

Essay Award Winner 2000

"Washerwomen and Whoremongers: The Personal Journal of Xanthippe"

by Murrielle Gaetane Michaud

Don't get me wrong - I love my kids. But the responsibilities of motherhood are becoming more taxing each day. Why I ever listened to Pericles when he asked the women of Athens to have more children (1), I'll never know. What was I thinking? The boys (2) are getting quite out of hand, and their father is never home to reprimand them for their behaviour. Yesterday, while passing through the marketplace on my way to the stream to wash some linen, I caught our oldest son Lamprocles carving "Euripides' mother is a vegetable-monger (3)" on the wall just below that beautiful new temple to Athena (4). (They ought to show a little more respect - I modelled for one of the sculptures on the metope! (5)) By the grace of Pallas Athena, where he developed such a bad attitude toward poets, and the gods, I will never know, but I suspect this is all because of his father. Naturally, I was loathe to punish the little charybdis (6), since one day I may be in his care and he may see fit to discipline me or force me to marry some old goat, who smells like the dregs of the wine cup. What with his father being so much older than I, it is certain that he will eventually be my guardian. So I must be kind to him in the hope he will return the favour to me in my golden years (7). Ha! My golden years - if I should live that long - I've been working so hard to make ends meet that my sandals are worn clean through. I've been taking in other people's laundry to try and make a couple of extra drachma, and all my darling husband can do is praise me for my ability to manage the oikos (8). He cannot be shamed into getting a job. Instead he goes out and makes big speeches to his friends about how a woman should work hard. Other men now quote his "wisdom" on this matter. If I hear one more man say, "The wife who masters the science of economics has so greatly improved herself that she then has a masculine mind," (9) I shall go straight to the source and short-sheet his tunic.

Being poor is a unique problem when your husband is famous but you don't have two oboloi to rub together. Socrates had a good inheritance, but he spent most of it on Hoplite (10) armour before I was even born. (How could anyone with military training become such a lazy mule?) Then when we were married, I brought a decent dowry with me, but that's all gone. I can't even blame it on him. Since he loathes financial affairs, I was the one who spent all the money to maintain the oikos and raise the boys. The law says the husband is supposed to maintain his wife's dowry, (11) but he didn't spend it, so he's not responsible. I have no one to blame but myself.

I've been thinking that maybe I just need a break from all this work and strife. I sure could use a few days off - maybe I could find a way to afford a few days away at the Thesmophoria (12) this fall. It would be nice to get my frustrations out of my system and be away from the Socrates and the boys for a few days... Thesmophoria, take me away!

Oh my - the day is wearing on. I had better get down to Alcibiades' (13) place and pick up that load of woollens for washing. He never tips. I'm thinking I might just let his

perizoma (14) shrink in the sun. He deserves it. There's nothing like having your perizoma ride up on you in the heat of battle. I hope Hipparettea (15) gets a divorce from that prostitute-chasing degenerate soon.

Taking in washing isn't the most dignified thing for a woman to do, but at least I'm not a whoremonger or a vegetable-monger.

