

# Xanthippe: Shrew or Muse

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*Socrates's wife Xanthippe has entered the popular imagination as a shrewish character who dumps water on the inattentive Socrates. Such popular portrayals are intended largely to highlight what makes Socrates such an appealing character. But she also appears briefly in Plato's dialogue the *Phaedo*, the dialogue that takes place in Socrates's prison cell, recounts the conversation about death and immortality that took place there, and then reports the events surrounding Socrates's death after drinking the hemlock. After a review of the ancient anecdotes about Xanthippe and possible readings of those anecdotes, this article considers the significance of Xanthippe's presence early in the *Phaedo* for our understanding of the conversation between Socrates and his companions. In this way, Xanthippe moves from the role of the shrew to—if not exactly a muse—at least a question mark. That we even know her name may indicate a force of personality too readily scorned by those highlighting her shrewish nature.*

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We know little about Socrates's wife Xanthippe. She has appeared in a variety of contemporary and later anecdotes about Socrates, but her appearance in the Platonic dialogues is limited to the *Phaedo*, and there she speaks only one sentence. In this article, I review what little is reported about her and her interactions with Socrates as a preface to showing how different her role is in Plato's *Phaedo* where she becomes, I argue, part of and counter to the philosophical discussion that takes place on the day of Socrates's death.

While engaging in conversation with his friends about the meaning of death and the possibility of reincarnation in the *Phaedo*, Socrates speculates on our rebirth as assorted animals, the unjust and violent as wolves and hawks, the good citizens as bees and ants (82ab). In Book X of the *Republic*, in the Myth of Er, Socrates also imagines the reincarnation of specific individuals as animals. Ajax reappears as a lion, Agamemnon as an eagle, Thersites, the buffoon of the *Iliad*, as an ape. In a 1995 article in the *Annals of the Entomological Society of America*, entitled "New Genus and Two New Species of Melicharini from Venezuela," one of the newly discovered species has been given the name "Xanthippe" (Naskrecki and Colwell 1995). There she is, the wife of Socrates, reincarnated as a spider. Poor Xanthippe, mocked and

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scorned as a shrew, throughout history the harridan who regularly scolded her philosopher husband, a man beloved by the young men of Athens, by Plato, and by Western civilization for millennia thereafter, reappears as an eight-legged arachnid feasting on the flowers of palms of the genus *Socratea*.<sup>1</sup> We can understand Ajax as a lion and Thersites as an ape, but why does Xanthippe return to us as a spider? One longs for Socrates's speculations on this.

We know little about Xanthippe, even whether she was Socrates's only wife or one of two, the other being Myrto, a descendant of Aristides the Just.<sup>2</sup> Yet she has evoked a range of responses, as authors from the time of Socrates to the present imagine what a wife of Socrates must have been like or, more interestingly, how the *presentation* of this philosopher's wife can highlight the qualities of the Socrates that we have come to venerate. Nietzsche, his own misogyny on full display, attributes Socrates becoming the philosopher he was to his henpecking wife:

Socrates found the sort of wife that he needed—but even he would not have sought her had he known her well enough: the heroism of even this free spirit would not have gone that far. Xanthippe actually drove him more and more into his characteristic profession by making his house and home inhospitable and unhomey for him: she taught him to live in the streets and everywhere that one could chat and be idle and thus shaped him into the greatest Athenian street dialectician: who finally had to compare himself to an obtrusive gadfly that some god had placed upon the neck of that beautiful horse, Athens, in order to keep it from finding any peace. (Nietzsche 1995, 233–34)<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Robert Graves, the English poet and novelist, expresses sympathy for this much-maligned woman. In an essay entitled “The Case for Xanthippe,” Graves acknowledges what might be considered her side of the story. Distinguishing between rationality—hard, “antipoetic,” numbers-focused rationality—as opposed to “reasonableness,” to which he appends the adjective “sweet,” Graves remarks that “Sweet reasonableness was wanting in Socrates.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Graves writes: “His homosexual leanings, his absent-minded behavior, his idleness, and his love of proving everyone wrong, would have endeared him to no wife of mettle.” Despite that, Graves recognizes that Xanthippe “is still pilloried as a shrew who could not understand her husband's spiritual greatness; and Socrates is still regarded as a saint because he patiently bore with her reproaches.” Graves the poet distances himself from “rationality” in order to defend Xanthippe's intuitions: “She saw that his metaphysical theories would bring the family public disgrace and endanger the equipoise of the world she knew” (Graves 1960, 599).<sup>5</sup> Graves may not pass muster with social scientists of our day when he suggests a correlation between the decline of “sweet reasonableness” and a decline in the status of women with “an immediate increase in wars, crime, mental ill-health, and physical excess.” But he does express exasperation with the immediate assumption that Xanthippe plays the negative role in the Socrates–Xanthippe marriage. Of course, everything Graves writes is speculative fancy, the poetic imagination attached to the Xanthippe he defends.

