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*Spyros Ganas*

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## Wife Material in a Household Context as presented in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*

Spyros Ganas,

*Department of Classical Philology  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki  
spyridogs@lit.auth.gr*

### Abstract

In this research, certain characteristics of Ischomachus' wife are reviewed anew, as she is presented in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. Although this topic has received considerable attention in recent years, many aspects of it have been overlooked or investigated with the binoculars of a contemporary moral compass that either underestimates the innovations the text brings to gender relations or overestimates these innovations as an attempt at a fruitless assimilation of womanhood into the male norm. We will examine how certain traditional values of womankind as seen in antiquity are transmitted to the male reality and how, in an innovative way, Xenophon exploits normativity to bring about the best practical outcome that counters the dominant notion of the superiority of the male gender. At the same time, we will take a closer look at unexplored moments in the text where Xenophon indirectly criticizes sophistical teaching and challenges the old phobia that trembled before a woman with masculine elements. It will be shown that Xenophon throws out hints to the reader to address these issues by utilizing literary references.

**Keywords:** *Xenophon, Oeconomicus, Women in Ancient Greece, Classical Antiquity, Female presentation in Classical Texts, Classics, Practical Philosophy*

Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* is a work that, despite its title, does not only deal with the proper management of the *oikos*, its growth and the proper arrangement of the income it brings. At the same time, issues related to agriculture (γεωργία) as an art (τέχνη) and science (ἐπιστήμη) are brought to the fore, a didactic method of learning through observation is proposed, mentions are made of the acquisition of leadership skills, godly plans and the female nature (φύσις cf. 7.22) are investigated and thus how feminine abilities cooperate with those of men<sup>1</sup> for the proper management of the household.<sup>2</sup> The administration of the household, of course, extends to the political level, since often in Xenophon the proper care of one's own affairs is often causally correlated with a possible correct political life and career.<sup>3</sup> This relationship is clearly realized gradually, for in order for one to reach a healthy political activity it means that the individual has first properly arranged his domestic obligations, a process that requires the simultaneous cooperation of the wife. For Xenophon it is fairly obvious that politics is inherently interwoven with economics,<sup>4</sup> and economics without one wife's

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 3.15: νομίζω δὲ γυναῖκα κοινωνὸν ἀγαθὴν οἴκου οὕσαν πάνυ ἀντίροπον εἶναι τῷ ἀνδρὶ ἐπὶ τὸ ἀγαθόν = "But I hold that a woman who is a good partner in the household is a proper counter weight to the man in attaining the good" (translation by Carnes Lord). The word ἀντίροπον is here, I believe, key. I think Lord's translation catches the spirit but misses the mark. According to Liddel and Scott (1996) s.v. ἀντίροπος the word in this passage has the meaning of "equivalent to" thus empowering the notion of equal responsibility of the two genders when undertaking a task. In Sophocles' *Electra* (120) the word is used by Electra when describing the weigh that she and Orestes must bear, which is manifested by both the suffering and the soon-to-be murder of the usurper couple, a commission which both, representing their respectable genders, must complete.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hobden (2016) 152, Foucault (1990) 154.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Memorabilia* 3.4 as cited by Foucault (1990) 153, cf. Aristotle, *N. E.* 1162a.17-19: ἄνθρωπος γὰρ τῇ φύσει συνδυαστικὸν μᾶλλον ἢ πολιτικόν, ὅσω πρότερον καὶ ἀναγκαιότερον οἰκία πόλεως. Cf. Vavouras E., "The political and economic philosophy in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*", *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 6, 2019, pp. 85-95.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hobden (2016) 161: "...economic activity is once more intertwined with political life". Cf. Vavouras E., "The political philosophy as a

support is faulty economics.<sup>5</sup> We are to explore the dynamics of the woman's position in the so-called "Ischomachus' household", how she effectively helps with the well-being of the *oikos*, and what behaviours attributed to genders are applied or subverted in a way these goals are to be achieved. Upon further inspection we shall realize that the key-element of good management is ruling, and this is augmented thoroughly by Xenophon with a plethora of paradigms.