Today I talked to Socrates about attending the Thesmophoria. He shrugged his shoulders and told me that if I wanted to go, I should go. I told him that we didn't have enough money. He said, "Well, then, I suppose you won't be going." I said, "If you would get a job, we could afford to do a lot of things around here - and I wouldn't have to take in other people's washing to make ends meet." He complimented me on my resourcefulness at making money, and told me that I had been doing a wonderful job managing the modest inheritance he had received from his family (16). I told him it wasn't enough money to keep the family going. I don't understand why he refuses to get a job. He's a qualified stone cutter (17) and the Periclean public building program has been extended. (Thank Zeus for the Delian League! (18)) Why, there are temples going up all over town (19)! Or, with all that pontificating he does at the agora, he could be a teacher. I asked him why he doesn't charge money to teach. Well, you'd think I'd asked him to throw his mother's corpse to the dogs (20)! He became red in the face, telling me that the only people who charge money for teaching are the sophists, and that he is not, nor will he ever be, one of them. He said they were "morally subversive" and a danger to the people of Athens because they disparage the gods (21). He talks as if he's so pious - the only religious experience he likes to talk about is the fact that Apollo said that there was "no one wiser" than he at the oracle at Delphi. I wonder if that's true. He sure doesn't mind reminding me of that prophecy whenever I disagree with him. Anyway, then I asked him how he felt about pursuing a political career - he's always out in the marketplace, talking to people - everyone knows him. He said that he absolutely could not become a politician because he has this voice inside him called a "daimon" that would never allow him to do such a thing (22). I wonder if I have one of those voices too. Oh sure I do, it's the one that keeps me from clobbering that windbag once he's fast asleep after a hard day of talking and drinking with his cronies. One of these days that "daimon" business is going to get him into a lot of trouble.

Just when I am so angry I could scream, Socrates always comes up with a way to charm me and set things right again. He must have felt guilty about that fight we had yesterday. He took me to the City Dionysia today to see the comedies (23). I was so excited - I got all dressed up in my best outfit. I wore that gauzy saffron number (24) Aspasia (25) gave to me a few years back - Socrates loves it! And you can barely see the wine stain Aspasia got on it while playing kottabos (26) at Alcibiades' house years ago. Socrates says I look like those fancy women that attend the drinking parties he's so fond of (27). I had to put a lot of white powder on my face to cover up the tan I've developed from working outside -

it seemed to make me feel a little ill, but I think it was just from all the excitement of going to the Dionysia (28). Anyway, I surely embodied the ideal of Dorian beauty last night.

Unfortunately, the plays were foolish - and Socrates even deigned to appear in one himself. He is no Thespis, (29) I can tell you that. He appeared as himself in Ameipsias' comedy, "Connus", which won second place overall (30). Everyone cheered and laughed when he was brought on stage at the very end of the play. I think he looked stupid - he didn't even have a mask on! Because the war is on, there weren't as many plays as there usually are, which probably worked in the favour of that sand flea Aristophanes (31). What an upstart! He's only 21 years old and he thinks he's the greatest thing since red-figure pottery (32)! His play, "The Clouds" was utter nonsense. The whole story makes fun of Socrates. The actor who played him was nothing like my Socrates - Aristophanes wrote his character as though he was a money-grubbing troublemaker (33)! (Well, I wish the money-grubbing part were true!) It is no wonder that play came in last place - it is a shame that last place means 3rd prize this year. Socrates says that the play makes him appear to be a sophist and that it could lead to problems for him if people choose to believe that portrayal of his character. He said he despises the sophists as much as Aristophanes does (34). After the awards were given, Aristophanes came over to say hello to Socrates. (I can't believe that a young upstart like that would come and talk to us after that terrible play!) He said that the Archon who licensed the play forced him to change the head sophist (35) in the story from a fictional character to Socrates because of a personal vendetta. (It seems Socrates was pestering this very same Archon with questions one day at the marketplace while he was waiting to purchase some beans and a fish head.) When the arrogant little maggot finally left, Socrates said that Aristophanes was a decent fellow whom he had spent some time with, and that they quite like each other (36). It's not bad enough that Socrates is seen with those fellow layabouts Crito and Plato, not to mention that egomaniac Alcibiades, now he spends time with poets who slander him in plays full of excremental humour. Back when Pericles was running things, playwrights weren't allowed to make fun of prominent citizens (37). But that time of propriety didn't last long. Cleon once sued Aristophanes because of one of his terrible plays (38), though the dim-wits in the Dikasteria (39) wrongfully allowed a shifty poet to win a law case over an upstanding military man with a long history of bravery. After that, well, there was no stopping that degenerate Aristophanes. After he wrote "The Acharnians", he turned around and penned another nasty play called "The Knights". It continued the terrible attack on Cleon.