As Leonard Woodbury notes, the anecdotes that tell of the difficulties that Socrates had with his wife, “instead of providing material for a biography of Xanthippe, are told to illustrate the qualities of Socrates” (Woodbury 1973, 7, n. 1). The anecdotes to which Woodbury refers come mostly from brief notices in the works of Xenophon, which are then elaborated in later non-contemporary writers. Below I review these anecdotes and discuss how they support Graves’s and Woodbury’s contention that the portrait of Xanthippe in these ancient writings highlights Socrates’s qualities rather than giving us clear insights into the character of Socrates’s wife. Xenophon’s stories, however, may suggest that what others over time came to mock as traits to be feared in a wife in fact made her a fit spouse for Socrates, a woman who could challenge him as others seldom did. After a review of the anecdotes, I suggest that although Plato may not offer greater insight into who Xanthippe was than can be gleaned from the stories that rose up about her, her single appearance by name in Plato’s dialogues may go beyond simply elevating the renowned philosopher. With her brief role in the *Phaedo*, she deepens Plato’s portrait of Socrates and helps to underscore the complexity of the theories he develops about the immortality of the soul. Unfortunately, Xanthippe cannot stand on her own. Few, if any, women in the world of ancient Athens could, apart from educated courtesans such as Aspasia and high priestesses (see Connelly 2007, especially ch. 7). Aspasia’s fame arose initially from her connection with Pericles, and Xanthippe will always remain a sideshow to Socrates, though Plato made her presence in the *Phaedo* serve, I contend, as more than such a sideshow.

#### THE ANCIENT ANECDOTES

Aristophanes, who is prepared to lampoon almost anyone—be they gods, Socrates, great tragedians, leading political figures of Athens, the demos, women in general, and Aspasia in particular—never mentions Xanthippe in his surviving comedies, indicating perhaps how inconsequential she was to the cultural, political, and intellectual world of fifth-century Athens. Xenophon, Plato’s contemporary and a generation younger than Socrates, however, takes up the task of introducing Xanthippe to those interested in stories about the life and activities of Socrates. She appears by name in only one of Xenophon’s works, his *Symposium*. Xenophon introduces the *Symposium* by remarking that it seems good that he report not only those serious (*spoudaios*) deeds of great and noble men (males, *andres*), but also their more playful adventures (*paidiai*).<sup>6</sup>

One of these more playful adventures is a dinner given by the rich Callias in honor of the winner of the *pankration* at the Panathenaic games. Chancing to meet Socrates and his companions on his way home from the games, Callias invites them all to join the celebration. After a meal, a young girl dances and plays the flute. A handsome young man plays the zither and also dances. Together, Xenophon writes, they present a wondrous performance. Impressed by this display of talent, Xenophon’s Socrates comments: “Oh men (*andres*), in many other ways, it is clear also in the

things which the girl does that the female nature (*gunaikeia phusis*) is not worse than that of a man, except that it is lacking in judgment and strength." To this he adds: "If any one of you has a wife, boldly (*thrassôn*) teach her whatever knowledge (*epistemenê*) you would wish her to have" (Xenophon 1923, 2.9). Two words stand out in this latter comment: "boldly" and "to have knowledge." To educate one's wife requires courage, comparable perhaps to that of the warrior on the battlefield. Is it because to do so flouts convention? Or because it is challenging to try to educate a woman? In either case, Socrates urges others not to shun the task, perhaps offering an insight into his own relation to Xanthippe—as one he dares/challenges to have the sort of knowledge he wishes her to have. Given Socrates's own life of philosophical pursuit in the service of the good life, could his advice to others reflect his own daring in trying to teach Xanthippe whatever he wishes her to know? In another work on Socrates, the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon reports on an enchanting (and flirtatious) interchange between Socrates and the prostitute Theodote, whom Socrates educates in the art of acquiring "friends," perhaps not the knowledge one would want to teach one's own wife, but suggestive of Socrates's engagement in educating women—be they wives or prostitutes. Xanthippe may be, however, more of a challenge to educate than Theodote, for whom he advises good deeds and "sweetness" (Xenophon 1923, III.11.11).

In response to Socrates's advice about educating their wives in the knowledge/science that husbands want them to know, the skeptical Antisthenes, another dinner guest, counters: "If you think that, why don't you educate Xanthippe, but rather endure a wife who of all those who are and, I think, ever were and will be, is the most difficult, harshest, painful, ill-tempered (*chalepotatê*)" (Xenophon 1923, 2.10). Thus are we introduced to Xanthippe, a characterization that will dominate almost all subsequent portrayals of her. But in what way was she the most difficult? Later authors take this portrait of Xanthippe in a thoroughly negative fashion, as we shall see in the discussion of Diogenes's anecdotes. But could Xanthippe's harshness also be her strength, making her an appropriate complement for the husband eager to educate her in whatever he wishes her to know, a match that violates the cultural norms of the submissive wife that Antisthenes treasures? In this possible reading of Socrates and Xanthippe's relationship, she poses the sort of challenge that Socrates welcomes in his other interlocutors. Socrates does not reject Antisthenes's characterization of Xanthippe. Instead, he explains that he keeps her as she is; that way, he says, if he learns to endure her, he will easily be "with all other human beings (*anthropoi*)." Socrates follows this with an analogy with horses: the horseman who rides the horses of the highest spirit (*thumoeideis*) can ride all horses. Xanthippe's ill temper prepares him for the challenges others may pose.<sup>7</sup>

The Xanthippe who emerges from this interchange introduces the Xanthippe who will dominate subsequent portrayals of the philosopher's wife and of the man Socrates, who is of such a character that he can endure, as others cannot, the challenges of having such a high-spirited wife. The disparaging portrait of Xanthippe as one difficult to control reinforces the favorable portrait of Socrates, a man so temperate, so calm that he, unlike any other man, can live with Xanthippe, thereby training

himself to endure confrontations with anyone, be he the wolf-like Thrasymachus of the *Republic* or the dismissive Protagoras of the *Protagoras*. The high-spirited Xanthippe, to be sure, highlights Socrates's excellence, as Xenophon clearly wishes to do, but the portrait may also reveal something about the personal strength of this woman whom others, expecting acquiescence from their own wives, find "harsh."

