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**Ischomachus the Model Husband? A Moderately Ironic Reading of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus***

Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* is usually considered a treatise on household management masquerading as a Socratic dialogue (Pomeroy). But for others the reverse is true (Strauss and the Straussians; see also Mackenzie and Nails in *EMC* 1985, Too's review of Pomeroy in *CR* 1995, and the less orthodox Straussian Stevens). How one comes down on this issue will obviously affect one's evaluation of Ischomachus' relationship with his wife, and of Xenophon as a Socratic writer. I argue that the *Oeconomicus* is both Socratic and economic, both didactic and ironic. Xenophon chose Ischomachus because both his virtues and his vices have much to teach Critobulus, Socrates' immediate interlocutor, and Xenophon's readers.

Our Ischomachus is probably the man whose wife went on to become the Chrysilla who would marry and bear a son to her son-in-law Callias, driving her daughter to attempt suicide (Andocides 1.124-127). There may be evidence for this in *Oeconomicus* itself. Callias would fall for Chrysilla again when she was "an old battleaxe" (Andocides 1.127); Ischomachus promises his wife that she can maintain her status even in old age (*Oec.* 7.20). The scandals which would beset Chrysilla and her children may shed light on Ischomachus' otherwise odd failure to say much about children to the wife he had married in large part for the sake of children. There are other ironies. Ischomachus hardly shares Socrates' understanding of property as that one knows how to use. Critobulus, in fact, is evidently already rich enough in conventional terms: he needs another sort of help. But we ultimately learn that Ischomachus farms not because farming is noble, but to make money (*Oec.* 20.22-29), and that leading men, the skill which had earlier seemed to dignify *oikonomike*, requires, unlike farming, education and a divine nature (21.11-12). Compare the reversals at the end of *Cyropaedia* and *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians*. Xenophon can, like Plato, choose interlocutors who are ironically unsuited to the virtues they purportedly illustrate, as are Callias and Autolycus, whose relationship is idealized in Xenophon's *Symposium* but ridiculed in Eupolis' *Autolycus*.

But most ironic readings go too far. Strauss argues that the *Oeconomicus* ultimately ridicules the conventional values Ischomachus represents. Particularly ridiculous is Ischomachus' attempt to educate his wife, which is as absurd as the rule of women in Aristophanes or the female guardians of the *Republic*. Stevens is more moderate, but he too finds little of value in what Ischomachus had to teach. Yet there are numerous passages in the *Oeconomicus* which appear to be straightforwardly didactic accounts of matters Xenophon treats similarly in other works. It seems equally ridiculous, then, to write off all apparent didactic elements in the *Oeconomicus* by reducing them to pabulum for the unphilosophical many.

The ironist need not be saying the *opposite* of what he appears to be saying; he may be saying something *other* than what he appears to be saying or something in *addition* to what he appears to be saying. Thus Ischomachus is not simply a negative example but a limited one. Why use this Ischomachus? Rather than making Xenophon a Straussian

esotericist, consider him an apologist who also believed, as a good Socratic, that writing inspired by Socrates should inspire the active involvement which irony demands.

What would Xenophon's Socrates himself say about how husbands and wives? In Aeschines' *Aspasia*, Socrates recounted a session of marriage counseling Aspasia once conducted with Xenophon and his wife. Xenophon alludes to this by having Socrates make a promise, never fulfilled, to have Aspasia instruct Critobulus about marriage (*Oec.* 3.14). Both Xenophon and his wife are led to agree that if they are to be loved they must strive to be virtuous (*SSR VI A 70*). Note the connection between eros and virtue (Ehlers), and the symmetry between husband and wife.

Ischomachus does tell his wife that she should work to make herself virtuous in soul and beautiful in body. He even notes that both husband and wife should honestly present themselves, sans cosmetics (compare Aspasia as quoted at *Mem.* 2.6.36). But Ischomachus shows little awareness that he himself should work to make himself virtuous. Nor is there much hint of the eros that ought to unite husband and wife. And Ischomachus' notion of his wife's virtue is limited to practical matters. Chrysilla seems to have known how to get her way, practically speaking; but her skill hardly ruled out moral scandal. By the terms of the *Oeconomicus*, though, it is not Chrysilla but Ischomachus who is responsible for her vice (3.11). The irony thus is not a misogynistic attack on the dangers lurking even within the ideal wife, but a critique of her teacher, whose failure to educate his wife in virtue is meant to show Critobulus, and Xenophon's readers, that they need the moralist Socrates at least as much as the economist Ischomachus.

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