### 1. Narrative Structure

Structurally the main segments of the text that dwell on the wife's obligations for better household maintenance are chapters 3 and 7 to 10. We ought here to consider how Xenophon presents these inner dialogues and how they serve the long-structure of the whole *opus*. The narrative of the work is multiple and polyphonic, so through various inquisitive methods and teachings we hear about the dialogue of Socrates with Critobulus, which contains within itself, as if in a drawer, the dialogue between Ischomachus and Socrates, which ultimately ends in the conversation between Ischomachus' wife and himself. Moreover, this conversation also has the reminiscence of the admonitions that the wife's mother gave to her and next to it the consonant advice the father of Ischomachus offered is aptly inserted.<sup>6</sup> This multi-layered structure of the work serves the multifaceted inquiry for economics and, in its intricate way, simultaneously constructs the "economy" of the narrative. Xenophon's narrative method, despite its lexical and phraseological repetitions, is masterful. What follows is a scheme that depicts the branching of the embedded dialogues:<sup>7</sup>

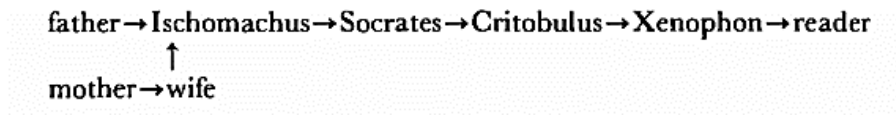
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precondition and completion of political economy in the Ways and Means of Xenophon", *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, 9, 2020, pp. 183-198.

<sup>5</sup> *Oeconomicus* 3.15.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hobden (2016) 154. Murnaghan (1988) 13 quotes Humphreys to point out the fact that the dialogues between males are set outdoors and have moral themes whereas when the interlocutor is female the discussion is centered upon practical issues.

<sup>7</sup> Pomeroy (1994) 18.



## 2. The Young Bride's Essentials.

At this point in the work where we have a flashback in time, Ischomachus' wife appears, presumably shortly after her marriage to Ischomachus. To view this woman in complete, we must first investigate her situation before she enters marital reality. Furthermore, we must examine here to what extent this image of the premarital position of the woman reflects either Xenophon's or the more general perception that a high-class citizen would have in this era. Shero (1932)<sup>8</sup> distinguishes the standard assumptions for a girl's status in 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Athens in 6 points and then demonstrates what Ischomachus' teachings and methods would bring new to the table. These 6 norms are as follows:<sup>9</sup>

- 1) The girl is a mere child before marriage (7.5).
- 2) The girl would have lived a sheltered life, without education.
- 3) The choice of husband was not something the girl would have a say in it.
- 4) The married couple would have minimal intellectual companionship (cf. 3.12).
- 5) The woman's faculty of operations is indoors.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Shero does identify Ischomachus with Xenophon and her wife with Xenophon's wife, Philesia, citing Diogenes Laertius. Although it is safe to assume Xenophon was inspired by his personal experience when describing the ideal wife, we should not overemphasize on the author's personal life and its possible impact on the work.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Too (2001) 69-70: "He asks what his wife could possibly know as she comes into his household at the age of fourteen and having lived a very restricted existence in her parents' house, no doubt in keeping with the conventional gendering of the 'indoors' as the female sphere".

<sup>10</sup> Shero (1932) 20 additionally cites that "it has been contended that the *Oeconomicus* was in part a reactionary protest against the increasing freedom from restraint which women were enjoying in the fourth centu-

6) Her commandments of indoor activities were absolute so that the efficiency or inefficiency of household affairs were her responsibility.

Of all the points above the second one is the one who holds, I think, the most value. Truly, since the girl hasn't received any essential education prior to the marriage, the whole accountability of her teachings lies upon Ischomachus, and her potential failure or effectiveness upon the issues concerning household dealings will ultimately be based on the husband's right or wrong didactics. Indeed, just like in horses and cattle it is evident that their behaviour is the result of the domestication that a good shepherd or hostler shall provide, in the same way the husband shall be the one who must be diligent enough to oversee that his wife is appropriately educated in order to supervise the indoor activities.<sup>11</sup> But even the ideal Ischomachus succumbs to the consequence of such a faulty situation where the wife seems deficient. But there is a twist. When she is asked for an utensil of which she has no knowledge of its whereabouts, Ischomachus takes upon himself the culpability of this small inconvenience since he feels responsible for not educating appropriately in regards of order.<sup>12</sup> This and other instances provide proof that reading Ischomachus as a pedantic and exceedingly priggish kind of man who patronizes this seemingly innocuous girl falls flat and reveals more about the reader's way of understanding than any of the work's conspicuous marital dynamics that proposes.<sup>13</sup>

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ry", but this opinion is overly baseless and hypothetical and surely does not represent what Xenophon had in mind when writing the treatise.

