




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Creating and Contesting Kyniska: The Reception of the First Female Olympic Victor

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Abstract

This article examines the historical creation of the legacy of Kyniska, the Spartan royal who was the first woman to win at the ancient Olympics in the early fourth century BCE, from her own lifetime to the modern era. By investigating the reception of her victory rather than her agency as historical actor, I demonstrate that the continuing relevance of her victory has depended on others' literary, historical, or political goals. I examine the creation and contestation of Kyniska's victory at five key moments of reception: 1) in the narratives of Xenophon, Plutarch, and Pausanias; 2) in her own victory monument; 3) in poetry commemorating Hellenistic rulers; 4) in feminist didactic biography of the nineteenth century; and 5) in the debates surrounding the modern Olympics. These moments reveal how her victory's reception has contributed to ancient and modern discourses on womanhood and gender. By contextualising Kyniska in each of these distinct eras and environments, I suggest that the perception of her victory has never been monolithic, not even in the ancient world.

Keywords: Kyniska; sport; Olympics; gender; reception

On the official website of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), you will find Kyniska listed as the final entry among 'the all-time greats of the Ancient Olympic Games'.¹ For ancient historians, the Spartan royal's two victories in the four-horse chariot race at Olympia in the early fourth century BCE are well known both through literary sources and through an inscription which proclaims that she 'alone of the women of all of Greece' won there (*CEG* 820 = *IG* V¹ 1564a).² Although Kyniska's epigram emphasises her achievement as

¹ International Olympic Committee (2021a) 'The All-time Greats of the Ancient Olympic Games'.

² All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. The text of Xenophon follows the *OCT*, and that of Plutarch and Pausanias follow their respective *Budé* editions. Other editions are noted below. All dates are CE except where otherwise noted.

a woman, on the IOC page her biography appears below the image of a male charioteer. It then reads:

Kyniska of Sparta. At Olympia: Won the four-horse chariot race in 396BC and 392BC. Back story: Daughter of the King of Sparta, Kyniska had her sights set on Olympic glory from an early age. Permitted by custom to win an Olympic wreath as the owner of a chariot, she evaded the rules banning women from competing. Trend setter: Kyniska's victories set the way for female owners, with a total of 12 claiming victory by the end of the Games.

Although the IOC's description of Kyniska sticks closely to that given by our main ancient sources, Xenophon and Plutarch, the tone with which the IOC describes her achievements both elevates her male relatives and downplays her own autonomy.³ Is her 'evasion of the rules' as framed here meant to be celebrated? And was the choice her own – that is, did she 'blaze a trail' of her own planning, or did she simply exploit a loophole in the system at the urging of her family? By both commemorating and downplaying Kyniska, the IOC's blurb in fact reflects an ongoing scholarly debate about her agency and motivation as a competitor in the Olympic Games. To what extent is she responsible for the victory? Some scholars have advanced the accounts of Xenophon and Plutarch in which she is a pawn of the political intrigues of her brother, the Spartan king Agesilaos.⁴ Others have focused on how Kyniska wielded power and influence through her religious and socio-economic contexts.⁵ Recently, Annalisa Paradiso has offered the nuanced argument that Agesilaos belatedly took credit for a victory in a race Kyniska decided to enter.⁶

As an example of ancient history for a popular audience, we may be inclined to forgive the IOC's description of Kyniska and its placement at the end of a list of men under a picture of another man. But how this educational material repurposes and redefines Kyniska for the wide audience of people interested in the Olympics, a multibillion-dollar enterprise, is of vital importance for the study of ancient reception, not least because the IOC has heavily promoted the recent Tokyo 2020 games as a step forward for gender equality in sport (though, as we will see, not necessarily inclusively nor equitably).⁷ But the

³ A referee rightly points out that the IOC describes Kyniska as 'Daughter of the King of Sparta,' as opposed to the more neutral phrasing of the crowd-sourced Wikipedia page, which refers to Kyniska first as 'a Spartan princess.' See also Caissie (2020), a brief introduction to the problems of Kyniska and her motivations for a more general audience, which suggests she 'cleverly exploited loopholes'.

