

"By Hera" in Xenophon  
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That Socrates is often ironic few would doubt. But there is much argument about just when he is ironic. One potential tool for diagnosing irony is the oath "by Hera," a favorite of Socrates. In a brief article in the 1983 festschrift for Edouard Delebecque, William C. Calder III studied its use in Plato. He argues, as have others, that it was an oath normally employed by women—though in our texts, dominated as they are by men, it is men who use it. In Plato it is uttered six times by Socrates and but once by another man. Calder argues that Socrates most often uses the oath to show "feigned admiration"; "goodness gracious" often works as a translation. He suggests that the oath was indeed a favorite of the historical Socrates, given that in 10 of the 11 times it appears in Plato or Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, it is put into Socrates' mouth.

But on three of the seven occasions the oath appears in Plato, Calder must engage in special pleading; once the oath is a "colorless interjection," once it serves as an "urbane reproof" and is "as close as Socrates ever comes to honest admiration"; once it is used before boys whose ears are too tender for stronger language. And Calder finds that in Xenophon, where the oath occurs 11 or 12 times (depending on the text at *Cyropaedia* 1.4.12), it is often but a "pale imitation" of Plato's usage.

I will look at evidence from Xenophon in hopes of showing that "by Hera" is an overt marker of irony in both Xenophon and Plato, in the following sense: a man uses a woman's oath to show that what he's saying is not precisely what he means. He warns listeners that there is a mismatch between his words and his meaning just as there is between his own gender and that of his oath.

Thus, for example, Socrates uses the oath while remarking on how the Syracusan dancing-master can sleep with his boy dancer without corrupting him (*Smp.* 4.54), or when praising the large library of the ignorant Euthydemus (*Mem.* 4.2.9). While the oath may have been a favorite of Socrates, Xenophon gives it to five other men, who use it similarly. For example, Lycon, Socrates' future accuser, praises him with a "by Hera" (*Smp.* 9.1); the rich Callias invokes Hera when admiring how Antisthenes' poverty keeps him out of trouble with the masses (*Smp.* 4.45); and the youthful Cyrus swears that he is becoming a real dolt at Astyages' court (*Cyropaedia* 1.4.12). This tells against Calder's suggestions that the oath was particularly Socratic and that Xenophon was simply mimicking Plato's Socrates.

One way to judge the meaning of "by Hera" is to contrast it with the far more common "by Zeus." "By Zeus" occurs 96 times in the *Memorabilia*; on all but 17 of these occasions it is said by someone other than Socrates. "By Hera," by contrast, occurs but five times, and is always said by Socrates, who is rather more likely to be ironizing than his somewhat wooden interlocutors in the *Memorabilia*. "By Zeus" serves to emphasize the seriousness of an utterance and is thus the counterpart to "by Hera."

This is not to say that "by Zeus" cannot be used ironically, and on at least one occasion we have clear evidence that it is (3.6.12, where Glaucon says that he is being mocked). Nor does "by Hera" always show that what follows isn't true. Thus Hermogenes uses "by Hera" to soften his remark that he admires Socrates for flattering Callias by presenting his advice about love as if it were praise (*Smp.* 8.12). Socrates then solemnly swears by Zeus that Callias will be pleased to hear why he should not have sex with his beloved (with whom he would in fact have an infamous affair). But normally "by Zeus," even in Socrates' mouth, underlines a speaker's commitment to what he is saying, while "by Hera" shows that one's commitment is less than complete.