

REVIEW

LOOKING, SEEING, AND SHOWING IN XENOPHON

Rosie Harman, *The Politics of Viewing in Xenophon's Historical Narratives*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. 231. Hardback, £85.00. ISBN 978-1-3501-5902-0.

It is difficult to imagine a Greek author for whom ‘seeing’, indeed the entire world of visual experience, is not important, and in particular the historians: one has only to think of the centrality of ‘viewing’, say, in Herodotus’ story of Candaules, his wife, and Gyges, if not already in the proem and its reference to the ‘showing forth’ (ἀπόδειξις) of his *historiē*, to say nothing of vital Herodotean concepts such as autopsy. Or, if one prefers, consider Thucydides in his proem and his words about the difficulty he has ‘viewing’ evidence from afar in time (ἐπὶ μακρότατον σκοποῦντι). With that said, though, there does seem to be something special about Xenophon and ‘viewing’. There is a noteworthy and unusual insistence on the visual throughout his work. And is it not the case that the most famous passage from his corpus is probably the sighting of the sea by the Ten Thousand (θάλαττα, θάλαττα), remembered even by the likes of James Joyce? But of course, saying that the visual holds a special place in the writing of Xenophon is one thing and substantiating the intuition quite another. This is what Rosie Harman has attempted to do in connection with what she identifies as his three major historical works: the *Hellenica*, *Anabasis*, and *Cyropaedia*. I believe that she has for the most part succeeded. *The Politics of Viewing in Xenophon's Historical Narratives* is a thoughtful book, well written and insightful.

Harman notes both in the introductory sections and throughout the book that reading Xenophon can be an unsettling experience: contradictions or inconsistencies abound. Leaders, often Persians (the two Cyruses), seem to be set up for us as readers as model leaders, and yet we see them also be deceptive and manipulative. Spartans are characterised as panhellenic champions and yet are also seen as egregiously self-interested and oppressive against other Greeks. Harman does not seek to smooth away these inconsistencies, rather, she lets them persist (more on this below). It is in connection with these discontinuities of presentation that Harman deploys her analysis of the visual in Xenophon.

Harman is very good at unpacking scenes of marked visual representation in Xenophon; actually, in Herodotus and Thucydides too in the introductory sections of the book. Harman reads the Candaules episode well, noting not only the accent on the visual, but specifically the idea of transgression: seeing what one is not meant to see. She also stresses the importance of power relations and the seen. As for Thucydides, Harman notes how he emphasises appropriate or accurate viewing versus inappropriate or inaccurate viewing: the Athenians are fatally impressed by the display of Alcibiades; their doubts regarding the Sicilian expedition are suddenly swept away by the spectacle of their fleet.

But of course Harman's topic is Xenophon's treatment of the visual, specifically in his historical works (she does treat his other works briefly in the introduction of her book). She examines the *Hellenica* by considering the many spectacles found in it from several different angles: a military action or example of signal leadership inspires admiration and perhaps even identification in the reader, and yet what is seen by the reader turns out to be open to interpretation—the apparently unmediated and obvious spectacle is shown to be something different for different audiences. Episodes of Spartan success are admirable, but after Leuctra, seem to show less confidence; Persians are seen as culturally inferior, and yet in the process we are also shown Spartans as oppressing fellow Greeks.

Similar contradictions are brought out in Harman's treatment of the *Anabasis*. Panhellenic themes can be endorsed by passages of heightened visual detail, even expressed through the gaze of an embedded, non-Greek viewer of spectacle, and yet fracturing also appears between leader and led and between the different ethnicities that made up the Ten Thousand. Likewise, in the *Cyropaedia*, the reader is often clearly meant to identify with Cyrus and the Persians, and yet also to be alienated by the experience of witnessing their activities.