After reporting on the interchange with Antisthenes, Xenophon describes another performance by the young girl. She somersaults among upright spears. Upon observing this, Socrates remarks that no one who has seen this routine will deny that "courage/manliness (*andreia*) can be taught when, though a female (*gunê*), she leaps so boldly among the spears" (Xenophon 1923, 2.12). Perhaps Socrates's experiences with the high-spirited (thumotic) Xanthippe has taught him to recognize that "manliness/courage" can be taught to women, even if it does not come to them by nature. Socrates had just exhorted the young men at the dinner to boldly educate their wives in whatever knowledge they want them to have; Socrates could be continuing this theme here by suggesting that the men might teach their wives manliness, a quality that they (unlike Socrates) may not want to foster.<sup>8</sup>

At the conclusion of Xenophon's *Symposium*, Xanthippe reappears, though not by name; her appearance is marked more by her absence than her presence. The final entertainment of the evening can only be described as bordering on the pornographic, intended to sexually arouse Callias's guests. "Ariadne," perhaps the brave girl of the earlier passages, reappears costumed as a bride. She awaits the arrival of "Dionysus." The sound of his flute precedes him and gives her pleasure. "Dionysus" appears and sits on her lap; they embrace and kiss and, under the encouraging cries from the symposiasts for more, they become lovers kissing and caressing before they go off to bed (Xenophon 1923, 9.3–7). We then learn that this erotic display inspired the bachelors to swear that they would get married; the married men, Xenophon tells us, mounted their horses and headed home to their wives. The wedded Socrates is impervious to the pornography that aroused the others; he remains behind as the others dash off. Xanthippe is ignored in these final passages, though she had been present as the difficult wife earlier. Through this absence, Socrates appears outside lust and outside marriage. He is the bachelor who is not a bachelor, unmoved by bodily demands and sexual desires.<sup>9</sup> As presented in Xenophon's *Symposium*, Xanthippe, whether by her presence or absence, embellishes the portrait of Socrates. Xenophon may thus unintentionally give some insight into the strength of the woman behind the famous and revered philosopher, there to challenge him but not to serve as a sexual object like the prostitute Theodote.

Xenophon gives Socrates more reason to acknowledge Xanthippe in his *Memorabilia*, but he does not name her in this work. In one of the many vignettes that fill the *Memorabilia*, he repeats the portrait of this woman as shrewish and oh so difficult to get along with, as Socrates tries to moderate the anger his eldest son Lamproclus feels toward his mother (Xenophon 1923, 2.2). The editor of one edition of the *Memorabilia* from 1880 has this to say about the wife of Socrates in a note to this vignette: "[W]e may infer that Socrates, who was upwards of seventy at the time, was more than twenty years senior of Xanthippe. With one of her temperament

especially, this could not lead to happy results" (Winans 1880, 219). Though Lamproclus laments his mother's harshness (*chalepotatê*, the same word Antisthenes uses in the *Symposium*), something that he says no one would be able to endure, and describes this "harshness" as "worse than that of a wild beast," leading her to say things that no one "for all his life is worth would be willing to hear" (Xenophon 1923, 2.2.7), Socrates does not reject Lamproclus's description. Rather, he diverts the discussion from the shrewish Xanthippe to a concern with gratitude, and notes that cities, although not caring about gratitude in any other case, monitor ingratitude to parents and forbid ingrates to hold office or oversee the sacred benefits to the city. Lamproclus should be grateful for his difficult-to-endure mother, as Socrates had told Antisthenes he himself is for his harsh wife.

As a follow-up, Socrates explains why he, Socrates, may welcome this shrew as his wife. Lamproclus should not think that human beings (*anthropoi*) make children on account of lust (*aphrodisiôn*), a comment that may explain why he, unlike the other husbands, did not rush home after the pornographic performance at Callias's dinner. The streets, he tells his son, are filled with resources to satisfy one's lust. Rather, it is clear that "we" search among all women for the one who will make for us the best offspring. The man provides the sustenance so that they *together* provide the best for their children (Xenophon 1923, 2.2.4–5). Xanthippe may be the shrew her son makes her out to be, but Socrates nevertheless identified her as the best one with whom he would "make children." Xanthippe is more than simply a baby-making machine; she is a good baby-making machine despite—or perhaps because of?—her harshness, which serves as a constant challenge to others. Socrates's comments here indicate that theirs is not an arranged marriage, but one determined by choice. Socrates *chose* Xanthippe to be his wife. Could it be because her harshness would also help him to develop the qualities necessary for a philosophical life, a way of life in which one must be prepared to endure both personal and intellectual challenges? While others mock Xanthippe's shrewish nature in Xenophon's stories, Socrates offers her churlishness as an advantage in training him to practice the moderation he urges on his son. And it may be that the challenges this shrew poses turn Socrates into the expert dialectician whom we find in Plato's dialogues.

