

Most Beautiful: Xenophon's Debate with Sappho

This paper argues that Ischomachus' praise of order in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* 8, particularly in its choice and ordering of examples, implicitly seeks to refute the position of Sappho on beauty, as articulated in fragment 16. This refutation serves Ischomachus' purpose of rendering his wife's mind "masculine." The three examples chosen (a chorus of men, an army on the march, and a ship) belong to the masculine sphere, and thus fall outside the experience of Ischomachus' wife, to whom the discourse is addressed. Pomeroy (1995) argues that the examples are chosen to appeal to Xenophon's male readership. I will argue that Ischomachus' choice of examples makes sense if we understand them as a refutation of the opening priamel of Sappho 16.

The accounts of Ischomachus and Sappho share a common topic (that which is most beautiful), and a similar sequence of examples. Sappho mentions cavalry, infantry, and a naval squadron as possible candidates for "most beautiful," before concluding famously that it is "whatever one loves." Ischomachus, meanwhile, begins with a chorus, then an army (including cavalry, infantry, and a host of others), before concluding with a warship. The omission of Sappho's final example makes sense given Ischomachus' differing agenda (and his dismissal of the role of sexuality in marriage stated in the preceding chapter). The inclusion of the chorus as a first example makes sense as a priming mechanism for the otherwise un-signposted allusion, particularly if, following Lardinois (2003) and Dodson-Robinson (2010), Sappho 16 was a choral song, composed for a nuptial context. While Ischomachus' wife would never have seen a ship-of-war or an army on the march, the poetry of Sappho, particularly a poem that may have been performed at weddings, would have been familiar to her, and thus might help explain the otherwise peculiar examples Ischomachus chooses.

That Ischomachus refutes Sappho, and does so without naming her, is consistent with his larger project in the training of his wife, which, as Murnaghan states, is to make her “...a blank surrogate for her husband who can be safely trusted and ignored” (Murnaghan, 1988). Sappho 16, and its opening priamel in particular, are usually read themselves as refutations or modifications of the masculine, epic worldview of Homer from a feminine, lyric one (Rosenmeyer, 1997). Ischomachus’ refutation of this argument by the female cultural figure par excellence, a refutation which elides any mention of her name or identity, can be seen as an attempt to erase undesirable and potentially destabilizing feminine influences on his wife’s character, helping to leave her with what Socrates will call in the very next chapter “a masculine understanding.”

That the refutation needs to be made at all, as well as the highly allusive manner in which it is done, should serve as a stark reminder that the approach to the marriage relationship offered in the *Oeconomicus* is proscriptive rather than descriptive (Murnaghan 1988, Glazebrook, 2009), and especially that the ideal of female ignorance and the disassociation of sexuality and marriage, both of which Ischomachus takes for granted, are perhaps not so universally accepted as the *Oeconomicus* makes them seem. Instead, a worldview considered distinctly feminine, which among other things closely identifies eros and marriage, must be rooted out by the husband in order to render his wife masculine, and therefore trustworthy.

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