COMMENTARY ON SAXONHOUSE

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It is a sign of the times that Professor Saxonhouse and I are devoting so much time and energy to writing about Xanthippe and philosophy; thirty years ago no one would have given the subject much (or indeed any) attention. We can see Xanthippe's importance somewhat more clearly now because of our own interest in women. I agree with Professor Saxonhouse that the role Xanthippe plays in Plato's *Phaedo*, although brief, is not insignificant. But I disagree with her about its nature. I will argue instead that Plato does *not* use Xanthippe's appearance to remind us of the importance in life of the body or of human sexuality. That is what she may represent to us now, and what she might have meant to Socrates in real life. But Plato brings her into his dialogue for a different purpose. Xanthippe serves as a foil to Socrates; she is emotional, while he remains calm and rational. She sees his death as a final separation; he regards death as a release and transformation.

Plato *could have* used Xanthippe to make the point Professor Saxonhouse wants him to have made, to remind us of the real and positive potential of our physical bodies. But if he did, it is curious that he does not say so more explicitly. In the dialogue he speaks only of the *disadvantages* of the soul's conjunction or *κοινωνία* with the body, not of the notion of "mutuality and community," of the union of man and wife, and the child that is the product of their union. Those ideas are imported into the discussion by Professor Saxonhouse. Professor Saxonhouse imagines that Xanthippe and Socrates' youngest son spent the night with him in prison, but all that Plato says is that Socrates' friends found Socrates released from his chains and Xanthippe "holding the young boy and sitting beside him" (*ἐχοναύτε τὸ παιδίον αὐτοῦ καὶ παρακαθημένην Phd. 60b*). Plato says nothing about physical contact between her and Socrates. Why try to argue *ex silentio* that "the absent Plato may very well [care about sexual reproduction]," even though he does not introduce any specific discussion of it into the dialogue? It is *conceivable* that by stating explicitly that he was not present during the discussion Plato means to inform his readers that he wishes to disassociate himself from Socrates' views about the separation of soul and body. But if he wished to do so, why doesn't he say so himself? *Pace* Jacob Klein, why should we assume that he means to
conceal from us his true meaning, or that he is unaware that he means what in fact he has not articulated, or that he playfully means to imply the exact opposite of what he is saying? If he had wished to assign to the sexual role of the female and the physical reality of the polis the kind of emphasis and importance that Professor Saxonhouse supposes, he could easily have done so, by giving Xanthippe a more sympathetic role to play, or by putting into the mouths of Socrates’ friends some of the arguments Professor Saxonhouse makes in her paper.

But in fact Plato allows Xanthippe to make only a cameo appearance in the dialogue. In the Phd. (or in any other of his dialogues) Plato is not talking about real women or historical events, as they actually happened. Plato does not pretend (any more than does Thucydides in his speeches, I.21.1) to offer a verbatim account of what was actually said and done on a particular historical occasion. Rather he represents what was said, or, as in the case of the Phd., what he heard had been said (he makes a point of explaining who was there, and why he and two other friends were not, Phd. 59bc). So Xanthippe in the Phd. plays a role that Plato has chosen for her, whatever she herself actually thought or did on the day of her husband’s death. Plato introduces Xanthippe into the dialogue to lend verisimilitude; she is there to remind us that, as Socrates says in the Apology, he wasn’t “born from oak or stone,” and has family and friends, like other men (34d).1 The notion that he had another wife as well, Myrto the daughter of Aristides, is a biographical fiction that derives from a theoretical (and chronologically impossible) illustration employed by Aristotle (fr. 93 Rose) to illustrate how nobility does not depend on wealth: wouldn’t Socrates have married the daughter of Aristides, even though she was impoverished?2

But in the Phd. Plato characterizes Xanthippe in a particular way; she does not behave like Diotima or Aspasia, the wise women to whom Socrates appeals in other dialogues.

When we came into the room we found that Socrates had already been released from his chains, and that Xanthippe (you know her) was holding Socrates’ child on her lap and sitting beside him. And when Xanthippe saw us she cried out (àll1)V4> and made other such statements of the type that women usually make, that “Socrates, this is the last time that your friends will speak to you and you to them.” And Socrates looked at Crito and said, “Crito, someone ought to take

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1 Rowe 1993, 118.
2 Woodbury 1991, esp. 251-52. On the basis of the Menexenus and other references to Aspasia in the dialogues (was she also identified with Diotima?), later writers inferred that she and Socrates had an erotic relationship, see Pomeroy 1994, 82 n.45.