⁴ E.g. Cartledge (1987) 149–50; Kyle (2003).

⁵ E.g. Dillon (2000); Pomeroy (2002). But see Millender (2019), who suggests that Kyniska's post-victory heroisation too, was encouraged by Agesilaos.

⁶ Paradiso (2015) 239.

⁷ According to the IOC's own data (International Olympic Committee (2021b)), 'the revenue for the Olympiad that spans 2013 to 2016 ... was USD 5.7 billion'. For the Tokyo games achieving basic gender parity, see the press release from the International Olympic Committee (2020). Though the

importance of the first woman's Olympic victory is not limited to the massive institutional structures of the IOC. A quick glance at the website of a grassroots group named 'Kyniska Advocacy,' begun by women athletes to support women in sports, confirms this. The group's motto reads: 'We are Kyniska.'⁸ Kyniska clearly matters; she is as much a pawn in our times as in her own.

Taking my cue from reception theory, I sidestep the question of Kyniska's agency in entering the games and celebrating her victory, and instead examine distinct moments in her long reception history. While not exhaustive, this investigation into Kyniska's diachronic reception nevertheless brings new perspective. I propose that there is no one right way to think about her, since each author and age, ancient and modern, has created their own Kyniska to suit their needs and narratives. Reception is not the most obvious way to consider Kyniska, who, after all, was a historical agent and a real person, but there need not be such a strong opposition between reception studies and historicism. As Simon Goldhill writes:

It is easy enough to assert the foundational historicist claim that things – texts, people – are of their time, and need to be understood as products of and in time. The difficulty comes when we try to articulate the dynamics between the contrasting and competing claims that there is value in understanding antiquity and its texts as another, passed and particular era; that meaning is realised in the process (as I would prefer to say) of reception; and that not only are we as scholars the products of a historical moment, but also that both we and others are capable of being ahead of our time, out of date, behind the times, self-consciously conservative, wilfully radical, and so forth.⁹

The question of agency is an important one, but it has proved difficult to answer. Instead, I suggest we think in terms of responsibility – who is responsible for the different, competing images of Kyniska we have received? To some extent she herself is, but so are historians and epigraphers, and their audiences; so are lay people and source books and the internet. The context in which we find Kyniska, just as for so many on the periphery of the spheres of power in the ancient world, is already dominated by the literate male elite. Moreover, the evidence pertaining to Kyniska's agency is not monolithic in its genre nor form, nor in the eras of which it is the product; archaeological evidence in particular came to light rather late. By focusing on the narrow context of Kyniska's lifetime, we lose sight of the historical trajectory her legacy has taken.

Thinking about Kyniska in terms of reception, then, does not necessitate the removal of agency from her deeds and from her portrayal by later literary sources. Kyniska's use by the IOC and by Kyniska Advocacy points to her

Tokyo Olympic Games were postponed until 2021, I follow the IOC's lead in calling them the Tokyo 2020 games.

⁸ Kyniska Advocacy (2021) 'Homepage'.

⁹ Goldhill (2017) 422.

relevance and continual reshaping in our modern moment. But her reception is not necessarily continuous: she is rather pulled from the margins depending on the literary, historical, or political goals of others. Thus, I trace and evaluate five distinct receptions of her victories: 1) in the literary texts of Xenophon, Plutarch, and Pausanias; 2) in the inscribed epigram commissioned for her victory; 3) in poetry commemorating Ptolemaic victors; 4) in Mary Hays' didactic biography from the nineteenth century; and 5) in the documents and debates of the modern Olympics. Considering how the image of 'Kyniska' has been continuously created and contested in and after her life shows that her reception has never been monolithic, not even in the ancient world.

