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[Review of: M.R. Christ (2020) Xenophon and the Athenian democracy: The education of an elite citizenry]

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Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Huitink, L. (2022). [Review of: M.R. Christ (2020) Xenophon and the Athenian democracy: The education of an elite citizenry]. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2022(4), [15].
<https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2022/2022.04.15/>

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BMCR 2022.04.15

Xenophon and the Athenian democracy: the education of an elite citizenry

Matthew R. Christ, *Xenophon and the Athenian democracy: the education of an elite citizenry*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. ix, 215. ISBN 9781108495769 \$99.99.

Review by

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Preview

How Athenian is Xenophon? Until relatively recently, the standard answer would have been, ‘not very’. The prevailing image of Xenophon, after all, was that of a reactionary Laconophile aristocrat, who spent most of his life exiled from Athens, in military service or on his estate near Elis in the Peloponnese, writing down partisan memories of his campaigns with Cyrus and Agesilaus and reminiscing about Socrates. Recent scholarship has, however, quite radically changed that image. Whatever the precise details of his exile and whereabouts at several points in his life (much remains uncertain), it has become abundantly clear that Xenophon was thoroughly plugged into the intellectual and political life of his native city.^[1] This appears, for instance, from the many connections between the subject matter, themes and imagery of Xenophon on the one hand and those of Plato and Isocrates on the other (Isocrates, as Christ reminds us [p. 5], is also said to have written an encomium on Xenophon’s son Gryllus after his death at Mantinea).^[2]

In his new book, Matthew R. Christ, departing somewhat from his earlier historically inflected work on the institutions of democratic Athens, places Xenophon still more firmly in an Athenian context, as he seeks ‘to understand Xenophon as an elite Athenian writing largely for an elite Athenian audience’ (p. 1). More specifically, Christ develops a reading of (part of) Xenophon’s corpus as an appeal to elite Athenians of his own class to abandon their assumptions of superiority based on lineage and wealth and to seek out an education that will make them worthy and effective leaders in the democratic *polis*. Xenophon, on this reading, is chiefly concerned with providing part of that education, both by shaking his elite readers out of their complacency and by instructing them concerning the values, knowledge, and practical skills they need to lead the Athenian democracy. Importantly, then, Christ’s Xenophon is less unhappy with the *dêmos* than the traditional view of him suggests. He is best seen as an “immanent” or

“internal” critic of the Athenian democracy, and not a “rejectionist” or “external” critic (p. 8): in other words, he seeks through his writings to improve rather than to overthrow the democracy.

Christ starts his discussion with Xenophon’s treatment of the Arginusae affair and the Thirty in the *Hellenica* (Chapter 1). On his reading, the former is not a story of how the unreasonable and fickle *dêmos* easily casts aside the rule of law, but rather a cautionary tale showing elite Athenians that they have an essential role to play in advising and managing the *dêmos*. Through a contrastive analysis with more pessimistic analysis of democratic decision-making in Thucydides’ Mytilenean debate, he shows that, according to Xenophon, the democracy is not inherently flawed as long as it can rely on proper leadership. Christ explains Xenophon’s indubitably dark picture of the Thirty, *not* as demonstrating the *wrong kind* of oligarchic rule (a common interpretation), but as demonstrating the elite’s failure to provide a plausible and effective alternative for the democracy *tout court* (in this respect, Christ’s Xenophon somewhat resembles the ‘Old Oligarch’, whose *Constitution of the Athenians* is preserved with Xenophon’s corpus). A major plank in his argument is the fact that Xenophon’s description of the restoration of the democracy is on the whole positive in tone.

The next three chapters focus on the image of elite leadership in the democracy, and consider Xenophon’s Socratic works, the *Memorabilia* (Chapter 2), the *Oeconomicus* (Chapter 3), and the *Symposium* (Chapter 4). Christ focuses on specific figures in each of these works. From the *Memorabilia* he singles out Socrates’ interactions with elite Athenians (e.g. Critias and Alcibiades in Book 1, Charmides in Book 2, Glaucon in Book 3, and the young Euthydemus in Book 4), arguing that the philosopher seeks to motivate and guide his interlocutors to reconcile the aristocratic ideal of becoming a *kalos kagathos* (Christ sticks with the awkward translation ‘gentleman’, and it is indeed hard to think of an alternative), a responsible citizen capable of providing the democracy with effective leadership. The message of the *Oeconomicus* is that those who, like Ischomachus, manage their own households well will both benefit personally, by becoming healthier and wealthier and so capable of sustaining an elite lifestyle, and be better citizens, able to effectively serve the city as hoplites or cavalrymen. Xenophon’s preoccupation with the proper place of elite citizens in the democratic *polis* is further developed in the *Symposium* and Socrates’ dealings with Callias and Autolycus in that dialogue, which Christ interprets as a study of how to recruit the super-wealthy to serve Athens.

Chapter 5 explores the *Hipparchicus* and *Poroi*, in which Xenophon speaks to Athenian concerns in his own voice and to some extent abandons philosophical speculation for practical, down-to-earth advice. *Poroi* has always been considered Xenophon’s most ‘Athenian’ work, as the economic reforms which he proposes in the treatise obviously have Attica in view. Christ (wisely) avoids speculation about the circumstances in which it was written – the questions whether Xenophon did or did not return to Athens towards the end of his life and whether *Poroi* betrays a bias for Euboulos have been much debated^[3] – and even simply states, without much further ado, that the economic

programme of the work is “sometimes implausible” (p. 141). Instead, his argument focuses on the form of the “pamphlet”, regarding it as a rhetorical model for how democratic *rhêtores* can argue in front of the *dêmos* and win it over for their plans.

