

Everyone would agree that knowledge of the role of women in any culture is vital to an understanding of it. For ancient Greece, however, our knowledge is sadly incomplete, and competent scholars have reached very different conclusions. Strangely enough the greatest disagreement is about the role of women in the period that is otherwise best known, namely, the Periclean age at Athens.

The description which is most widely accepted is summarized in the Oxford Classical Dictionary: "After 500 B.C. the Athenians adopted Ionian ideas of womanhood, and the whole structure of Athenian social life was arranged for men's sole benefit. No education was thought necessary for girls, a marriage was arranged for them as soon as possible, and after that the less that was heard or seen of them the better. The Athenian house was small, dark, and uncomfortable; but women spent most of their time indoors, for nearly all forms of outdoor recreation were closed against them." According to this view Athenian women spent most of their lives in "Oriental seclusion", behind locked doors in separate quarters.

While this view has been and still is held by many scholars, dissent has been strongly expressed. The historian A. W. Gomme, in his Essays in History and Literature, suggested good reason for scepticism, and H. D. F. Kitto, in The Greeks, discusses the problem at length, giving detailed arguments for rejecting the dominant view. Since Kitto's book is so generally available, his arguments need not be repeated here; we may, however, wonder why the disagreement exists.

The chief reason is of course the scanty evidence: there is simply nothing available from the period that resembles modern sociological studies, and literature of the Periclean age tells us little indeed about the subject. Given the lack of full and reliable accounts of the role of women in Periclean Athens, scholars have tended to rely heavily on a study by Xenophon entitled Oeconomicus, or Household Management. Here we find an account by an Athenian husband named Ischomachus of his method of training his young wife. No one could read this account and suppose for a moment that Ischomachus thought of his wife as being in any real sense his equal. His assumption of male superiority is clear, and scholars often take his views to be typical of Athenians of his age.

A recent editor of the Oeconomicus, however, suggests that perhaps the picture of the pompous and arrogant husband is intended not as one of a typical Athenian, but as a caricature. Leo Strauss points out that Ischomachus is an unusual name, and that only one historical figure of that name is known. What happened to the marriage of the historical Ischomachus was well publicized, for the tale was a scandalous one. Perhaps, then, Xenophon intended his readers to identify his husband-figure with the actual man of the same name, and to contrast the picture of his modest and obedient young wife with her later career.

If the identification of Xenophon's Ischomachus with his historical namesake is accepted, then his boastful pride in the effectiveness of his methods of training his demure bride can only be a subject for scorn. The historical wife had a daughter who grew up to marry an aristocrat named Callias. Callias proceeded to fall in love with his mother-in-law, and for a time kept both his wife and her mother in his house, until the wife rebelled, tried to hang herself, and then ran away. The mother was later rejected by Callias, although she had borne a son who was eventually recognized by Callias as his own. Such was the scandalous career of the young wife so carefully schooled in obedience by her male chauvinist husband. The conclusion, then, is that if Xenophon's figure and the historical one are identical, his attitudes towards his child-bride are hardly to be recommended as ideal or taken as typical, and scholars who see Ischomachus as a typical Athenian are mistaken.