<sup>11</sup> *Oeconomicus* 3.11-12.

<sup>12</sup> *Oeconomicus* 8.1-4. Ischomachus' wife feels shame for her rather insignificant failure, but Ischomachus reassures her not to worry since he is the one who "had failed to instruct her about the virtue of order". Cf. Strauss (1970) 140.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g.: Shero (1932) 19 and Too (2001). Oost (1997) 235 with more sobriety notes that: "Much of the priggishness of Ischomachus is probably due to his role as teacher rather than as "male chauvinist"".

### 3. Marital Domestication and Conversation

We've seen that in a way the girl's education is parallelized with the one of animals (3.11-12) that are to be domesticated.<sup>14</sup> Indeed in 7.10 words such as ἐτετιθάσευτο ("had been domesticated") and χειροήθης ("tame")<sup>15</sup> are applied when referring to the young maiden's presentation before Ischomachus right when he feels it is the right time to initiate his teachings upon her. This choice of words is not, I believe, the result of some condescending attitude with which Ischomachus is predisposed towards her, and of which he was previously accused by scholars.<sup>16</sup> Rather, they seem at first glance to function simply as a rhetorical metaphor that helps to enforce Ischomachus' narration that usually encapsulates vocabulary that derives from the agricultural region.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in order to clear away any suspicion that these words carry a derogatory meaning, we ought just to read the following phrase: ἐτετιθάσευτο ὥστε διαλέγεσθαι ("had been domesticated to the extent that we could have discussions"). It has been noted that the choice of the word διαλέγεσθαι seems to tone down the use of wording that pertain to animal activities.<sup>18</sup> By this expression we are also to see "the alacrity with which the wife's intelligence mature".<sup>19</sup> Her abil-

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 272 who cites other passages where words about domestication are used when referring to men "taming" their wives.

<sup>15</sup> Other possible translation could be "docile and submissive", Cf. Scaife (1995) 230.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g.: Scaife (1995) 226: "On the contrary, from a widely held though by no means universal current perspective it is hard not to be struck by a good deal of condescension and paternalism in the approach taken by Ischomachus" and Oost (1977) 235: "...the Oeconomicus, with all its condescension toward the child wife".

<sup>17</sup> Scaife (1995) 231 n. 15 thinks the expression has a ritual connotation and is used to imply the consummation of the marriage. This is interesting, of course, but requires that we view the expression as "enigmatic" which Scaife thinks is the case.

<sup>18</sup> Glazerbook (2009) 239 n. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gini (1993) 483-4 who nevertheless appears to be excessive when trying to prescribe psychological nervousness to Ischomachus who observes this rapid mental transfiguration. Too (2001) 70 contrasts the wording with previous archaic poets, assuring that besides its domesticating connotations the woman is presented in novel and good terms: "Yet

ity to converse is significant, of course, even more so if we keep in mind that Critobulus agreed with Socrates that there is not a person he is discussing less than his wife, even though she is the one managing the οἶκος (3.12). Moreover, the term is not usually applied when discussing relationships between a husband and a wife. By this way it is evident that Ischomachus wants to treat her wife as an equal, not as her subordinate.<sup>20</sup> The term διαλέγεσθαι is also prevalent in *Memorabilia* and has a special meaning to Xenophontic Socrates. According to Socrates himself, he with his company dwell upon the activity of διαλέγεσθαι by selecting matters and topics and categorizing them by their kind.<sup>21</sup> Considering then the fact that having a conversation was generally believed to be an exercise pertaining to men, and adding to this Aristotle's<sup>22</sup> assertion that talking is the distinguishable factor that separates men from beasts, then it is safe to assume that women in general terms were believed to be something less than human. Hence, Ischomachus' wife's ability to converse and engage to dialectics seems bit by bit far more subversive since by it she is transforming herself or is at least educated by her husband into doing so, in order to become a fully civilized being. It is no wonder that her prominence in the dialogue is intensified from this point forward.<sup>23</sup>

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unlike the various caricatures sketched in Semonides, poem 7, the tamed wife is the disciplined, non-consuming woman".

