

“Not Fitting for a Symposium”: The Problem of Female Acrobatics

Towards the end of Xenophon's *Symposium*, Socrates both criticizes the female acrobat's routine from earlier in the evening, during which she tumbled through swords, and thwarts her upcoming performance atop a whirling potter's wheel: "So it seems to me that to tumble into swords is a display of danger, which is not fitting for a symposium. And what's more, to write and read upon a wheel while it whirls could perhaps be some wonder, but I cannot recognize what enjoyment these things would provide" (7.3, translation my own). Xenophon's Socrates envisions the symposium as a primarily philosophical space in which the symposiasts should promote spiritual and mental edification via homosexual *eros*. The female acrobat, who contorts her body into a hoop (2.22) and springs in and out of swords (2.11), threatens Socrates' philosophical program. But were female acrobatic performances really out of place at a symposium, or is the literary Socrates out of touch with popular entertainment? In my paper, I plan first to unpack the way that the female acrobat in Xenophon's text functions as a foil to the members of the *hetaireia* themselves, who recline, drink, and converse while encountering the female acrobat as a product for their visual consumption. I will suggest that the female acrobatic performances in this text symbolize the epitome of the anti-elite, while remembering that this is only one elite author's literary interpretation of the female acrobat.

To compare Xenophon with more popular representations of the female acrobat at the symposium, I will turn to vase paintings, which depict female acrobats performing highly contorted handstands; Vickers (2016: 147-158) calls this the 'generic pose' for its frequency and remarkable consistency. Two South Italian vases from the mid-4th century (Genoa 1142, St. Petersburg GP-4662) depict a female acrobat in a handstand near a *kottabos* stand with ribbons

hanging on the ‘wall’ in the background, marking a clear sympotic context. Five other vases depict handstanding females either with garlands, ribbons, and beads hanging on the wall to denote interior sympotic space or with sympotic vessels such as a *krater* and *kantharos*. One acrobat, in a lost Campanian vase from Sir William Hamilton’s collection (preserved through an engraving by Tischbein [1791]) even handstands over a *calyx-krater* while holding a *kantharos* between her left toes and a ladle between her right ones. Using these vases as evidence, I will argue that the number of female acrobats who appear on vase paintings demonstrates their popularity as sympotic entertainment, even though Socrates in Xenophon’s text suggests that female acrobats are unfit for a symposium.

While I will suggest that this type of entertainment was associated with Southern Italy—both because of the plethora of vase paintings from that region and because Xenophon’s acrobat is part of the Syracusan’s performance troupe—I will nevertheless conclude by arguing that it was part of a cultural exchange between *Magna Graecia* and the mainland. Vases such as the Attic red-figure *hydria* of Polygnotos from the 5th c. BC support my argument; this vase depicts a nude female running toward three swords next to a nude female in a backbend with a *kylix* on a sympotic table. Ultimately, I hope to prove the historical legitimacy of the female acrobat in Xenophon’s *Symposium* while suggesting that Socrates’ take on her performance contrasts with her popularity outside of the literary realm.

Bibliography

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1791: Naples.

Vickers, Jonathan R. “The Acrobatic Body in Ancient Greek Society” Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository 3834 (2016).