The evening wasn't a complete loss. We won the door prize for attendance and took home a lovely chunk of goat's cheese with some laurel leaves stuck in it. This means I won't have to take in any laundry tomorrow, and I already know what we'll be having for supper!

It appears that things are heating up in the war with those hicks, the Spartans. You would think they had had enough after our fearless leader Cleon, under the guidance of Athena,

pummelled those Spartans at Pylos (40). I think we've really got them on the run now. The war will be over soon and we will all have big, strong, Spartan slaves to milk our goats and wash our chitons. Thucydides, that great cry-baby, now calls Cleon "the most violent of the citizens" (41). I think he just suffers from sour grapes because he can barely defend Amphipolis in his capacity as general (42).

I went down to the stream to wash a few things of my own out and catch up on the latest gossip with the slave girls from town (43). They told me that Pythagoras' house had been burned down overnight (44). Well, I said, nobody likes a godless know-it-all. Crito's slave girl said, "That's right - your husband had better watch his step too." I asked her just what she meant by that, and she just laughed and walked away. The impudence! I shall make certain that she is punished I hurried home to find Socrates "resting his eyes" after a long day of being a gadfly. I woke him and told him what Crito's slave had said. He explained a few things to me. It seems that everything is changing around here. Ever since Pericles invited those "natural thinkers" (45) to Athens, people have been getting steamed about these new ideas they brought with them which mock our gods. Protagoras' house was burned down because he opened a sophist school in the city (46). And the people of Athens have grown to hate sophists. I didn't even know what sophists were until today. And I had no idea that people hated them so much. I think I hate them too. Socrates explained to me that some people actually believed that stupid play by Aristophanes, and thought that it was based in truth (47). People are talking about it all over town, claiming that Socrates is a godless atheist. They're saying that his impertinence to the gods has caused the war to go on for the past eight years (48). Not only that, but he's being blamed for that plague at the beginning of the war, the failure of that stupid Sicilian expedition, and the loss of radical democracy (49). I know he's not crazy about radical democracy, but that's only because he thinks the leaders aren't always fair (50). It's all the fault of that Gorgias of Leontini (51) - he started it all with his "Rhetoric" classes! I'm surprised his house hasn't been burned to the ground, too! Now lots of people are questioning the gods and their stories. It's not right - and Socrates is being blamed for the whole thing!

That tears it! I'm feeling sorry for Socrates because half the city hates him right now, and then I find out about the other woman in his life! I think I'm pretty open minded about things, but this time he's gone too far! I didn't say anything about the hetairai that he messes around with at those symposia. I looked the other way when he had young boys around. But this is the last straw! He's been flirting with some woman named Myrto and he came home to tell me he's been thinking about having children with her (52) - just like his friend Euripides (53)! He never spends any time with me, he won't get a job, and now he wants a second wife. Well, if he thinks I'm taking in more washing to feed his new girlfriend and those extra kids he wants to have, he's the stupidest gadfly in town! That's it! I'm going over to Aspasia's place for a few days. Things will fall apart around this place pretty quickly without me. I don't care. He can drink hemlock for all I care...

Notes and bibliography:

1. Pericles made a speech in 430 BCE asking women to have more children so a large pool of conscriptable young men would be available for future wars (Pomeroy, 66).
2. Xanthippe and Socrates had three sons, named, from eldest to youngest, Lamprocles, Sophroniscus (after Socrates' father), and Menexenus (Anderson).
3. The mother of Euripides the poet was in fact a vegetable seller. Only a very poor woman would be out selling produce in the Acropolis of Classical Athens (Pomeroy, 105).
4. The Parthenon was completed in 432 BCE (Hornblower, 1116).
5. The east frieze of the Parthenon features a Panathenaic procession dedicated to Athena. It displays women with baskets of gifts for Athena (Fantham, 84).
6. The Charybdis was a huge monster in Homeric epic, which had twelve feet, six heads, and big, pointy teeth. It lurked in a cave and ate sea creatures and unwary sailors (Odyssey, book 12, line 85).
7. In Classical Athens, a woman who was widowed was returned back to the eldest male kinsmen, along with the remains of her dowry. If a widow's father were dead, and the deceased husband's family all dead, it is likely that she would become the responsibility of her sons (Pomeroy, 61).
8. The oikos is the household, the management of which is the responsibility of a classical Athenian wife (Pomeroy, 73).
9. Socrates, in "Oeconomicus" by Xenophon, 9-10.1 (Ibid.).
10. The Hoplites were Greek soldiers who used a revolutionary type of phalanx warfare in battle. Socrates was a hoplite briefly – it is posited that he developed a great deal of his thought on virtue and the good life during his service in the army (Anderson).
11. The law stated that the husband must maintain his wife's dowry and use it to support her (Pomeroy, 63).
12. The Thesmophoria was a three-day festival honouring the goddess Demeter. It was held in the autumn before sowing time, and was a highly secretive ceremony for women only (Pomeroy, 77-78 & Finnegan, 143-144).
13. An Athenian politician and general who was raised by Pericles and tutored by Socrates. He enjoyed a brilliant military career in the Peloponnesian War, and died at the hands of mercenaries on behalf of the Thirty Tyrants (Radice, 53).

14. Underwear (Hornblower, 497).

15. There are only three instances of women ever attempting to get a divorce in the ancient world; the most daring was that of Hipparettea. Hipparettea, wife of Alcibiades, left him for bringing prostitutes to their home. She was the only woman to ever attempt to get a divorce on her own. When she went to register her divorce at the tribunal, Alcibiades appeared and physically carried her home. She remained married to him until his death (Pomeroy, 90).

16. Xanthippe did in fact make do with Socrates' small inheritance (Leon, 187).

17. Anderson.

18. Funds from the Delian League (an alliance of Greek states, formed to face the threat of invading Persians) were collected to maintain the league, but in 454 when the headquarters was moved to Athens from the Isle of Delos, Pericles began re-routing funds to finance his Athenian building program (Moscovich).

19. The building program begun by Pericles in the 440s and 430s was still going strong after his death in 429 BCE from the plague (Hornblower, 1139, Radice, 189).

20. An important aspect of Ancient Greek life was the proper inhumation of family members. To throw the body of a family member to the dogs would be considered the greatest blasphemy (Hornblower, 433). Also, even in war, the bodies of men were returned to their families when possible (See "Iliad", Book XXII, 301-321 ff.).

21. Sophists were philosophers who were interested in the pursuit of "inquiry into nature", and techniques of persuasion in argument. They often charged large fees to teach their disciplines. They were viewed suspiciously by the conservative people of Athens for their naturalistic views on religion and morals, and for their deceptive techniques in rhetoric – concepts that young people seemed to embrace while casting aside the old tenets of social, moral, and religious life in Classical Athens (Honderich, 839-840).

22. Carr.

23. After much debate over whether women did or did not attend festivals, the consensus of research seems to point to the fact that women did in fact attend festivals (Pomeroy, 80).

24. Saffron coloured gauze dresses were worn by prostitutes – not usually worn by Athenian wives (Pomeroy, 83).

25. Aspasia was a hetaira, or prostitute, who rose to public prominence in Athens as the consort of Pericles. Aristophanes said (perhaps not entirely in jest) she was the one who started the Peloponnesian War, not Pericles (Pomeroy, 89).