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Glazerbook (2009) 239 who is mistaken in saying that "[Ischomachus] first taught her how to carry on a conversation". Ischomachus didn't teach anything her wife prior to that point and she Cf.ms pretty capable to carry a conversation by herself without any essential guidance, Cf. Gini (1993).

<sup>21</sup> *Memorabilia* 4.5.12, Cf. also Strauss (1970) 149-150 who supposes that Socrates took this method from Ischomachus only to correct himself later by saying that this is a "deliberate exaggeration that is meant to counteract the amazing neglect of the *Oeconomicus* on the part of those who are concerned with 'the Socratic problem'".

<sup>22</sup> *Pol.* 1253a9- 18.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 272-273.



#### 4. Self-control and Temperance as Wifely Gifts

But Ischomachus' wife is seemingly unprepared up to this point for the teaching she shall receive from her husband. She is barely fifteen when she is married. In addition, she has minimal education or training that would assist her on house managing (7.4-6).<sup>24</sup> It is therefore, as already stated, the husband's responsibility to guide her to proper behaviour and govern her so that her conducts in household management are suffice. Her condition should not be of course surprising neither to Socrates nor the reader and Ischomachus himself comments that he deems it adequate if she had come to him having knowledge of weaving and controlling her appetites. Indeed, her upbringing consisted of living "previously under diligent supervision in order that she might see and hear as little as possible and ask the fewest possible questions".<sup>25</sup> This education pattern seem to be in line with contemporary beliefs on raising young girls and is perfectly exemplified by Pericles' maxim "that a woman's virtue lies in being least talked about by men" (Thuc. 2.45).<sup>26</sup> And yet the young girl does take a piece of advice from her mother,<sup>27</sup> that she should be moderate and practice self-control.<sup>28</sup> Self-control (*sōphrosūnē*) is a pervasive notion that runs through Greek thought from Hesiod to Plutarch<sup>29</sup> and is thought to be traditionally a female characteristic.<sup>30</sup> Greek culture was fixed in

<sup>24</sup> Foucault (1990) 154.

<sup>25</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.5-6: Καὶ τί ἄν, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐπισταμένην αὐτὴν παρέλαβον, ἣ ἔτη μὲν οὐπω πεντεκαίδεκα γεγονυῖα ἦλθε πρὸς ἐμέ, τὸν δ' ἔμπροσθεν χρόνον ἔζη ὑπὸ πολλῆς ἐπιμελείας ὅπως ὡς ἐλάχιστα μὲν ὄψοιτο, ἐλάχιστα δ' ἀκούσοιτο, ἐλάχιστα δ' ἔροιτο;

<sup>26</sup> As cited by Hobden (2016) 172.

<sup>27</sup> Murnaghan (1988) 12 thinks that realistically the education she receives from her husband should have been given to her by her mother, but this is not provable nor is there any testimonies that give any adequate insight to what a typical girl education would look like in 5<sup>th</sup> B.C. Athens. Additionally, the decision to have the husband act as a preceptor further reinforces the novelty of Ischomachus', and thus Xenophon's, marital guidelines. Cf. also Glazerbook (2009) 239 n. 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.14: ἐμὸν δ' ἔφησεν ἡ μήτηρ ἔργον εἶναι σωφρονεῖν

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Scaife (1995) 229.

<sup>30</sup> Pomeroy (1994) 275.

the idea that women (just like children) appeared to be deficient in relevance to self-restraint, thus making them more prone to eagerness and consequently more dangerous to be driven by their passions. Murnaghan (1988), 12, claims that children and women could defy their physical liabilities and be more like men and that this is exactly what Ischomachus aims to do to her wife, thus eliminating their differences and her personality. But this is hardly Xenophon's point, who is making sure that it is imprinted on us that women and men are equally flawed. In the *Symposium*<sup>31</sup> it is stated by Socrates that women (and children) are not inferior to men except that they lack judgement (γνώμης) and strength (ἰσχύος). Hence any man should counsel his wife with courage and then instruct her to do whatever he wishes with her newly skills.<sup>32</sup> Oost (1977), 228, thinks that this Socratic statement is surprising and that the first assessment might not apply in full force to Ischomachus' wife. This is of course incorrect, since it confuses γνώμη (knowledge) with διάνοια (understanding) while Xenophon himself cares to make the discretion clear.<sup>33</sup> Following the young girl's assessment that the only rule she has received is to be self-restrained, Ischomachus immediate response is that his father gave him

