

Taking Xanthippe's Side



Katarzyna Kasia

Chair of Culture Theory, Faculty of Management of Visual Culture, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw

Katarzyna Kasia, PhD is a philosopher, a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Warsaw, a recipient of grants from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kościuszko Foundation, a visiting scholar at Princeton University. Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Management of Visual Culture, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. A regular contributor to the weekly *Kultura Liberalna*, and a frequent political commentator in the Polish media. katarzyna.kasia@asp.waw.pl

It is pointless to go looking in textbooks of Western philosophy for any portraits of women. Especially in the early centuries, back when abstract thought, far detached from day-to-day, banal concerns, emerged unexpectedly (or perhaps necessarily) in Greece. Although its birth was patronized by the Pythia of Delphi, a woman who spoke in riddles, the voice of philosophy nevertheless remained unambiguously male. This obviously stemmed from political and societal factors, from established roles entrenched in longstanding customs, from the law, from written and unwritten rules of exclusion and privilege. Womanhood was seen as inherently imbued with the Dionysian wildness of the Bacchae, which could never be tamed, never squeezed into the confines of cool intellect. Perhaps, though we know next to nothing about it, the situation may have looked different in those parts of society where philosophy was closely entwined with religion, reason interwoven with faith, and physicality with spirituality – like among the Pythagoreans, or much later the Epicureans, who professed completely different views but also lived in multigenerational communities. However, there too, or perhaps especially there, the master, a man whose views were considered the only rightful ones, was supremely important, pointing out the correct path for his followers, male and female.

Perhaps that is why the notion of tender sensitivity is so rarely encountered in this oldest philosophy. The concepts of reason, beauty, good, truth, justice, virtue are all there, but they are all striving for a certain bronzy certainty. Even if the ancient wise men begin with a question, or like Aristotle with an apotheosis of wonderment, they very quickly join in the stream of mutually incompatible assertions, in debate, in a kind of rivalry with very high stakes indeed: the title of the wisest Greek. On the other hand, inherent in this struggle is an a priori sense of defeat, because “the wisest” in the classical era is no longer *sophos*, but at most *phileo* – *sophos*, he is not a wiseman but only a lover of wisdom. As Giorgio Colli wrote: “It was Plato who first used the name philosophy for his meditations, for his literary deliberations inseparably linked to writing as a means of expression, the literary form of dialog. But at the same time Plato harbored admiration for the past times, the old world where in which there still lived true wise-

men.”¹ Given this, it is little wonder that learning was meant to entail remembering – or reverently conserving, unearthing with archeological care – the much more ancient wisdom. Perhaps that is why, from the outset, there was more regret in all this, than sensitivity?