1. Xenophon's Kyniska

In our attempt to understand Kyniska's reception, we should begin with the recognition that our extant literary sources were already contesting the meaning of her victory at the time of composition. Adopting the narrative of Xenophon and Plutarch is to adopt a narrow viewpoint on her wins, conditioned by the fact that both authors centred her brother's life, not her own. Xenophon's biography of his contemporary Agesilaos contains the earliest literary record of Kyniska's achievement. In it, he writes the following about the Spartan king:

ἔκείνo γε μὴν πῶς οὐ καλὸν καὶ μεγαλογνώμον, τὸ αὐτὸν μὲν ἄνδρoς ἔργοις καὶ κτήμασι κοσμεῖν τὸν ἑαυτοῦ οἶκον, κύνας τε πολλοὺς θηρευτὰς καὶ ἵππους πολεμιστηρίους τρέφοντα, Κυνίσκαν δὲ ἀδελφὴν οὖσαν πεῖσαι ἄρματοτροφεῖν καὶ ἐπιδειῖσαι νικώσης αὐτῆς ὅτι τὸ θρέμμα τοῦτο οὐκ ἀνδραγαθίας ἀλλὰ πλοῦτου ἐπίδειγμά ἐστι;

Xen. Ages. 9.6

How is this not noble and high-minded, that he adorned his house with belongings and deeds of a man, raising many hunting dogs and warhorses, but persuaded Kyniska, his sister, to raise chariot-horses, and showed when she won that this reared animal is not a display of a man's character, but of wealth?

Throughout the passage, Xenophon manipulates the dynamics of gender and wealth to claim that Agesilaos engineered the win to prove a moral point to the rest of the Greek world. Using *μὲν* and *δὲ*, he balances Agesilaos' deeds 'of a man' (*ἀνὴρ*) with Kyniska's, which are not a sign of womanhood, but of wealth (*πλοῦτος*). The passage is carefully constructed with the motif of visual display and adornment (*κοσμεῖν ... ἐπιδειῖσαι ... ἐπίδειγμά*) which culminates in the antithesis of 'a man's character' (*ἀνδραγαθία*), implicitly reserved for those who raise animals for war, not competition. But just as we cannot know Kyniska's true role for certain, we cannot know Agesilaos': Xenophon's attribution of agency to Agesilaos is motivated by the generic constraints of praise literature and by his own views on the relationship of wealth, labour,

and (masculine) virtuous character.¹⁰ If anything, the passage reflects not just the disparagement of other winning city-states as unmanly, but also the construction of masculinity at the cost of the disparagement of femininity.

This claim recurs much later in Plutarch's life of *Agesilaos*. He follows Xenophon, an attributed source for much of the life:

Οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ ὄρων ἐνίους τῶν πολιτῶν ἀπὸ ἵπποτροφίας δοκοῦντας εἶναι
κίνας καὶ μέγα φρονούντας, ἔπεισε τὴν ἀδελφὴν Κυνίσκαν ἄρμα
καθεῖσαν Ὀλυμπίασιν ἀγωνίσασθαι, βουλόμενος ἐνδείξασθαι τοῖς
Ἕλλησιν ὡς οὐδεμιᾶς ἐστὶν ἀρετῆς, ἀλλὰ πλοῦτου καὶ δαπάνης ἢ νίκης.
Plut. *Vit. Ages.* 20

But when he saw that some citizens were thinking they were great and were being presumptuous from their horse breeding, he persuaded his sister Kyniska to enter a chariot and compete at the Olympics, since he wanted to show the Greeks that victory was not a mark of virtue, but of wealth and expense.

Though Plutarch's account follows Xenophon's, there are important differences. He makes clear that this was part of Agesilaos' reaction to other city-states' victories in the races but condenses the contrast between him and his sister Kyniska here. Though the themes of masculinity and wealth are still present, they are not constructed in as sustained or as sophisticated a way as is the general theme of moral excellence, as evidenced by the use of ἀρετή instead of the more explicitly gendered ἀνδραγαθία.

