

Kings and Kingship in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*

The *Cyropaedia* is a complex work that attempts to serve several functions, possibly including that of a “mirror of princes” giving moral advice to the would-be ruler. On this view, the character of Cyrus is meant to represent a moral ideal of kingship. The problem with this assumption is that, although Cyrus treats us to several homilies on virtue, his own behavior is often at odds with his sermonizing: he continually manipulates everyone he meets, friend and foe alike, with the goal of increasing his own power and prestige. A further impediment to envisioning Cyrus as the ideal ruler is the last chapter of the book, in which Xenophon indicts the perfidy and luxury of the Persian system. It is nevertheless possible to read the *Cyropaedia* as a mirror of princes without assuming that Cyrus is a moral ideal: Xenophon was the intimate of generals and kings, and he knew only too well that leadership in an imperfect world sometimes requires a dose of *realpolitik*. The character of Cyrus may not be designed so much as a model of moral purity as of efficient administration: his various manipulations increase, not only his own power, but the strength and stability of Persia itself. This becomes even clearer when Cyrus’ behavior is compared with that of several other kings who appear in the *Cyropaedia*: the vain and hesitant Cyaxares, the self-indulgent Croesus, the disorganized Armenian king, the vicious and narcissistic king of Assyria, and the romantic but self-absorbed and irresponsible King Abradatas of Susiana. Xenophon offers us a series of vignettes of monarchy, showing how it may fare under different types of kings. His final critique of the Persian Empire is an attempt to show how even a well-organized state can decline when its fortunes are tied to the character of one man.