26. Kottabos, was a game played at parties, where the dregs of wine in the bottom of a cup are flicked at a target (Fantham, 116).
27. Hetairai were often present at symposiums which were otherwise exclusively male. Decent female Athenian wives never attended these banquets and parties (Fantham, 116).
28. It was fashionable for women to powder their faces with a white cosmetic made from lead. The whiteness of a woman's face was considered attractive because it proved their husbands were so rich that they did not have to work outside. Therefore, a wealthy woman would have a pale skin tone from remaining indoors, hidden from the tanning rays of the sun (Pomeroy, 83).
29. Believed to have invented tragedy and added speech to what previously were only choral performances. Our modern word thespian, meaning actor, comes from this name (Hornblower, 1510).
30. Marianetti, 112.
31. Because of the Peloponnesian War, in 432 BCE, only three comedies were staged instead of the regular five (Aristophanes/Bailey, 5).
32. Red Figure pottery was a recent development in the painting and firing of Greek pottery. This style began circa 525 BCE (Hornblower, 1236).
33. Indeed, the character of Socrates in "The Clouds" has been proven to be nothing like the real man (Aristophanes/Bailey, 22).
34. Bailey/Aristophanes, 16.
35. It appears that the Archon who did in fact license the play may have forced a change in the role of the head sophist to coincide with his personal views against the new philosophers who were challenging the traditional Athenian religion, morality, and values (Aristophanes/Bailey, 8).
36. In fact, Socrates and Aristophanes were friends. They would often be the only two awake and sober at the end of a long banquet (Marianetti, 108).
37. Pericles instituted a ban against plays that attacked public persons. It was short-lived (Crane, 12.2.6).
38. Cleon and Aristophanes endured a legal and political battle that lasted for four years. Cleon fought from his end through repeated legal actions, and Aristophanes fought back with constant personal attacks in his plays (esp. "The Knights" in 424 BCE) (Crane, trm ov 12.2.6).

39. The popular court which presided over public actions. These were presided over by approximately 6,000 jurors and between 201 and 601 judges (Hornblower, 452).
40. It was the first time Spartan soldiers had ever surrendered in war. As a result, the Spartan leaders offered peace in exchange for the captured soldiers. Cleon advocated that the Athenian assembly refuse this offer of peace. They did (Crane, Perseus, trm ov 12.1.7).
41. Thucydides' "Histories", 3.36.6
42. Thucydides was a strategoi during the Peloponnesian War. He lost a battle to Brasidas, which led to his exile in 424 BCE (Hornblower, 1517).
43. Poor women exchanged gossip with slaves and prostitutes at a fountain or stream where clothes were washed (Ehrenberg, 1962: 401).
44. Marianetti, 129.
45. As part of the vast growth of Athens during the classical period, Pericles invited Herodotus, Protagoras, and Anaxagoras to bring their new ideas to Athens. They contributed to the Athenian "Enlightenment" which challenged traditional concepts of religion with emerging science (Pomeroy, 17).
46. Aristophanes/Bailey, 9.
47. In Plato's "Apology", Socrates complains that "The Clouds" prejudiced his fellow Athenians against him, which led to his prosecution and ultimately his death (Marianetti, 108).
48. Common people had confused Socrates with the sophists (though he was not one of them), and Athenians began to blame him for bad fortune, especially the prolonged Peloponnesian War (Marianetti, 118).
49. See previous (Marianetti, 199-120).
50. Socrates was critical of democratic government because he thought that public opinion was based in ignorance, and he believed in the philosopher king ideal for leaders – that they have no vested interest in governing and be intellectuals and decision-makers (Carr).
51. Gorgias was probably the first teacher of rhetoric – brought to Athens by Pericles at the beginning of this period of "new thought". Other "new philosophers" who were challenging the traditional myths of nature and cosmogony were the pioneers of natural science (Aristophanes/Bailey, 8).

52. Myrto was Socrates' second wife. They had two sons together who were still small children in 399BCE, the year of his death. It is alleged that the second marriage occurred so that legal citizen offspring would be available for conscription in times of war (Pomeroy, 67).

53. Euripides also had a second wife. Both marriages were alleged to have occurred so that legal citizen offspring would be available for conscription in future wars (Pomeroy, 67).

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