No writer contemporary with Socrates refers to any wife other than Xanthippe. Diogenes, writing his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* more than half a millennium after Xenophon in the third century CE, cites Aristotle to report that Socrates had two wives:<sup>10</sup> the first was Xanthippe, with whom he had Lamproclus of *Memorable* fame, the second Myrto, the daughter of Aristides, whom he took without a dowry and with whom he had two sons, Sophroniscus and Menexenus. Some authors, reports Diogenes, hold that because of a shortage of men in Athens as a result of the Peloponnesian War, he had two wives at the same time (Diogenes 1972, 2.26). Accurate or not, only Xanthippe satisfies Diogenes's penchant for good stories about the philosopher. Once again Xanthippe the shrew takes center stage, this time more to show off Socrates's witty apothegms than as a challenge to Socrates. Diogenes, for instance, tells of the time that Socrates invited some wealthy men to dinner. Xanthippe told him that she was ashamed, presumably of the meager offerings they could

offer their guests. Socrates responds: "Take courage, for if they [the guests] are moderate, they will go along with it. If they are foolish, there need be no concern about them for us" (2.34). Xanthippe's shame about the poverty of her household is in sharp contrast to her husband's lack of concern with how he appears before others.<sup>11</sup> Xanthippe here is the foil to reveal Socrates's admirable personal qualities.

The next anecdote builds on Xanthippe the shrew in order to display Socrates's wit. In the midst of a series of what we might call one-liners, Diogenes reports on Xanthippe scolding Socrates and then pouring water on him, to which Socrates responds: "Did I not say thundering Xanthippe also makes water?" (2.36). When Alcibiades hears this, he comments that Xanthippe's railings and abuse are unbearable, to which Socrates explains first that he has gotten used to her abuse "as to the sound of a windlass," not at this point suggesting that she teaches him how to "endure" other human beings. In Diogenes's tale, Socrates then asks Alcibiades whether he is bothered by the sound of geese, to which Alcibiades replies that at least the geese provide eggs and goslings. So too, Socrates says, with Xanthippe, the baby-making machine. He has become accustomed to her railings as to the sounds of geese and windlasses and, by the way, he adds, "She bore [my] children" (2.37).

In Diogenes, Xanthippe continues to provide fodder for Socrates's punchlines: once when she stripped off his cloak in the agora, his friends advised him to defend himself with his hand. "By Zeus," he responded, "in order that while we are going at each other, each of you will say, 'well done, Socrates,' 'well done, Xanthippe'" (2.37). And so Socrates denies them such entertainments. Diogenes concludes his repertoire of Socrates's "words and deeds" by repeating Xenophon's anecdote in which Socrates made the analogy between living with the "harsh, savage (*tracheia*)" Xanthippe and riding a high spirited (*thumoeidesin*) horse. Here, though, Diogenes writes that Socrates says that having learned to master/control/rule (*kratêsantes*) such a creature, he can easily be around others (2.37). Diogenes's story is not embedded in a discussion of the education of wives and women who can become manly, as it is in Xenophon's telling. It becomes a story of control and mastery of a shrewish wife. Xanthippe serves Diogenes as a stock character, the comic shrew who is unable to appreciate her philosopher husband. Diogenes probably draws on Xenophon's Xanthippe, but half a millennium later he does not capture the potentially positive consequences of living with a shrew, which may be implied in Xenophon's telling. Rather, Diogenes reinforces the conventional reading of the vexing wife who follows Socrates through history. Nevertheless, both authors find in Xanthippe a way to praise Socrates by highlighting the differences of temperament between husband and wife. To be sure, neither author got his portrait of Xanthippe from Plato.<sup>12</sup>

#### XANTHIPPE IN PLATO

As noted above, Xanthippe appears by name only once in Plato's dialogues,<sup>13</sup> in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue that recounts the conversations that took place on Socrates's last day and reports on the details of his death. Phaedo from Elis (that is, not an

Athenian citizen) has been asked by the foreigner Echecrates from the distant Peloponnesian city of Phlius to tell him the words and deeds of Socrates's last day. Phaedo is eager to comply with Echecrates's request and reports that on entering the prison in which Socrates was being held on the morning of the day Socrates is to die, Xanthippe, holding their young child, was sitting beside a reclining Socrates (60a). The scene is intimate. It appears that Xanthippe has been there during the entire night, for Phaedo, who has been waiting from before dawn to enter the prison, makes no mention of her entering the prison before him. It is Phaedo and his friends entering the prison who disrupt this communing—on what level, we do not know—of husband and wife. Xanthippe marks a transition in the dialogue, technically from an exterior framing that sets up the dialogue as a conversation between Phaedo and Echecrates to one that is narrated by Phaedo, but more important, she marks a transition from the world of the physical, the bodily transitory existence we all share, to the abstract language of the unseen soul whose immortality is the topic of conversation on the day Socrates is to die. Though Phaedo does not refer to Xanthippe by name near the end of the dialogue, we may assume she reappears in the evening with their sons and the women of his household as his body is prepared for his death (116b).<sup>14</sup> After his bath, we learn, he spoke with the women and children before asking them to leave and returning to the cell where his companions were waiting for him and the executioner.