In both cases, the focus is on Agesilaos. In Xenophon, for example, Kyniska's victory comes in a section otherwise concerned with favourably contrasting Agesilaos' character with the Persian king's boastfulness (ἀλαζονεία, *Xen. Ages.* 9.1). Kyniska's victory is meant to show Agesilaos' recognition that he can be a true victor without the wealth and extravagance necessary to Artaxerxes or even to other Greeks (*Xen. Ages.* 9.7). Plutarch also frames Kyniska's victory in the context of Agesilaos' frugality and his conviction that moral worth is not tied to wealth. The discussion of her first victory follows that of how unchanged by foreign campaign Agesilaos was and how austere his family's lifestyle was, with particular emphasis on his wife and daughters (*Plut. Vit. Ages.* 19.4–6). Xenophon does not even record Agesilaos' daughter's name, according to Plutarch, who only claims to have discovered

¹⁰ On the ideal of labour in Xenophon, see e.g. Johnstone (1994). On the ways that foreign women in Xenophon often serve as intermediaries between men while also demonstrating leadership characteristics themselves, see Baragwanath (2010). Baragwanath identifies women's deftness with managing φίλια as an aspect of their ideal leadership roles. Kyniska, by winning, demonstrates Agesilaos' point that winning is nothing compared to having φίλια through one's friends and the reputation of one's city-state (*Xen. Ages.* 9.7), but it is unclear whether she is an active mediator in this case. See also Baragwanath (2015: 176) for Sparta as 'other' in gender relations and thus a useful comparison with Persia for Greek writers. It may be no coincidence that this discussion of Kyniska and manliness follows a comparison between the Persian king and Agesilaos (*Xen. Ages.* 9.1); see below.

it through ‘Lakedaemonian records’ (Λακωνικαῖς ἀναγραφαῖς, Plut. *Vit. Ages.* 19.6). Kyniska’s narrative in the subsequent section is contrasted both with the conspicuous consumption of generals who, unlike Agesilaos, were affected by foreign customs, and also with the modesty and economy of her brother’s other female family members. Anxiety over change in Spartiate social norms based on incoming wealth and increased social mobility – for men and women – probably contributes to the original Xenophonic narrative, and recurs here.¹¹ Spartan women, who could inherit, own, and manage land in a primarily land-based economy, were the wealthiest women in Greece.¹² Xenophon and Pausanias (Paus. 3.8.1) write that Kyniska is the first woman to breed horses. This was likely a years-long enterprise made financially feasible by the support of her inheritance of one-fifth of her father’s wealth, and by her family’s long-standing background in horsemanship.¹³ We can thus read against the denigration of wealth and expenditure in the Agesilaos-centred accounts to find a version of Kyniska, who, like previous equestrian victors, was uniquely positioned to compete and win because of her wealth and royal status.

By contrasting her role as celebrated victor with Agesilaos’ more modest wife and daughter, Plutarch may also suggest that Kyniska’s performance of femininity was viewed critically by some ancient audiences. Likewise, Xenophon’s account contains a reflection of contemporary elite male attitudes towards women’s participation at Olympia and in sport more generally, which did not end with Kyniska. Xenophon finished his work after Agesilaos’ death in 360 BCE, which places his composition closer chronologically to the two-horse chariot victory of another Spartan woman, Euryleonis, in 368 BCE.¹⁴ Moreover, he may even have witnessed the growth of Kyniska’s reputation and cult. In his description of Lakonia, Pausanias writes that Kyniska received her own hero shrine (ἥρῶν, Paus. 3.15.1), suggesting that she and her victory had religious importance after her lifetime. The importance of public competition at religious festivals for women in Sparta may have allowed for Kyniska to gain a cult following.¹⁵ An inscription with her name reconstructed (*IG V* 1.235) and votive equestrian figures have been found at the Menelaion in Sparta, and part of her name has been found in the environs of the sanctuary of

¹¹ For this anxiety, see Hodkinson (2009) 185–6. See also Golden (2014: 254), who stresses that equestrian competition was always a site of difference between the masses and the wealthy older people who participated in it.

¹² Pomeroy (2002) 82.

¹³ Paradiso (2015) 238–9. She also notes that Plutarch’s narrative diverges from Xenophon’s in that Plutarch has Agesilaos intervene to suggest entering the Olympics, not to suggest the keeping of the stables in the first place; she says he is the first to disbelieve the earlier version. Pausanias suggests that the Lakedaemonians collectively became more invested in raising horses after the Persian Wars, and he lists other horse breeders who set up monuments (Paus. 6.2.1). For the equine names of several of Kyniska’s family members as evidence for the familial interest in equestrian pursuits, see Pomeroy (2002) 21.