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<sup>31</sup> *Symposium* 2.9-10: Ἐν πολλοῖς μὲν, ὧ ἄνδρες, καὶ ἄλλοις δὴλον καὶ ἐν οἷς δ' ἡ παῖς ποιεῖ ὅτι ἡ γυναικεία φύσις οὐδὲν χείρων τῆς τοῦ ἀνδρὸς οὐσα τυγχάνει, γνώμης δὲ καὶ ἰσχύος δεῖται. ὥστε εἴ τις ὑμῶν γυναῖκα ἔχει, θαρρῶν διδασκέτω ὅ τι βούλοιτ' ἂν αὐτῇ ἐπισταμένην χρῆσθαι. Cf. Too (2001) 79: "[...] the Xenophontic Socrates [...] is well disposed to women because he interrogates women's biological difference as the basis for her supposed inferiority with respect to men".

<sup>32</sup> Too (2001) 73 takes in regard Antisthenes' following joke concerning Socrates' wife Xanthippe, who is the most difficult of all women and yet he has managed to educate her, and thus stages Socrates as a *par excellence* expert on wifely didactics, rendering Ischomachus as an inadequate interlocutor on these matters. But the argumentation that follows ultimately falls flat.

<sup>33</sup> Especially in chapters 20 and 21. The point being that διάνοια in the context means that Ischomachus' wife has a better and clearer way for judgement by her nature (*physis*) rather than thing being a result Ischomachus' instructions, Cf. Gini (1993) 484. The instructions are of course what Socrates in the *Symposium* tells his drunk company to give to their wives (διδασκέτω) so that they may earn the knowledge (γνώμη) they lack.

the same advice (7.15). In this way he reassures her not to worry about her doubts on what she could possibly contribute to their common estate, since she has no knowledge nor experience in house affairs except her mother's admonition that her ἔργον is to behave with prudence (σωφρονεῖν). Ischomachus' response was for some time wrongfully disregarded.<sup>34</sup> He defines self-control as something which they should both crave to because it contributes to the whole *oikonomia* of the house since it includes that both "act in such a way that their property is in the best possible condition, but also so that their property accrue, fairly and justly, as much as possible".<sup>35</sup> Helen North<sup>36</sup> remarks on the novelty of this idea that brings new meaning to *sōphrosūnē* in relation to men and women. Truly, Ischomachus assures his wife that prudence which was commonly attributed to women can extend beyond its traditional boundaries if that means that a house estate can be more effectively maintained and their shared prosperity is to be preserved.

## 5. Gods and Marital Labor

Ischomachus wants her wife to be constantly updated that they are to be tested together in equal terms, for he has shown that moderation and temperance is to be practiced by them both without its traditional restriction to female nature. Their struggle is common, and this is emphasized by the use of terms such as *κοινωνία* and *κοινωνός*<sup>37</sup> that pronounce their incipient partnership and reinforce the idea that the house, the finance and eventual children are common to them both.<sup>38</sup> Responding to his wife's hesitations, Ischomachus

<sup>34</sup> Scaife (1995) 227.

<sup>35</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.15: ἀλλὰ σωφρόνων τοί ἐστι καὶ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς οὕτω ποιεῖν, ὅπως τά τε ὄντα ὡς βέλτιστα ἔξει καὶ ἄλλα ὅτι πλεῖστα ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ τε καὶ δικαίου προσγενήσεται. Cf. Kourtoglou et al. (2024) 123-124.

<sup>36</sup> As cited by Glazerbook (2009) 240, Cf. also Scaife (1995) 227 n. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Oeconomicus* 7.11-13.