Though her appearance is brief, there is little relation between the Platonic Xanthippe and the shrewish Xanthippe of the ancient anecdotes that emphasize her difficult character and have her pouring water on her husband. The prison scene where Phaedo finds her and Socrates is serene, as the husband and wife sit next to each other with her holding his child. The impression is one of quiet intimacy between husband and wife, a scene even more startling considering the conversation that will follow about the contamination to the soul that comes from the body, the distractions it causes (66b), and the chains that the body puts on the soul. In this scene-setting prelude, Phaedo in mid-sentence, right after he mentions Xanthippe's name, says to his companion, "for you know [her] (*gignôskeis*)," reminding us that he is narrating this series of events not to us, the readers of the dialogue, but to a particular listener, Echecrates. But why and in what way does Echecrates, a foreigner from a distant city, "know" Xanthippe? He has heard only sketchy reports of Socrates's trial and execution and is eager to learn more specifics about the deeds and speeches surrounding his death. But he "knows" Xanthippe—as Phaedo, himself a foreigner, assumes he must. In some fashion, Xanthippe is spoken of such that even those outside of Athens "know" her. Consider here the ending of Pericles's Funeral Oration when Pericles comments oxymoronically that the greatest glory of a woman belongs to she who is least spoken of among men, whether for good or for bad (Thucydides, *History*, II.45). Wherefrom Xanthippe's fame? Plato gives us no indication why Echecrates would know her.<sup>15</sup> We never hear of the wives of other characters in the Platonic corpus.<sup>16</sup> Yet with Phaedo's side comment, Plato ensures that his readers attend to Xanthippe.

Phaedo's report to Echecrates continues by noting that when he and his companions entered Socrates's cell, Xanthippe "cried aloud and said those things which

women customarily do.” This speech entails the only words attributed directly to Xanthippe in the Platonic dialogues. They are: “O Socrates, now is the very last time your companions will speak with you and you with them” (60a). Although Phaedo’s side comment introducing these words may be read as Phaedo’s dismissive attitude toward Xanthippe, this brief sentence asks for more consideration than Phaedo, a young man, is willing to give it. Admittedly, Phaedo’s words can be read as trivializing, but they need not reveal Plato’s attitude toward Xanthippe. Part of Plato’s accomplishment is to give at least a double meaning to the language he uses in his dialogues, here revealing Phaedo’s—but not necessarily Xanthippe’s—limitations.

Again, the sentence that is “of the sort that women customarily” speak is: “O Socrates, now is the very last time your companions will speak with you and you with them” (60a). Is it so hard to imagine that a man might speak this sentence? If so, why? Why should one read it as a “woman’s” comment? On the one hand, one could read the statement simply as an observation of fact. Knowing that Socrates is to die, Xanthippe recognizes, as we all would, that this is the last opportunity he will have to speak with his friends as they are “accustomed” to. This view, however, is the view of someone who focuses on the necessity of the body for engagement in discourse. In the final sections of his speech before the jury, as Plato writes in the *Apology*, Socrates had reflected in fanciful speculation on the possibility that death is an unending conversation among friends—that is, he had imagined an existence in which conversation might not require physical bodies (41ab). Xanthippe, a woman, does not separate the soul from the body, speech from the physical existence of the human being, as we see Socrates trying to do throughout the *Phaedo*; in this, she shows little difference from the men in the dialogue who also have difficulty making this break with the body and resist Socrates’s arguments to that effect, and who weep as violently as she (117c-e) when they contemplate being unable to speak with Socrates as they have in the past.

We should note as well that there are in this brief sentence spoken by Xanthippe feelings of sorrow, that this is indeed the last time that these friends will be able to converse with one another. This sense of loss is no less present when Phaedo begins to speak to Echecrates about the pain that he himself feels at the memory of the loss he and others have experienced, a pain that is joined with pleasure in the recollection of the time spent with Socrates. So, what is it that makes this sentence peculiarly feminine? Or—is it? Does Plato suggest a certain androgyny here where Xanthippe is no different from the male friends who came early to the prison gates because they themselves knew that it was the last time they would be able to speak with their friend? She sees what they see and puts into words what they themselves feel when they weep at the end of the dialogue. Xanthippe, the mother of Socrates’s children, the bodily companion of Socrates, understands relationships based on the body that gives voice to speech, while Phaedo, the companion and friend of Socrates, seems dismissive of such an understanding.

Both males and females will experience grief at the loss of the body of Socrates and the speeches that go along with that body, but—and here I believe Plato is alerting us to the difference—Xanthippe expresses the sadness that will be experienced by

others rather than herself. She shows an altruism that does not surface as one of the traditional virtues of the Greeks—apart, we might, note, from Socrates's claims in the *Apology* that he is driven by a certain philanthropy, that he has been sent by the god to care for his fellow citizens by urging them to attend to the quality of their souls rather than to wealth, power, and beauty.<sup>17</sup> Xanthippe is the one who expresses concern for another, while Phaedo admits that his weeping at the end of the dialogue is not for Socrates, but for his own misfortune in being deprived of such a companion as Socrates (117d).