¹⁴ For Euryleonis, see Paus. 3.17.6.

¹⁵ See Reid (2020: 516–18) on this aspect of Lakonian young women’s sport.

Apollo Hyakinthos at Amyklai (IG V 1.1567).¹⁶ César Fornis has suggested that Kyniska was not just the first woman Olympic victor, but the first woman of the historical era to be heroised, and that she became a model for Spartan women and girls precisely because she achieved victories through her wealth, and where no woman had achieved them before.¹⁷ In addition to Euryleonis, Pausanias writes that many Lakedaemonian women in particular followed Kyniska to win at Olympia (Paus. 3.8.1). Her reception by later women, girls, and female victors thus suggests that Kyniska's popular image from the fourth century BCE onwards was not quite in alignment with the literary sources which follow Xenophon's account.

We are not just viewing Agesilaos' revision of Kyniska, then, but also Xenophon's revision of Agesilaos. The king's sister's actions are of secondary concern to his overall characterisation of Agesilaos as austere, unyielding, and politically astute. The later literary sources which rely on Xenophon are themselves points of reception too. Kyniska's cult and her female successors in Olympic victory point to ways of viewing Kyniska independently of the narratives of Xenophon and Plutarch. In relying on these sources to uncover the motivation of Kyniska's Olympic participation, we must acknowledge that we are debating Xenophon's Kyniska.

2. The Epigraphic Kyniska

Kyniska's victory monument at Olympia also offers ways of viewing her achievement separately from the Xenophontic narrative. Dated to the first half of the fourth century BCE, its inscription (IG V¹ 1564a) memorialises her first victory, likely in 396 BCE.¹⁸ It consists of a commemorative epigram inscribed on a statue base of which remains have been found near the Prytaneion at Olympia as part of a statuary dedication. Kyniska's voice and image would have projected clearly to a passer-by viewing the inscription as part of the larger installation, which Pausanias tells us was 'a stone base, and both a chariot of horses and a charioteer, and an image of Kyniska herself' (λίθου κρητῖς καὶ ἄρμα τε ἵππων καὶ ἀνὴρ ἠνίοχος καὶ αὐτῆς Κυνίσκας εἰκόν, Paus. 6.1.6). The monetary independence of Spartan women in combination with the wealth and resources available to Kyniska suggest she may have commissioned this monument and poem herself. The fact that the poem was in all likelihood composed by a man does not *a priori* obscure Kyniska's

¹⁶ Fornis (2013) 39. Dillon (2000: 464 n. 25) notes that 'at Sparta women were allowed to drive two-horse chariots in races at the Hyakinthia festival (Athen. *Deip.* 139 f).' It is worth noting that the votive equestrian figures are common in hero cults and may bear no special significance for Kyniska.

¹⁷ Fornis (2013) 40.

¹⁸ Many scholars agree with Moretti (1953: 43), who dated the inscription and her first win to 396 BCE on the basis that the Spartans were banned from the Olympics by Elis, with whom they had ongoing hostilities, from 420 until about 400 BCE. The length of Sparta's ban, while commonly accepted as around twenty years, is not certain. On the other end of the potential range, 380 BCE is a possible date. The argument that Kyniska could not have won so late is based on our best guess at her age, which was probably around 50 years old in 396 BCE (Pomeroy 2002: 21).

voice.¹⁹ It is likely true, moreover, that all victors' epigrams were composed by male poets, not just Kyniska's. The question of epigrammatic voice – who speaks – is important but tangential to our focus on the reception of her legacy. We can move forward under the assumption that it is not only the poet's voice we hear, but also the person in whose voice it is written, Kyniska, and who may be the same person who commissioned, paid for, and gave instruction to the poet. Thus, we can see the inscription as her attempt to shape her own reception while still upholding traditional forms of commemoration. The poem's changing point of view and its focus on Agesilaos and Arkhidamos, however, pose potential interpretative problems.²⁰ Instead of arguing for one reading over another, instead I examine how such shifts in focus and perspective – from herself, to her family, to Sparta – allow for a polyphonic interpretation of the poem, and by extension, her victory.