<sup>38</sup> Scaife (1995) 226.

makes a lengthy<sup>39</sup> reference to how the customary law and nature coincide in the division of labor that is undertaken by each of the two sexes. This division is made in accordance to physical and psychological criteria that govern the idiosyncrasy of women and men. Subsequently, these properties of the sexes are examined with a dose of essentialism, and it logically follows that their given physical traits designates the woman to stay inside and be engaged in raising children, making fabrics and preserving the fruits brought in by the man. Correspondingly, the man is burdened with the assigned obligation to stay outside the house in order to care for the conveyance of all the raw foods and materials that will be preserved and processed under the supervision of the woman (7.19-25). Also, this couple has been constructed by nature in such a way as to benefit themselves the most, because through their union the preservation of the species is insured. Moreover, offspring are born who will care for the aging couple through the process of procreation (7.18-19). As far as the physical attributes go, the man is endowed with natural strength and resilience while the woman lacks power and endurance. In terms of psychological differences, the woman is more affectionate but also timid, which helps in raising children, while the man lacks a sense of danger so that he can more effectively protect the common property (7.20-26). Scaife<sup>40</sup> makes two very apt observations based on these god-given characteristics that define the couple: The first being that “...natural differences instituted by gods lead directly to a division of labor” and the second that “such complementary deficiencies and competencies on both sides render the marital partnership more beneficial”.<sup>41</sup> What follows is the subversive part that this distribution of qualities presents. Ischomachus says that certain qualities are equally bestowed on both the female and male sexes. These are

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<sup>39</sup> Too (2001) 74-75 makes an infelicitous attempt to prove that Ischomachus is an idle chatter with his *μακροὶ λόγοι* and fits the profile of the *ἀδολέσχης* whose character is analyzed in Theophrastus.

<sup>40</sup> Scaife (1995) 227.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Too (2001) 70: “Husband and wife now constitute a co-operative partnership which divides responsibility for the greatest benefit of both involved”.

memory, diligence, and temperance. He even goes so far as to claim that no one can say with certainty which of the two sexes is superior in these areas (7.27-30). In fact, whichever sex prevails in temperance also has the divinely given power to impose itself on the other. These views were very likely to have sounded very insurrectionary to the Athenian ear. It is certainly not a given that every male Athenian would have listened with favor to the idea that there was a possibility that his wife, let alone due to her divinely ordained nature, could appear superior to him (7.42).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in the classical and archaic perception, the woman constituted a danger and a constant worry for the household, because she appeared as a bottomless pit whose needs were never satisfied. Her existence was defined by a perpetual consumption of all the goods that the man offered and brought into the home.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Ischomachus also seems innovative when he speaks of mutual benefit that comes equally from the woman's side.<sup>44</sup> In this regard, Xenophon agrees with Plato (*Republic* 456A)<sup>45</sup> that there is no moral basis behind biological differences, nor that biology alone can define as an indicator the value and merit that a human being can offer. From the moment Ischomachus leaves open the issue of which of the two companions will prove more useful or contribute more, the overturning of the archaic era's traditional perception that saw the differences in women and men in absolute terms is activated.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, I do not agree with Murnaghan's view<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Oost (1977) 235: "But Ischomachus/Xenophon goes beyond this, and at least envisions the possibility that, in her own sphere of course, woman may be or become the superior of man".

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Glazerbook (2009) 241 who provides plenty of citations from archaic poetry, also Too (2001) 67-68.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Too (2001) 70: "The wife is the individual who now conserves, rather than devours, the resources of the estate. Her responsibility is to guard what the husband brings in from outside as the fruits of his ploughing, sowing, planting and herding, and the resources of the estate".

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 37-38.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. also Pomeroy (1994) 36: "In contrast to Greek philosophical and literary traditions,

Xenophon is the first Greek author to give full recognition to the value of women's work" and Too (2001) 70: "The husband at first implicitly inscribes his new bride within the misogynistic anxieties about the wife as

that Xenophon does not have a positive assessment of women but rather holds an optimism about human nature. Is woman excluded from human nature or does she exist as something other than it?

