

Noreen Humble  
(University of Calgary)

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Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*: fictionalities and receptions

That Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* is a fictional narrative about a historical figure, Cyrus the Elder, the founder of the Persian Empire, is not currently disputed, nor does anyone think that Xenophon himself was aiming at historical veracity. Indeed, as scholars have long observed, there are so many details which bear little resemblance to other traditions about Cyrus' life<sup>1</sup> (not least of which are invented characters and battles), and so much psychic omniscience<sup>2</sup>, that Xenophon could not possibly have expected his readers to have regarded the work as a true account of Cyrus' life. Thus while we may not all agree on precisely what he was aiming at, we all agree that it was not historical accuracy, in the modern understanding of that phrase.

In current scholarly discourse the fictionality of the *Cyropaedia* is discussed in quite diverse areas of enquiry. For example, it is front and centre in discussions about the ancient novel and its origins. Recurring points of generic contact with the novel apart from its fictionality, are, for example, the so-called romance embedded in it (the story of Panthea) and its utopian character<sup>3</sup>. Later ancient Greek novelists, it is argued, drew specifically on the romance element in it to frame their own material<sup>4</sup>.

It is also common to find the *Cyropaedia* mentioned in discussions about the origins of biography, a type of writing in which the line between fact and fiction is often blurred, particularly in the ancient world<sup>5</sup>. The basic structure of the work – a chronological presentation of Cyrus' life from boyhood to death – clearly encourages this line of thought<sup>6</sup>. Cyrus himself is certainly not a fictional character, and Xenophon does

draw on some pre-existing material about him, but the amount of fabricated material places the work closer to what we might define as “fictional biography”.

The *Cyropaedia* is also scrutinized as a didactic philosophical text, and while there might not be any agreement about Xenophon’s message – is it, for example, the presentation of a “visionary account of how a government might be organized by a true leader<sup>7</sup>”, or “a critique of political life in the classical world *tout court*<sup>8</sup>”? – it is certainly evident that in presenting his ideas in a fictional setting Xenophon is following common practice in contemporary philosophical writing, particularly the writing of his fellow-Socratics, and not just about Socrates himself as a character but, consider, for example, Plato’s mythic creations such as Myth of Er (*Republic*, 10.614a-621d).

Into whichever of these enquiries we dip, and no matter under what generic tag we want to discuss the *Cyropaedia*, a common and important element in each discussion is its fictionality. And this brief survey of contemporary discussions about the *Cyropaedia* shows also how this one aspect of the *Cyropaedia* can provoke, and be relevant to, a *multiplicity* of receptions – a testament to Xenophon’s literary creativity and experimentation.

The *Cyropaedia*’s fictionality is also read in a variety of ways in the early modern period, and though there are some points of contact with the current discussion, not surprisingly there are also a number of differences, including more direct appropriation. The only current appropriation of the work I can think of can be found in the world of business where the work has been hacked apart into sound bites as a type of mirror-for-managers<sup>9</sup>. In this essay, therefore, I want to provide an overview of three primary strands of reception of the *Cyropaedia* in the early modern period in which its fictionality plays some sort of a role. I will deal with them in roughly the chronological order that they seem to appear, with the *caveat* that with deeper digging other strands may appear and even more interconnections between the strands would indeed become evident.

### Mirrors-for-princes

The first and main receptive strand is similar to the third modern interpretative category above in that the text is viewed as didactic, i.e. as holding important lessons for rulers, and Cyrus is read as a fictional paradigm of a good ruler. Thus the work is immediately held up as an authoritative exemplar both of and in the popular genre of writing we term mirrors-for-princes<sup>10</sup>. This line of interpretation was strongly influenced by Cicero’s endorsement of the work as a leadership manual. First in a letter to Paetus (9.25) Cicero talks about how he personally found it a useful leadership model: “The *Cyropaedia*, which I have worn