Socrates does not respond to Xanthippe's grief that that day's conversation will be the last between himself and his companions. Rather, he prepares for this conversation by looking to his friend Crito, who will care for his body after his death, and saying: "O Crito, let someone lead her home" (60a). Some of Crito's men (slaves?—the Greek says only *tines*) lead her off as she performs the ritual role for the women of the household in ancient Athens, "weeping and beating her breast."<sup>18</sup> With her, presumably, goes Socrates's child; they are replaced by a world of speech that emphasizes opposition and an isolation from bodily community. The conversation that follows can take place only after the female has departed and with her the understanding of the body as the site of mutuality, community, sexuality, and physical continuity. The philosophical soul flourishes only in abstraction from these. The presence of Xanthippe reminds the reader (and the Pythagorean Echeocrates) that we ought not to ignore that mutuality even as we speak of the opposites that fill so much of the rest of the dialogue.

"How strange is this which human beings call pleasure," Socrates remarks in his first words after he has asked Crito to take Xanthippe home, words that now serve as the introduction to the speeches of the dialogue. Pleasure is strange because by nature, even though it is so close to pain, what seems to be its opposite, the two never come to the same man at one time. To explore this curiosity further, or to point to their interconnection, the mutuality of opposites, Socrates proposes an Aesopian myth using an absurd image (60c) of a head with two parts attached to it—one pleasure, the other pain. In an effort to put an end to their warring with each other, the god bound them together so that one cannot be without the other; thus, wherever pain is, there too is pleasure. The quarrelsome Xanthippe (at least according to some) is bound to Socrates—or perhaps more seriously, for Socrates, sitting there in prison with his wife during the night before his execution, the female who departs and the male friends who arrive are like the Aesopian head that the god has fashioned, the head with two parts, who though they are opposites cannot escape each other, the friends who want to focus on the soul with their immaterial words and the wife whose body has given him children.

Xanthippe's departure marks the departure of the family, of the mutuality of male and female, but not the importance of mutuality, which seems to dominate the early parts of the dialogue before the harsher oppositions of exclusion take thematic control of it.<sup>19</sup> I cannot say that we learn anything about Xanthippe from the *Phaedo*, but although Xenophon and the ancient anecdotes portray her as the shrew in opposition to mild-mannered Socrates, for Plato she appears as qualifier—a question mark,

so to speak—that causes his readers to think more deeply about efforts to cast off the body in order to argue for the immortality of the soul with questionable arguments based on opposites that are at the heart of this dialogue. Socrates in his speeches tries to isolate the soul from the body, to imagine the soul in and of itself (see esp. 80e, 82a and b, 83a), and thus enable the soul to exist independently from the contamination of the body, not “in community” (*ouden koinônousa*, 80e) with the body. In this fashion he concludes that philosophy is the preparation for death. But the simple dichotomy between body and soul does not work well, and the isolation of the soul becomes a problematic claim, perhaps a gift to his friends, as some have suggested (Davis 1980, 72; Ahrens Dorf 1995, 201), but perhaps not sufficiently compelling to convince a Plato who portrays himself as absent from the discussion on the day of Socrates’s death.

I do not debate that in Socrates’s presentation in the *Phaedo* the body is a hindrance to the pursuit of philosophy (esp. 82d–83b), that a reliance on sight corrupts what we can know; I do question, though, whether this argument, which shifts quickly to the corrupting power of the pursuit of pleasure, is the last word either from Socrates or most especially from Plato concerning this topic. Plato writes dialogues in which speeches come from specific individuals, individuals who can only be identified though the senses. We learn at the very beginning of the dialogue that Echeocrates wants to hear not only what was said, but also who was physically there and what was seen on the day Socrates died. Thus *Phaedo* offers the details of who was there and who did what; he reports the bodily movements of characters—especially Socrates, who sits up and lies down, who strokes *Phaedo*’s hair (89b), who rubs his legs. And we also learn of Xanthippe’s posture when *Phaedo* arrives, what she did when she left the prison, and what she did when she (probably) returned in the evening.

To support his argument about the immortality of the soul, Socrates draws on the developing theme of opposites (sleeping and waking, tall and short) and refers his audience back to an ancient tale that the souls of the dead, having gone to Hades, return; and from them, the dead but now returned souls, the living are born. Thus, death gives life to life. Just as the weaker comes from the stronger, the faster from the slower, the smaller from the bigger, so too all opposites come from their opposites (71a). This exposition leads to the Q.E.D.: “It is agreed by us also in this that the living come into being from the dead no less than the dead come into being from the living.” All this is claimed as if there were no process of procreation that depended on sexual commingling, no Xanthippe necessary to produce the child who sits with his mother in his father’s prison cell. Such an argument, such claims, such an ancient story can only be put forward when Xanthippe is no longer in the room, when the women have not only physically departed but when they have left all consciousness, when the previous dismissal of the body as a hindrance to purity and to learning has been “proven.”