## 6. Marital Order and Xenophon against the Sophists

Proceeding from the order of nature regarding the works that each sex must perform, Ischomachus talks about the congruence of nature and conventional law the latter of which does not contradict but complements the divine law and planning. However, while god has defined the couple as shareholders in the upbringing of children, it is the law that has made them shareholders in a common home, making the second partnership a secondary convention that does not, however, deviate from the nature's design (7.30). Scaife<sup>48</sup> also notes that: "Social arrangements support essential human nature by making attractive those very tasks for which divinely established natures have fitted us, so that we will want to do them". He also adds that the use of comparative adjectives (κάλλιον / αἴσχιον) makes the violation of these conventional behaviors less severe and that it is noteworthy that the shameful deviation from typical conventional behavior is made by the example of a man. To help this argument, I will add that even the divine punishment that supposedly comes to every violator of men's deeds which god has imposed is mentioned by Xenophon with a grain of doubt (7.31: ἴσως τι). This convergence between nature and law also seems to function as a way for Xenophon to aim a jab at the sophists that believed that conventional law places limits on our natural desires and capabilities. This hidden polemic against the sophists is also concealed in another part of the play. When Ischomachus teaches his wife about the benefit that comes from having all household utensils arranged in an orderly

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the consuming, empty vessel in order to displace it with the image of her as the clean slate upon whom he will set down his teachings".

<sup>47</sup> Murnaghan (1988) 14.

<sup>48</sup> Scaife (1995) 228.

manner (8.17-23), he wants to give her the impression that no object is so contemptible that it is not worthy of a rhythm and order that will make it beautiful. Indeed, to quote Strauss' paraphrase of the passage:<sup>49</sup> "Such arrangement, however, is not only good but beautiful as well. It is a beautiful sight if every kind of thing, however humble, is ranged in rows and separate from other kinds; no grave or solemn man, but only a wit, will laugh at the suggestion that a well-ordered array of pots and pans deserves to be called graceful." The solemn or grave man (σεμνός) is of course used to picture Ischomachus himself. The word used by Xenophon to describe the witty man (χομψός) is applied along with its derivatives (e.g.: κομψεύομαι) by Plato when he refers to the sophists and their discourse, which is often branded by rhetorical jargon and snarky remarks that are usually devoid of truth's sanctity.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the pots (χύτρας) that constitute Xenophon's example of beautiful order but will nevertheless be laughed at by the witty man, are precisely the same object that the sophist Hippias considers inappropriate to mention in a very sacred matter, such as that of beauty, which is the subject in the homonymous platonic dialogue. Socrates ironically replies to Hippias that such examples would not be presented by a witty man (οὐ κομψός) but by someone who seeks the truth.<sup>51</sup> The word similarities are uncanny, a case of dependence between the texts can be made.

<sup>49</sup> Strauss (1970) 144.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Gorgias* 521d, *Laches* 197d.

<sup>51</sup> *Hippias Major* 288c-d: ἐρεῖ τοίνυν μετὰ τοῦτ' ἐκεῖνος, σχεδόν τι εὔ οἶδα ἐκ τοῦ τρόπου τεκμαιρόμενος: ὦ βέλτιστε σύ, τί δὲ **χύτρα** καλή; οὐ καλὸν ἄρα; Ἰππίας: ὦ Σώκρατες, τίς δ' ἐστὶν ὁ ἄνθρωπος; ὡς ἀπαίδευτός τις ὃς οὕτω φαῦλα ὀνόματα ὀνομάζειν τολμᾷ ἐν **σεμνῷ** πράγματι.

Σωκράτης: τοιοῦτός τις, ὦ Ἰππία, οὐ **κομψός** ἀλλὰ συρφετός, οὐδὲν ἄλλο φροντίζων ἢ τὸ ἀληθές. (I have marked with bold and italics the words that are identical with Xenophon's text).

## 7. Manly Intelligence (*andrikên dianoian*)

There are in fact other signs that demonstrate that Ischomachus' wife is a woman of high intelligence and can, through her actions, even subdue Ischomachus himself. She can see through Ischomachus' lies and in domestic trials she appears as a harsh judge who, with impartiality, does not spare even her husband (11.25). It is not clear whether she acquired this ability from her *physis* or from the teachings of Ischomachus, but either way, she can easily dissect his rhetoric and see behind his mendacious attempts.<sup>52</sup> Socrates playfully praises her and points out that she has a manly intelligence.<sup>53</sup> This phrase has been interpreted in various ways. According to Strauss, it denotes the virile concern that makes a being a good protector of his estates.<sup>54</sup> Others interpret the phrase negatively because they think that for Xenophon a woman's virtue is simply to be obedient and to be completely assimilated to her husband's demands and needs, thus eliminating her femininity.<sup>55</sup> Only Glazerbook<sup>56</sup> evaluates the phrase positively, but even he does it only after admitting first that it is condescending: he also cites Skinner's opinion, who correctly assesses that the phrase means high praise. All these assessments miss an intertextual clue that sheds more light on how positively Ischomachus' wife is lauded and how this is wrapped up in a subversive way that is rooted in literary tradition. Indeed, a masculine intellect, or designs befitting men, characterized only one woman from the mythological tradition, a character whose appearance on stage always ter-

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<sup>52</sup> Gini (1993) 484.

