

Xenophon famously challenged the East~West polarity that infused the thinking of his fifth-to-fourth-century B.C. Athenian contemporaries in selecting the Achaemenid king Cyrus the Elder as the subject of his most important study of ideal leadership, the *Cyropaedia*. Less recognized is the equally radical challenge to traditional gender stereotypes that his literary portraits of women represent. In this paper I examine Xenophon's destabilizing of gender polarities in the context of his depiction of Eastern women, exposing how this gender destabilization in the Eastern context goes hand-in-hand with—and perhaps promoted—his problematizing of the associated Greek binary conceptions of East~West and Slave~Free.

First I show how in Xenophon's portrayals of Eastern women, imaginary and historical, the frustrated expectations of the powerful male in the text parallel those provoked in his Greek readers, whose assumptions are likewise put to the test. Xenophon's initial construction of the 'Eastern Feminine' in the person of the captive Panthea of Susa—who is viewed by her guard Araspas as a gorgeous sexual object, and who bears intertextual associations with Helen of Troy—breaks down as she instead proves her worth to Cyrus as a valuable benefactor and friend. In like fashion Mania frustrates Pharnabazus' expectations by winning his respect (and belying the irrational associations of her name: Cartledge 2003), proving an exemplary friend and sub-satrap—better in fact than her male counterparts.

Second I contend that a similar though muted vision infuses Xenophon's treatment in the Western/Greek context of the binaries of gender (in the *Oeconomicus*) and of slave versus free. In the *Symposium* he underscores the capacity of female slaves to display the qualities of ideal (male) leaders, *philia* and *andreia* along with *sophrosune*. The slave-girl's athletic feats elicit Socrates' declaration that here as elsewhere 'it is clear that the nature of women is no worse than that of men—aside from in intelligence and strength' (2.9): but even these qualifications are undermined in this context by her dextrous juggling display and the sheer physicality of her next act, as she leaps in and out of a hoop surrounded with upright swords (2.11). Xenophon brings into focus an ironic contrast between the male spectators fearing as they merely watch, and the woman confident as she actually performs, thus again staging the disparity between negative male expectations and a woman's real ability. Socrates is drawn to the conclusion that women can learn virtue: that *andreia* itself is teachable and able to be learned by females, even by a female slave—a figure the binary opposite, on two counts, of the Athenian citizen male.

Finally I reflect on the possibility that just as Xenophon had recourse to Persian models (reflected in the Darius tomb inscription) in re-writing Cyrus' death as wise king dying peacefully in his own bed (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1985), instead of meeting comeuppance on the battlefield with his head plunged into a skin of blood, so his enlightened conception of women may well have been inspired in part by elements of the Old Persian oral tradition. In that case we find in Xenophon a Classical Greek thinker who *used* Eastern traditions in inviting readers to qualify their conceptions both of the East and of the Feminine, conceptions which his personal experience on the *Anabasis* had perhaps exposed as inadequate—a striking instance, then, of a classical writer deploying Eastern sources imaginatively to challenge binaries that implicate the East.