All that remains of the statue group is about one-third of a round black limestone base originally around one metre in diameter found in 1879 not far from the southern side of the Heraion, where Pausanias' description indicates it stood in his time.²¹ The heavily damaged right side of the inscription is supplied by the poem's survival in the tenth-century-CE *Palatine Anthology* (*Anth. Pal.* 13.16). *IG V¹ 1564a* reads as follows:

Σπάρτας μὲν [βασιλῆες ἔμοι]
 πατέρες καὶ ἀδελφοί, ἄ[ρματι δ' ὠκυπόδων ἵππων]
 νικῶσα Κυνίσκα εἰκόνα τάνδ' ἔστασσε. μόν[αν]
 δ' ἐμέ φαμι γυναικῶν Ἑλλάδος ἐκ πάσας τῶ[ν]-
 δε λαβῆν στέφανον.
 vacat
 Ἀπελλέας Καλλικλέος ἐποίησε.

IG V¹ 1564a

While Kings of Sparta are my fathers and brothers, since she won with a chariot of swift-footed horses, Kyniska dedicated this statue. And I alone I say of the women of all of Greece take this crown.

Apelle[a]s son of Kallikles made this.

The epigram adheres to some common generic conventions. The famous line that 'I alone ... of the women of all of Greece...' reflects a formula commonly found in victory inscriptions to emphasise being the first to break a record; in this case a 'gender record' is broken.²² Likewise, family ties feature prominently in other Spartan agonistic inscriptions.²³ In context here, this emphasis

¹⁹ Pace Kyle (2003) 185.

²⁰ As a referee noted, the emphasis on familial relationships and on male family members in the inscription is consistent with what we know of women's dedicatory inscriptions and their generic constraints in general.

²¹ Hyde (1912) 207; Hodkinson (2009) 183.

²² Young (1996) 180–1.

²³ Nobili (2013: 78–9) notes that this is also common in non-Spartan agonistic inscriptions; cf. *CEG* 378, *CEG* 386, *CEG* 758. She also notes Pindar and Bakchylides' reference to familial victories

integrates Kyniska into a tradition and hereditary lineage of male victors. This aspect of the poem along with the Xenophontic narrative has suggested to some scholars that the primacy of the references to Spartan kings, fathers, and brothers undercuts Kyniska's agency and instead places Agesilaos at the centre of her victory.²⁴ Others have seen Kyniska's voice come through in both the first person dative ἔμοι in the first line and in the first person pronouncement at the end of the inscription.²⁵ Still others have suggested that Kyniska herself is politically motivated to support her royal house in her inscription.²⁶ Though strange at first glance, the shifting perspective from first person to third person (ἔστρασε) and back, as Cecilia Nobili notes, does not need emendation, and indeed finds parallels in at least two other agonistic inscriptions.²⁷ The first person asks a viewer to identify with the speaker's voice and thus draws attention to a singular achievement which distances her from her fathers and brothers, while the third person emphasises both her familial affiliations and the placement of the enduring image atop the base. These shifts allow for multiple perspectives, but Kyniska is at the centre of them.

Finally, as the inscription's deictic stress on the physical monument suggests, we should not forget the expensive, large statue group made of bronze featuring Kyniska herself, perhaps alone on the base. Joseph Day suggests that such inscribed monuments '...were frequently in cooperative and/or competitive conversation with others of their type. Visitors to sanctuaries and cemeteries were brought into those conversations, thereby becoming active participants in the places' spatial dynamics.'²⁸ Kyniska's monument, in the Altis at Olympia, would have encouraged an interpretation that she competed with (and bested) other athletes, whose monuments stood nearby, while showing cooperation within her royal family. As the lone statue memorialising a woman, Kyniska's statue would have drawn additional attention against the surrounding statuary of male victors. For Pausanias, who saw and described the statue group, 'she was very eager for distinction in the Olympic games and was the first woman to raise horses and the first to win an Olympic victory' (φιλοτιμώτατα δὲ ἐξ τὸν ἀγῶνα ἔσχε τὸν Ὀλυμπικὸν καὶ πρώτη τε ἵπποτρόφησε γυναικῶν καὶ νίκην ἀνείλετο Ὀλυμπικὴν πρώτη, Paus. 3.8.1).²⁹ As Donald Kyle notes, Pausanias' Kyniska is 'more and more independent, ambitious, and admirable' as compared to Xenophon's reception of her.³⁰ All

in their epinician odes. See also Bennett (2005: 92), who notes that Epigram AB 78, attributed to Poseidippos, celebrates Arsinoe's victory by recalling her family.