Socrates suggests that without the movement back and forth that is entailed in this ancient tale, everything would remain the same, in a static condition of foreverness. He proposes instead a flowing, pendulum-like transition, but no sexuality, no

bodies mixing, as if there had been no Xanthippe, no restraints on this vision of independence. Socrates's companions find nothing problematic in his asexual story of the origins of life, where the living simply arise from their opposite, the dead. They, like Phaedo, welcomed the departure of Xanthippe. Her presence in the cell might have reminded Socrates's interlocutors of the role of the female in the production of a life that may not come from death, but from an interdependence and commingling of bodies—whether in the family or in the polis. We the readers, though, can recall her presence and that of the child whom the old, but living, Socrates fathered through sexual relations with Xanthippe.

Xanthippe's presence reminds us of the grief that will be felt later despite Socrates's repeated claims that the body is not him. Xanthippe is there not because she provides any answers, but because the issues surrounding life and death, body and soul, opposition and mutuality are not so simple or straightforward as Socrates appears to argue, in what may indeed be a gesture of friendship to those with whom he spends his last day. Xanthippe is not only there to be sent away; she is there to be a brooding reminder that we are more than speech or soul, that the love of wisdom requires the female as well as the male. Plato himself ensured that we recognize this by putting Xanthippe there for us to notice. He need not have granted this role to Socrates's wife, but he did so for his own theoretical purposes, forcing his readers to become aware of tensions in the argument he gives to Socrates in this dialogue, keeping alive issues of mutuality and sexuality that the other interlocutors may refuse to see. He did not do so in order that we might know who this Xanthippe was or why she in particular was the wife of Socrates, but to help his readers stand back and assess the arguments that Socrates may offer to his friends to comfort them.

#### XANTHIPPE'S ACCOMPLISHMENT: TO BE "KNOWN"

Xenophon may have written of Xanthippe the shrew in order to illuminate the character of Socrates, and Plato may have set her beside Socrates in his prison cell in order to introduce a certain philosophical questioning to the constrained conversation about the immortality of the soul, but the mere fact that she appears in the ancient literature at all needs to be acknowledged. The only other individual woman known to us from this period would be Aspasia, the concubine of Pericles and the mother of his children. Both Xanthippe and Aspasia were wed to men who dominated the cultural and political life of fifth-century Athens, but the mere fact that they were noticed by name—by Plato, by Xenophon, by Aristophanes (for Aspasia)—suggests that perhaps Xanthippe, like Aspasia, was a personality in her own right, a force who by the mere fact of demanding attention from Socrates and thereby violating the expectations of the unseen/unheard women whom Pericles appears to praise is worthy of that attention. Phaedo had said to Echecrates: "You know [her]." Would Plato have given those words to Phaedo were there not some history behind them that ensured that we, the readers of his dialogues, knew the name of Socrates's wife too? Perhaps, but given the infrequency of fictional characters in his work more likely not.

We will never really know who Xanthippe was, why Socrates married her, what words she spoke, whether she tossed that bucket of water on Socrates's head, or whether she sat with Socrates on the night before he drank the poison hemlock. But we do know that she demanded enough attention from those writing about Socrates that they felt comfortable mentioning her by name and not just ignoring her, whether it was to create a foil for the idealized Socratic figure, to express misogyny about women who could never rise to the level of the philosopher, or to give a deeper meaning to the philosophical texts they wrote. Plato may have used her as a representation of the body that demands attention even as he imagines the immortality of the soul, and Xenophon may have used her to shower praise on his beloved Socrates, but in each case she managed to impress her existence onto the consciousness of these thinkers. It should not surprise us that she has the reputation of a shrew if she had a forceful personality at a time when the woman least spoken of had the greatest glory. We need only think of poor Clytemnestra who tried to assert her own independence of action, driven by her anger at a husband who dared to sacrifice their child, and who has become the object not of comic ridicule, but of fear. Xanthippe is no Clytemnestra, but somewhere behind all the anecdotes and behind the bachelor Plato's acknowledgment of her existence, we may catch a glimpse not of a shrew or a spider, but of a woman who dared to speak and act in ways that forced men to "know" of her, even a foreigner such as Echechrates. If only there had been a writer like Plato, perhaps a female writer, who could have reported on the words she spoke, the actions she took, and the movements she made, and turned them into dialogues of the quality that the acolyte of her husband bequeathed to us.<sup>20</sup> Xanthippe's name will always be associated with the henpecking wife such as she appears in the writings of Nietzsche or more contemporary works like Maxwell Anderson's *Barefoot in Athens*, but this doesn't mean that she was such a person. History has bequeathed to us the Xanthippe of the mocking ancient anecdotes, the wife who becomes the caricature of the woman who cannot appreciate the brilliance of the man to whom she is bound by marriage, rather than Plato's Xanthippe, who, thinking of the pain of others, laments that Socrates's death means the end of his conversations with his friends. We are, I venture, the worse for it.

#### NOTES

1. Wikipedia also makes note of a species of an "African white-toothed shrew" with the common name "Xanthippe's shrew." Less interestingly, apparently she has also made it into the skies as a comet, according to Wikipedia.

2. There is speculation about an aristocratic background for Xanthippe: the "hippe" part of her name refers to *hippos* or horse and thereby those whose wealth enabled them to own horses. (Pericles, for example, was the son of Xanthippos.) Several works explore the relative status of the two possible wives, which one came first, what this tells us about marriage laws in Athens, and who bore Socrates's children. See Fitton 1970; Woodbury 1973; Bicknell 1974.