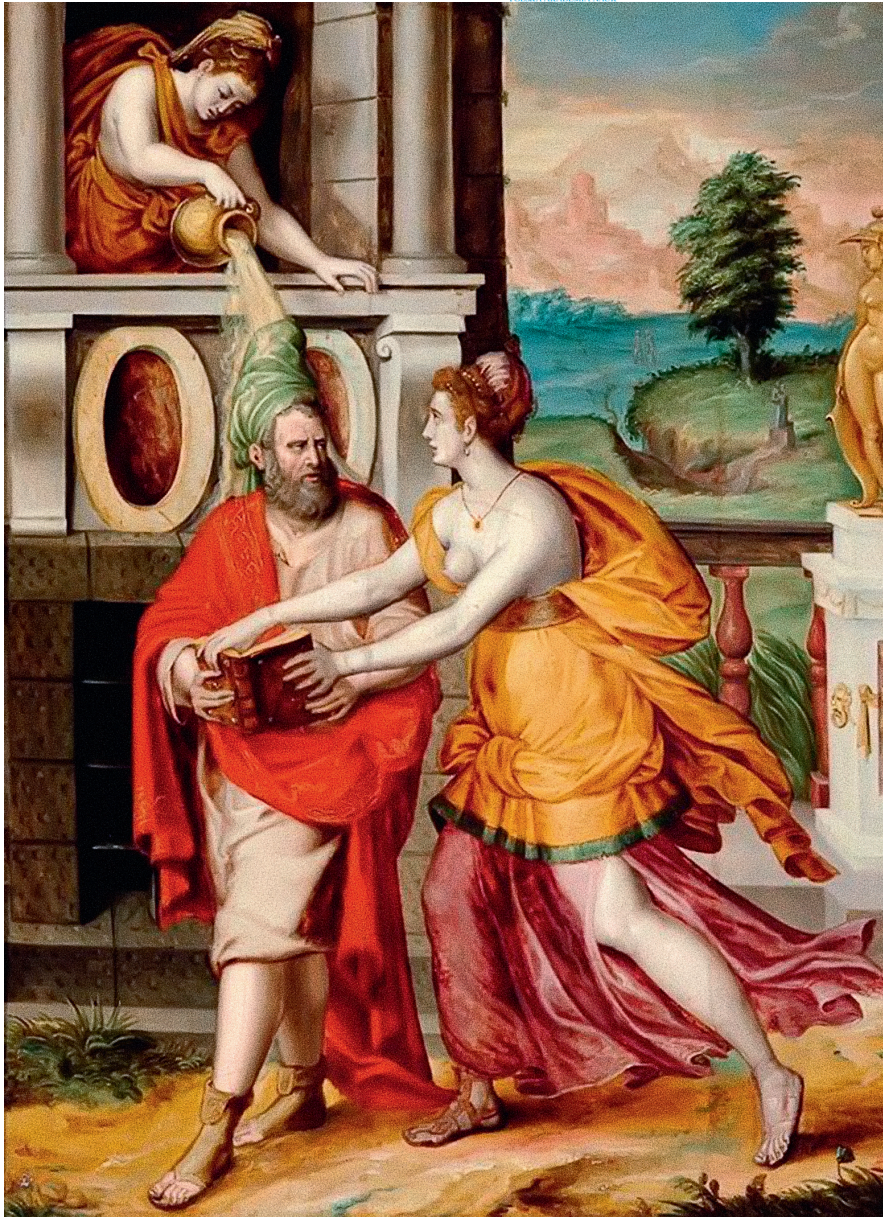
But what about Socrates? The father of ethics, who spent the whole of his tragically-ended life promoting virtue – his own and that of others? After all, he was a man of endless patience, sacrifice, and care. He would spend all his days, and sometimes even evenings and nights, in the Athenian Agora, tirelessly helping his fellow Greeks to discover the truth, strive for virtue, and become better people. The accusation I raise against him will not be Nietzschean – I do not know how things really were with Greek tragedy or if “putting life on the stage” should really be treated as an unforgivable sin. My accusation has the face of a woman, and her name is Xanthippe. Socrates’s wife went down in history as an awful and quarrelsome woman, a shrew who would rail against her husband in public, yelling at him, cursing him, urging him to show elementary care for his family, forcing him to come home, tearing him away from young people hungry for his teachings to make him provide for his own children.

When Alcibiades said to him, “The abusive temper of Xanthippe is intolerable;” “But I,” he rejoined, “am used to it, just as I should be if I were always hearing the noise of a pulley; and you yourself endure to hear geese cackling.” To which Alcibiades answered, “Yes, but they bring me eggs and goslings.” “Well,” rejoined Socrates, “and Xanthippe brings me children.”²

Xanthippe brought him children. Pause here for a moment and try to interpret this sentence. Regardless of how we look at it, there is no recognition, no sense of tenderness there – instead, what we find in this sentence is a vast expanse of contempt. And this may be the biggest grudge I hold against Socrates: it

¹ Giorgio Colli, *La nascita della filosofia*, Milan, 1975, trans. this fragment Daniel J. Sax.

² Diogenes Laërtius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge 1915.



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Luca Penni,
Socrates and Xanthippe,
 around 1550, Royal Castle
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was his fault that disregard would be confused with tenderness for centuries, or even millennia. Barely anyone, though there were fortunately such cases, took Xanthippe so seriously as to think for a moment about her, her life, her daily struggle, her humiliation, and her loneliness. In the final act of this story, the wise and good admirer of virtue (which is truth) and truth (which is virtue) was sentenced to death, and although he could easily avoid it, he decided to die for principles as decided by the court. Did anyone think about Xanthippe while sobbing over *The Apology of Socrates and Phaedo*? About her being left alone with everything: a home, children, the controversial legacy of her husband and his legend? We may think of this gesture as the ultimate perpetuation of priorities and stereotypes, the complete shattering of any hope for tender, interpersonal sensitivity.

Limited space here prevents me from elaborating further on the thesis that male Western philosophy very often lacks a sense of tenderness. Perhaps it has been too unilateral, too machist from its very begin-

ning. Two thousand years of the dominance of Christian thought, especially in the Catholic Church's version, have helped to perpetuate these trends. The only eruption of tenderness in the darkness of patriarchy came with the letters written to Abelard by Heloise, who showed in a dramatic way the price that must be paid for tenderness in the ultimate *nihil sibi reservavit* (Latin for "keeping nothing to oneself"). Of course, there were other such swallows in history, but none of them made a summer, so to speak. The nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries were a period of grand transformations, bringing a vindication of weakness, tenderness, doubt, multifaceted thought. That said, all these things are easier to find in essays than in major treatises.

Despite the great work done to make the voice of women in philosophy heard loud and clear, the underlying sin remains that of disregard. Unless and until we understand Xanthippe, appreciate her, and cry over her fate, a time of wisewomen, of tender female narrators, will never have any chance to arrive. ■