are organized around central concepts in Aristotle's natural philosophy that have some association with the feminine: causation, necessity and chance, space, motion, and potentiality and actuality. There is a thematic thread connecting all of these in the notion of the telos (that Bianchi treats as masculine), the end at which a change, a movement, or a person might be aiming. Further continuity is provided by the discussion of the generation of the female from different perspectives in chapters 1 and 6, which serves to bracket the whole project.

Chapter 3 ("The Errant Feminine in Plato's *Timaeus*") examines the account of the origin of our world in the *Timaeus*, with an emphasis on the feminized concepts of the "receptacle" (*hupodochê*) and "space" (*chôra*), some understanding of which is necessary for the discussion of place in Aristotle. In this chapter and the next, Bianchi's acknowledged debt to Irigaray is most evident.

The coda aims to link the interpretation of the feminine as aleatory matter in Aristotle with contemporary feminist political theory, in particular recent projects of "new materialism" in feminism. The emphasis in the coda is on aleatory matter as matter that moves somehow "against nature." Bianchi is not suggesting that the feminine and the aleatory are in fact essentially connected, but rather that the connection Aristotle established between them "has survived, quite unscathed, the supersession of [his] teleological metaphysics" (224). That is, even those who abandon teleological explanations may still cling, problematically, to an understanding of the feminine as intrinsically accidental. At the same time, Bianchi sees the primary insight of certain contemporary philosophers (for example, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, Claire Colebrook) as similar to the understanding of matter as she has represented it in Aristotle's works. The insight in question is "that matter is essentially moving, processual, self-organizing, and riven with the capacity to unfold in unexpected directions (whether to destructive or productive ends)" (224). Bianchi's point is that Aristotle's conception of aleatory matter shares with the new materialisms a displacement of the centrality of the human subject.

The book is presented as a feminist interpretation of Aristotle. The reader might wonder why a feminist would take an interest in Aristotle, who is still viewed by many as the original philosophical misogynist. The coda gives us some idea of how Bianchi thinks a feminist might profit from reading Aristotle: he has a theory of matter that aligns with some features of an influential form of contemporary feminism. But she also addresses the question in the Introduction, where she points out that while Aristotle is extremely interested in providing systematic and teleological explanations of natural entities and processes, he is also an acute observer of all kinds of natural phenomena, and committed to providing philosophical explanations that account for the phenomena as they are. So she sees Aristotle's natural philosophy as both systematic and phenomenological, and his discussions of sexual difference and sexual reproduction as sources of interesting and suggestive tensions between these commitments.

Bianchi's approach to Aristotle's work, her methodology in this book, is thoughtful and constructive. She distances herself from two tendencies often found in scholarship on Aristotle's treatment of sexual difference. One is to criticize Aristotle for failing to be progressive, or liberal, or modern. He is, in fact, none of these things, but pointing that out does not tell us much about what he was trying to do, why he went about it the way he did, or why his views have been so influential. The other is to act as an apologist for Aristotle, by offering charitable readings that, on Bianchi's view, tend to glide over inconsistencies in Aristotle's claims and thus fail to engage with the complexities of those views. She characterizes her own approach, by contrast, as the "critical intimacy" advocated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This means that she asks both what the texts might have meant for Aristotle in his own terms and context, and what they might mean for us (5). The scholarly tradition in which she works, and which she cites most frequently, is phenomenological, and the interpretations of Aristotle to which she returns most

often are those of Irigaray and Heidegger. Bianchi distinguishes her reading from other recent phenomenological work insofar as her book acknowledges the systematic aims guiding Aristotle as well as the contradictions and tensions (which she views as generative and productive) within the systems he produced. She is familiar with commentators working in traditions other than the phenomenological, and includes them in her discussions in footnotes.

The originality of the theme of the book is important. Many feminist and nonfeminist interpretations of Aristotle's conception of sexual difference have focused on the association of the feminine with the passive and the inferior. Bianchi does not neglect these associations (so, for example, in chapter 6, on potentiality and actuality, there is an interesting discussion of passive powers and passive change). But in choosing as her focus the character of the female and the feminine as accidental, she is able to develop an interpretation of sexual difference in Aristotle that is more interesting, more comprehensive, and unique in the literature. As a result, *The Feminine Symptom* is a creative and useful contribution to scholarship in ancient philosophy and to feminist philosophy. At the same time, the ambitious breadth of the book is such that on occasion, evidence adequate to the claims, and precision in the articulation of Aristotle's views, are sacrificed to the richness and originality of the interpretation.

Consider one case: in the chapter on motion, Bianchi points out that Aristotle believes that the sun participates both in a circular motion (out of love for the prime mover) that is teleological, and governed by simple necessity (it could not be otherwise), and in instances of generation and destruction in the sublunary world (because the sun is their efficient cause) that are governed by physical necessity. The sun is then implicated in both teleological and material causation. So, too, is the generation of a female animal because she is the result of an error in the material conditions of generation (physical necessity) and yet "the existence of females is teleologically necessary so that the species may reproduce itself in perpetuity" (160). In drawing this comparison, Bianchi relates a cosmic manifestation of the aleatory with a biological manifestation. She then goes on to associate the aleatory with certain artistic practices (for example, the automatism of the Surrealists) by way of the Epicurean atomist notion of the swerve (*clinamen*), while pointing out that the Surrealists "stringently avoided any acknowledgement of its [that is, automatism's] connection with the feminine" (161), suggesting, perhaps, that we should re-examine that connection.

There is a lot to think about here, even in the course of a few pages, much of it novel and exciting. But these fascinating associations are drawn in part by leaving out some of the refinements and qualifications of Aristotle's accounts of causation, necessity, and sexual difference. In this case, the claims about necessity need to be elaborated and clarified, and referred back more explicitly to the author's own treatment of necessity in chapter 2. The senses in which the movement of the sun and the generation of females are bound by teleological necessity are, on Bianchi's own account, quite different, so we should be cautious in drawing the comparison between the ways in which they manifest the teleological and the aleatory.

Moreover, Aristotle would not say that the existence of female animals was teleologically or hypothetically necessary so that a species might perpetuate itself (he knew that many species manage to reproduce without sexual differentiation) but rather so that the formal cause and the material cause might be kept separate. It would be more precise to say that he believed a female

principle was teleologically necessary for the generation of animals. I do not think this is a quibble; it means that whereas the female principle is teleologically necessary for the generation of animals, female individuals are produced by physical necessity.

Bianchi's project here is nonetheless important in allowing both those who work in ancient philosophy and those who work in feminist philosophy to rethink what matter, necessity, accidents, and causation might have meant for Aristotle and what they might mean for feminists. The interest of that project gives us reasons to read this book, to follow the debates in the footnotes, and to return to the texts it interprets.