3. Compare the conversation between Socrates and his son told by Xenophon and discussed below, which suggests that Socrates knew just what sort of woman he chose to be his wife and perhaps welcomed the challenge she posed.

4. I think Graves is wrong here about Socrates's "antipoetic" nature, but for the sake of his argument, he presents a stern rather than the charming Socrates who appears to anyone who reads both Plato and Xenophon with a view to understanding his appeal to the young whom he was accused of corrupting.

5. In his effort to speak on Xanthippe's behalf, Graves reads the *Republic* as expressing Socrates's views with regard to the necessity of expelling the poets from the best city; he suggests that that "may have been the cause of Xanthippe's quarrel with him" and wonders whether there may have been a dialogue, unrecorded by Plato, that took place "between Socrates and an angry, unyielding poet, Xanthippe's love—in which the honours went elsewhere?" (Graves 1960, 605).

6. The following discussion of Xenophon's anecdotes has benefited significantly from the advice of an anonymous reviewer who pushed me to probe more deeply into what may be the implicit biases against strong women captured in the stories and may as well be revelatory of Xanthippe's character and her relationship with Socrates.

7. The word *thumoidos* suggests that Xanthippe—like horses (befitting her name)—is "spirited," controlled by *thumos*. In the Platonic dialogues, *thumos* along with *eros* is essential for the philosophical pursuit of truth.

8. Aristophanes's comedies, especially *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae*, illustrate the expectations of husbands who are challenged by strong women. These husbands do not welcome women's refusal to submit to conventional roles. Socrates's response to Antisthenes suggests that he, in contrast to other husbands, might appreciate a wife like the fictitious Praxagora of the *Ecclesiazusae* who easily subdues her mealy-mouthed spouse and other men with arguments for the rule of women.

9. Leo Strauss writes that Socrates behaves as an inveterate bachelor and that his relation to Xanthippe is the comic equivalent of his relation to the city (Strauss 1972, 178). The preface to his interchange with the prostitute Theodote, though, suggests that Socrates is not immune to lust. After observing her pose for an artist, Socrates comments, "We are eager to touch what we have seen, and we shall go away excited and after we depart we shall long for her" (Xenophon 1923, III.11.3). Socrates's references to Xanthippe never suggest any such excitement or longing.

10. But no more. There is no mention in the surviving texts of Aristotle of Xanthippe or of Socrates's wives.

11. See my discussion of the "shameless Socrates" in Saxonhouse 2006, *passim*, but especially chapter 5.

12. J. W. Fitton suggests that the wife nagging her timocratic husband about their meager resources in Book 8 of the *Republic* (549c-d) may be "modelled on Xanthippe" and refers us to Adams's note in Adams 1963 and D Harvey in CQ ns. (Fitton 1970, 64, n. 4).

13. We might note that when Socrates mentions that he "has endured that the things of his household have been uncared for so many years (31b)" and when he refers to his young children near the end of the *Apology* (34c), he acknowledges, but he does not mention, the existence of his wife and their mother.

14. I have considered the theoretical implications of Xanthippe's appearance in the *Phaedo* in Saxonhouse 1998. In the current article, I focus more on what the dialogue might tell us about Xanthippe.

15. In my article on this dialogue, I argue that to know Socrates as a body is to know him in the context of his family (Saxonhouse 1998). The report of Socrates's death—even to Pythagoreans such as Echebrates, those most focused on the nature of the soul and the opposition of body and soul—nevertheless entails a report of the body's existence and that bodily existence entails a relationship—sexual and more—with his wife. To know Socrates on the day of his death is to know his entanglements in the creation of new life via bodies.

16. In the *Republic*, we get the sense that Glaucon may be aware of crying babies, whence his comments about the arrangements for the children of Callipolis: "It's an easy-going kind of child-bearing for the women guardians, as you tell it" (460). We hear of Glaucon's "hunting dogs and . . . throng of noble cocks" (459a) that he breeds, but not of a wife.

17. I introduce the language of altruism here focused on specific individuals as distinct from a concern for the welfare of the community as a whole, such as Pericles extols in his Funeral Oration or Oedipus expresses when he speaks of his fatherly concern for all the inhabitants of Thebes.

18. It is amusing to note that Hugh Tredennick's translation of the *Phaedo* renders this passage "Some of Crito's servants led her away crying *hysterically*" (Plato 1993, 111; italics added.) The use of the word "hysterically" here completely misrepresents for the modern reader the traditional expression of mourning that was expected of female mourners. Plato's dialogue expresses none of the misogynist overtones of Tredennick's "hysterical."

19. Ronna Berger comments: "Plato seems to go out of his way to let us know that Socrates who is about to speak of the philosopher's desire to escape from the body is the father of a child young enough to be held in his wife's arms" (Berger 1984, 225, n.).

20. Plato, of course, did this for Aspasia in his *Menexenus*, attributing to her a female version of Pericles's funeral oration, surely not a record of her actual words but a record that captured the existence of a woman to whom men might attend, who deserved more than notice by the comic playwright.

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