Important questions lurk behind the many admirable close readings that we find throughout. To Harman's credit, she addresses them in the first pages of the book. Right from the start, given that scenes of spectacle either contain within them elements that can be seen as contradictory, or that they can be seen to destabilise the narrative in which they are found, it is important to ask whether Xenophon meant for these passages to be interpreted as either internally inconsistent or even at odds within the larger framework of the text: if someone looking at Agesilaus' camp at Ephesus would be made so full of hope (*Hell.* 3.4.18; cf. *Ages.* 1.27), why is Agesilaus' subsequent campaigning in Asia so disappointing? It could be said in response that, well, that is because that is what really happened. But if that is the case, why present the Spartan army training at Ephesus in such a golden light in the first place then? Harman does not believe that we can reconstruct Xenophon's intentions in presenting his many scenes of spectacle that seem so inconsistent, sometimes with their

own details, and often with the general trajectory of the narratives of which they are a part.

Instead of attempting to reconstruct Xenophon's intentions Harman treats Xenophon's texts as themselves social products, historical artifacts that carry within them these highly visual scenes that seem to be so often at odds with other features of the text in which they are found. Hence, she can conclude quite persuasively, 'far from offering a unified, dominant and didactic vision of the world, Xenophon's historical narratives open up and engage the reader in the contradictions of their world ... Xenophon's writing creates for the reader a *praxis* of political response to the historical conditions of Xenophon's own time' (161).

Harman's approach is a reasonable and legitimate one. There are, though, potential difficulties with her interpretation of at least some passages in Xenophon's corpus, once we remove the attempt to determine why Xenophon may have included his visually elaborate scene. Consider the end of the *Hellenica* (7.5.26–7). There, Xenophon famously contrasts the expectation that the second battle of Mantinea would prove decisive in determining the balance of power in the Greek world with the reality that it in fact settled nothing. To my understanding, Xenophon is here precisely inviting the reader, through very vivid description, to imagine with him counterfactual history: the battle should have been decisive, but it turned out not to be. Here the intention of Xenophon seems to me to be clear: appearances were deceptive. This battle description and its results are not in this case an artifact of reporting with inconsistency or contradictory material embedded within it of which Xenophon was perhaps unaware. Xenophon himself is telling us as readers how to interpret the visual here; his authorial stance is not that different from Thucydides' on the mistaken views of the Athenians. Surely to understand this passage we have to take into account Xenophon's words about how to see the battle and its results in the right light. Harman treats this passage well in her discussion of it, but she does not really take up the issue of how Xenophon is *steering* the reader toward a specific interpretation of the spectacle: that, in fact we all (that is, all Greeks) failed to see that Mantinea did not bring about a new ordering of the Greek world (cf. 66–7).

Or consider also another passage that Harman looks at briefly towards the start of the book: *Oec.* 3.9 (pp. 22–3). In the exchange between Ischomachus and Socrates on viewing, it seems to me that Xenophon was trying to make the point that there is a difference between spectating (and enjoying) a sight versus watching a scene or action so as not to be ignorant, that is, to learn in some deeper sense from what one sees. I think that we can conclude from this passage that Xenophon believed that there was a right way and a wrong way to take in the visual. And if that is the case, then I think we have also to believe that when we encounter inaccurate viewing or viewing that misleads or overwhelms in Xenophon's text, that is what he wants us as readers to note.

And so we must again confront the issue of his intention in writing that scene of viewing in the way he has. Another way to say the same thing is to take Xenophon at his word when he imagines a viewer taking in with him the lesson of some paradigmatic scene such as Teleutias' departure from his men, or Agesilaus' camp at Ephesus: we are supposed to interpret the scene in the way Xenophon is encouraging us to read it; the cues are there, and hence also his intention.

In cases like these, Harman has helped me see a question that she feels we cannot answer, and that seems fair. It needs to be said most emphatically that Harman has written a very important and thoughtful book. For one thing, it quite rightly privileges discussion of the visual in Xenophon: no other ancient Greek historian writes with his eye on the visual more than he, and Harman understands this. Her readings of specific passages are often deeply insightful. If a fair test of the importance of any book about an ancient author is do we know more about them than we did before thanks to this treatment, the answer in this case has to be yes.

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