<sup>53</sup> *Oeconomicus* 10.1: Καὶ ἐγὼ ἀκούσας, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, ἀποκρίνασθαι τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτῷ ταῦτα, εἶπον· Νῆ τὴν Ἥραν, ἔφην, ὦ Ἰσχόμαχε, ἀνδρικήν γε ἐπιδεικνύεις τὴν διάνοιαν τῆς γυναικός. = "On hearing that his wife had replied to him in this way," said Socrates, "I spoke, 'By Hera, Ischomachos,' I said, 'you display your wife's manly understanding.'", translation by Carnes Lord. Other male models are also used by Ischomachus that help promote the concept of rectitude and leadership, Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 302, Glazerbook (2009) 243.

<sup>54</sup> Strauss (1970) 153.

<sup>55</sup> Scaife (1995) 225 and Too (2001) 79.

<sup>56</sup> Glazerbook (2009) 243.



rified Athenian viewers with her gender-transgressive behavior. Clytemnestra, the primary evil of intemperance, is presented in Aeschylus as having γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον κέαρ,<sup>57</sup> and Sophocles is probably referring to her when he writes: ἀνδρόφρων γυνή<sup>58</sup> (the italics are mine). Xenophon here masterfully takes the primary characteristic of one of the most hated women and instills it in the innocent little creature that is Ischomachus' wife. He confirms to us that with proper and methodical teaching one does not need to fear androgynous behavior displayed by women, but that with directive and targeted education, women will be able to undertake jobs of equal value to men, since they share the same intellect.

### Conclusions

Oost says that “the *Oeconomicus*, with all its condescension toward the child wife, treats woman better than any other work of Xenophon, perhaps more than any other work of ancient Greek literature”.<sup>59</sup> The second part of his statement certainly finds us in agreement. Xenophon by no means supports completely the blown-out patriarchal ideology of ancient Athens regarding the sexes.<sup>60</sup> He follows his own path and approach which has as its *modus operandi* ruling and how one can acquire it so that it may be applied to the traditional feminine condition. We would not say that he treats the subject as an essentialist, at least in absolute terms. Xenophon truly believes that a woman is potentially a queen, like the one who rules over a swarm of bees (7.32). The point is that as a queen she has a range of responsibilities that must be undertaken with due diligence, of which prudence (σωφροσύνη) is an essential component. In addition, she must be

<sup>57</sup> Agamemnon 10.

<sup>58</sup> Fr. 857 N. = 943 P.:

<sup>59</sup> Oost (1977) 235 cf. Scaife (1995) 230: “[...] it has been hopefully suggested, the relative absence of outright misogyny stems from the fact that Xenophon was a social liberal, not afflicted with that low view of women otherwise so prevalent in classical Athenian literature and life”.

<sup>60</sup> Contra Scaife (1995) 226.

taught the art of leadership in order to exercise it in an effective manner. The most ideal form of leadership is that of the royal type, for: “Surely we should not be ashamed to imitate (*mimêsasthai*) the Persian king” (4.4). The Persian king functions as a model of action that is transmuted into the woman through the example of the queen bee. The couple itself is a microcosm of the actions that the Persian king performs on his own subjects.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, I do not believe that Murnaghan’s (1988) view is valid, which claims that women simply conform to the male space and do not gain their own autonomy. The woman as marital complement balances and assists the estate work and can even potentially surpass her husband in restraint and care. The fact that this transcendence occurs in the “patriarchal” model of labor that is divided into τὰ ἑνδον for women and τὰ ἔξω for men is beyond the point and should not detract from the much more valuable and groundbreaking views expressed throughout all of Socratic works of Xenophon concerning female nature which is extolled in an accumulative fashion in the *Oeconomicus*.

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Pomeroy (1994) 238–40.

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