

Laughing in the Face of Death: Xenophon's Use of Humor in the *Anabasis* and Other Works

Scholars have noted a consistent model of good leadership pervading much of Xenophon's oeuvre where exemplars of good leadership are typically military men, an unsurprising fact as the author himself became a leader of the Ten Thousand as a young man. While scholars have examined the manifold ways in which good leadership is demonstrated by powerful people throughout Xenophon's works (Buxton 2016, Humphreys 2002), they have overlooked how Xenophon develops the use of humor as a valuable tool and significant characteristic common to successful leaders. This paper will focus on two examples of humor used by the character Xenophon in *Anabasis* 3. By contextualizing these examples within *Book 3* and by comparing them to instances in which individuals throughout some of Xenophon's other works use humor, I will demonstrate that Xenophon the author recognized humor's utility for managing the morale of subordinates, gaining their good favor, and presenting oneself as a viable leader.

Anabasis 3 finds the Greek army in disarray as they are trapped behind enemy lines with no generals. When all hope seems lost, the character of Xenophon enters the scene, a man the author describes as neither a general, a captain, nor a common soldier (3.1.4). In 3.2.3, Xenophon turns the soldiers' fear of the enemy's cavalry into a laughable disadvantage. While the soldiers assuredly knew that the horsemen offered the Persians serious tactical advantages, Xenophon's use of absurd imagery empowers them by diminishing the perceived power of the Persians.

In addition to his cavalry quip, Xenophon uses humor to deal with a dissenter, Apollonides, advocating diplomatic resolutions rather than following the militaristic plans of Xenophon (3.1.26-8). Xenophon prevents Apollonides from speaking by saying, "You amazing fellow, you have

eyes but still do not perceive, and you have ears but still do not remember.” (3.1.28). The interjection prevents Apollonides from making his argument and rehashing the problems which Xenophon is trying to mitigate. His disingenuous address of Apollonides as an “amazing fellow” belittles both the man and his argument. Xenophon then mocks him further saying he should be deprived of rule and treated as a pack animal.

Modern theories on humor and leadership are helpful in analyzing the effects of Xenophon’s humor in the *Anabasis*. Leaders can use humor as a tool to release tension in a target audience, make problems seem more manageable to the audience, and help the listeners feel safe with the source of the humor. Humorous speech also bolsters the popularity of the speaker and increases the overall persuasiveness of a given speech. All these factors align with the goals of Xenophon’s speech: managing his troops’ despondency so that they can be useful and endearing himself to the men so that they might view him as a favorable candidate for generalship. Humor also fosters a sense of superiority over the target. Xenophon’s levity takes a terrifying force and renders them as comically weak and reduces the threat of a potential rival to his authority in Apollonides (Crawford 1994).

Xenophon the character’s reliance on humor aligns him with exemplary leaders throughout Xenophon’s corpus. Huss (1999), building on his argument that Socrates’ dance in *Symposium* 2.16-19 was performed for comedic effect, develops the use of humor to talk about serious matters as characteristic of Xenophon’s *kaloi kagathoi*, citing Cyrus and Agesilaus as additional comedic characters. While Huss’ observation is apt, his scope ought to be widened. Xenophon’s characters typically wield humor effectively as demonstrative of intellectual superiority and as a tool for conveying authority to others. Twice the character of Socrates in Xenophon’s *Apology* makes light of his impending death and exhorts his comrades to take courage via playful banter (*Apol.* 23, 28).

In the *Hellenica*, Theramenes, despite facing certain death, takes a witty jab at his adversary Satyrus by manipulating that man's language against him (2.3.56). So, while Xenophon's humor in *Anabasis* 3 might garner little more than a smirk from a reader at first glance, consideration of the gravity of the scenarios in which the author Xenophon employs humor both within the *Anabasis* and without reveals humor as a serious, admirable tenet in exemplary figures as developed within the Xenophonic corpus.

Bibliography

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