XENOPHON AND THE PERSIAN KISS

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Xenophon accords a unique importance to self-restraint or self-mastery (enkrateia). It is one of the ‘pillars’ of virtue in the Memorabilia.1 Above all, it is one of the qualities indispensable in a ruler. While it is essential in several areas, such as eating, drinking, fatigue and sleep, Xenophon undoubtedly devotes most attention to mastery of sexual desire. For example, the first actual dialogue of the Memorabilia deals with this issue (1.3.8–14): Socrates faults the conduct of Critobulus, who has kissed the son of Alcibiades, and on this occasion he compares the youths’ kiss to a tarantula's bite. The Symposium develops the same theme, when Socrates comments on the attraction Critobulus feels towards Clinias: the kiss, still a biting into the soul, is defined as ‘an insatiable thing, and it produces a kind of delicious anticipation’. Socrates concludes with the necessity to refrain from kissing youths, if one wishes to ‘be temperate’ (σωφρονεῖν).2 The kiss represents a formidable danger for the enkrateia of anyone who surrenders himself to it.

Xenophon, in various works, creates scenes of avoided kissing3 that seem focused on this same moral issue, one which seemingly tends to blur the differences among his heroes, from Socrates to Agesilaus. Yet, upon closer examination, reflections on kissing vary with the narrative contexts. Xenophon notably emphasizes the custom of the Persian kiss in several scenes that bring together a Persian and a non-Persian. Thus, in the Agesilaus, a passage praising the Spartan king's enkrateia provides the narrative framework for a troubling scene of a kiss declined. Agesilaus' exemplary conduct towards the young Megabates can, to be sure, seem like a practical application of Socrates’ warnings in the Memorabilia or the Symposium. But the two protagonists’ reactions are only fully comprehensible if account is taken

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3 Kissing scenes are in some ways the narrative pendant of erotic images on numerous
of the Persian custom of the courteous kiss. A gesture’s meaning can be equivocal or misunderstood, especially between individuals of high rank: depending on how it is perceived, it can have considerable consequences. That is what differentiates this scene from the Socratic discussions. The *Agesilaus* anecdote, therefore, does not have as its only purpose highlighting the Spartan king’s *enkrateia*: it is part of a more general reflection, developed further in the *Cyropaedia*, and, indeed, by Arrian, on the equivocal meaning of a gesture or a custom, and even on the ways of deflecting it or putting it to other uses.

**The Kiss of Megabates**

The scene in the *Agesilaus* belongs to a quite specific political and diplomatic context, the recruiting of the Persian noble Spithridates to Agesilaus’ expedition in Phrygia during the autumn of 395. Only a little is known of this individual: prior to his appearance in the *Anabasis* as a subordinate of Pharnabazus who fights against the Ten Thousand when they appear in Bithynia, he seems to play the role of an officer of Darius II and puts down the revolt of Pissuthnes alongside Tissaphernes and Parmises. A few years later, we learn from Xenophon that Pharnabazus apparently wanted to take the daughter of Spithridates as a concubine, while marrying the Great King’s daughter; thereupon Spithridates went over to the Spartan side through the intervention of Lysander, something the *Agesilaus* does not mention. Accompanied by his son, Spithridates meets Agesilaus at Ephesus. This young son, Megabates, is only mentioned three times in the *Hellenica*. When he meets the king, Xenophon notes in an apparently neutral way the Spartan king’s satisfaction: ‘When Agesilaus saw them, he was pleased (ἤποθη) with what Lysander had done’ (3.4.10, tr. Marincola). Later, in Paphlagonia, when Agesilaus acts as a go-between for King Otys, with the objective of get-

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vases. As Lear 2008: 59–62 has noted, citing especially a famous *kylix* of the Briseis Painter (Paris, Musée du Louvre G278), the kiss is part and parcel of ‘courtship’ scenes.