Chapter 6, finally, turns to the only text which does not deal directly with Athens, namely the *Anabasis*. Picking out aspects of the organisation of the Ten Thousand which could be seen as specifically democratic (e.g. the use of voting, the modeling of relations between the army’s leadership and the common soldiers), as well as forensic and deliberative elements in the many speeches given by Xenophon as a character in the *Anabasis*, Christ argues that the *Anabasis* continues to display Xenophon’s interest in elite behaviour within a democracy and ‘offers his elite Athenian readers an optimistic vision of the efficacy of elite leadership of the masses’ (p. 154).

Christ’s arguments are largely convincing, elegantly made, and to the point: at 192 pages, the book is slim, but every page counts. It is, in that respect, a truly exemplary monograph. The fact that Cambridge University Press has already issued a paperback edition is perhaps an indication of the book’s readability. None the less, there are aspects of the book which could have done with a bit more elaboration to shore up or further develop the arguments. I single out three.

One small regret I had after finishing the book is that it does not do more to relate Xenophon’s teachings for instructions of elite Athenians to those of other major ‘voices’ of the fourth-century BCE, such as Plato, Isocrates, the Old Oligarch, or the funerary orations. Of course, it is unfair to criticize a book for what it does not do, but in this case one sometimes feels that part of the argument is missing: for example, given everything that has been said about the relationship between the Platonic and Xenophonic Socrates, it would have been helpful to have at least some indication of how Christ thinks Xenophon’s “not-so-anti-democratic-after-all” Socrates relates to Plato’s version of the philosopher. Still, owing to Christ’s efforts, others are now in a much better position than before to take up that line of inquiry, in an effort to integrate Christ’s positions into the wider debate about Xenophon’s relation to his contemporaries.

A second general point is that Christ’s overall thesis – that Xenophon largely wrote for an Athenian elite audience with a view to instructing them about effective democratic leadership – is somewhat reductive. For example, the firm focus on Socrates’ dealings with elite Athenians in the *Memorabilia* means that the many other conversations about effective and morally good forms of leadership in that work are mostly put to one side – but from the *Memorabilia* as a whole there arguably emerges a picture of a Socrates more interested in qualities of leadership *per se* than in the particular regime in which leaders exercise those qualities.^[4] That is, the *Memorabilia* could also be profitably read by readers who are not wedded to, or confined by, Athenian democratic principles. Similarly, the ‘Athenian’ aspects of the *Anabasis* should not be exaggerated, as there are also ways in which the organisation of the Cyreans resembles Spartan practices. Furthermore, apart from the *Anabasis*, Christ omits all the works from Xenophon’s corpus—the final five books of the *Hellenica*, the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, *Agesilaus*, *Hiero*, and the *Cyropaedia*—which do not directly deal with Athens. He

merely claims that these works, too, “can be read as, among other things, a projection and exploration of elite Athenian identity” (p. 4), but this is too vague. The phrase, “among other things” matters a great deal here, as scholars have used precisely these works to contextualize Xenophon’s Laconophilia (itself an elite Athenian pursuit), to argue for his profound interest (shared with many fourth-century thinkers) in monarchy, and to suggest that Xenophon’s oeuvre had a panhellenic appeal.^[5] I therefore prefer to read Christ’s book as making good on the somewhat weaker overall claim that an Athenian elite audience functioning in a democratic context may have profited from Xenophon’s ideas about leadership (whether or not they were always Xenophon’s primary intended audience and whether or not they may have read Xenophon for different purposes as well).

My third and final point relates to what Christ calls (p. 10) his “holistic and synthetic” approach to Xenophon’s oeuvre, which consists in tracing recurrent motifs and patterns, on the assumption that, even if Xenophon is not always entirely consistent, there are significant threads that connect his works to one another. This approach has in fact become common in Xenophonic scholarship, and certainly pays dividends.^[6] However, if one feels (as I do) that form and content cannot always be clearly or easily separated, the question arises how the approach relates to Xenophon’s astonishing generic range and inventiveness. Again, the “synthetic” approach can feel a little reductive, for instance when one gets the impression that historiographical works like the *Hellenica* and the *Anabasis* are *really* or essentially lessons in leadership and not much more. However, Christ’s book contains interesting observations which begin to point in a different direction, especially his sensitivity to the differences in form between Socratic dialogues and treatises like *Poroi* and their implications for Xenophon’s ‘message’. I wish that he had thematized the point more explicitly. But to end on a positive note: this just goes to show that careful reading of Christ’s book is handsomely repaid.

Notes

^[1] For an up-to-date view of Xenophon, see M.A. Flower (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon* (Cambridge 2017), reviewed in [BMCR 2017.10.19](#).

^[2] For Plato, see G. Danzig, D. Johnson and D. Morrison (eds.), *Plato and Xenophon: Comparative Studies* (Leiden 2018) (with [BMCR 2019.06.32](#)); for Isocrates, see E.-M. Tamiolaki (ed.), *Xenophon and Isocrates: Political Affinities and Literary Interactions* (Berlin 2018).

^[3] See D. Whitehead, *Xenophon. Poroi (Revenue-Resources)* (Oxford 2019), pp. 7-30 (and for a review, see [BMCR 2020.10.02](#)).

^[4] See now D.M. Johnson, *Xenophon’s Socratic Works* (London/New York 2021), reviewed in [BMCR 2022.02.06](#).

^[5] For Xenophon and Sparta, see now N. Humble, *Xenophon of Athens: A Socratic on Sparta* (Cambridge 2021). For fourth-century discussions of kingship, see C. Atack, *The Discourse of Kingship in Classical Greece* (London 2019), reviewed in [BMCR 2020.11.17](#).

[6] The paradigmatic example, setting the tone for much work done in the past decade, is V.J. Gray, *Xenophon's Mirror of Princes: Reading the Reflections* (Oxford 2011).