²⁴ Kyle (2003) 185.

²⁵ Pomeroy (2002) 141–2.

²⁶ Coleman (2019) 63.

²⁷ See Nobili (2013) 76–7 for parallel passages with shifting points of view.

²⁸ Day (2018) 99.

²⁹ φιλότιμος is not necessarily an admirable attribute, but it does indicate some agency on Kyniska's part. The word in any degree or form occurs five times in Pausanias, but the superlative only occurs once elsewhere (Paus. 6.2.1) on the increased desire of the Lakedaemonians to raise horses after the Persian Wars.

³⁰ Kyle (2003) 186.

this indicates, however, is that the inscription, like Kyniska herself, probably elicited a range of responses from passers-by at Olympia, of whom Pausanias was one. Of course, one possible response was apathy; as Peter Bing has suggested, there is not much evidence that anybody cared much about inscribed epigram before the Hellenistic era.³¹ The entire monument, then, allows for many different ways to view Kyniska's victory – a number increased by reading the inscription, not limited by it.

3. The Hellenistic Kyniska

Some surely did read Kyniska's epigram, as evidenced by how her victory became a model to imitate and surpass for other sporting queens and their epigrammatists. Our third snapshot in the reception history of her victory comes from the Hellenistic world of the third century BCE. As scholars have pointed out, the epinician poetry of Callimachus and Poseidippos for the Ptolemaic royal women Arsinoe II, Berenike I, and either Berenike II or Berenike Syra, who won chariot races at Olympia, Nemea, and Isthmia, consciously invokes Kyniska as a royal predecessor.³² Take the following example from epigram 87 of Poseidippos to celebrate the victory of Berenike I, written in the voices of the victorious horses:

ἴπ[ποι] ἔθ' ἀμὲς εὐόσαι Ὀλυμ[πια]κὸν Βερενίκας,
 Π[ι]σά[ρ]ται, Μακέτας ἀγάγομ[ε]ς στέφανον,
 ὃς τὸ [πο]λυθρύλατον ἔχει κλέος, ὧι τὸ Κυνίσκας
 ἐν Σπάρ[ρ]ται χρόνιον κῦδος ἀφειλόμεθα.³³

AB 87

We were the ones – still [mares] at the time – who gained Macedonian Berenice the Olympic garland so famed throughout the world that we have stripped Cynisca of her glory days in Sparta!

For Berenike and Poseidippos, Kyniska stands as the model of a royal whose win brought renown to her homeland, and thus can be imitated and bested profitably. As Kathleen M. Coleman writes, 'Berenice, for her part ... surpasses Cynisca and establishes the superiority of Macedon over Sparta. The combination of statue and epigram, which is implied by Berenice and specifically claimed by Cynisca ... claims a prominent space in both the cityscape and contemporary consciousness, shaping opinion, establishing authority, and claiming dynastic pre-eminence.'³⁴ Likewise, the invocation of her victory

³¹ Bing (2009) 119.

³² See Remijsen (2010) 98–123; Fantuzzi (2005) 249–68. Clayman (2012: 124–5) argues for Berenike II, not Berenike Syra, as the victor of AB 78, 79, and 82, and that she competed after her 246 BCE marriage. Remijsen prefers Berenike Syra in 256 BCE (before her marriage) in her completion of Moretti's victor list, but notes that Berenike II likely won as well, potentially in 244 BCE.

³³ Translations of Poseidippos are by Frank Nisetich in Gutzwiller (2005) following the text (printed here) of Austin and Bastianini (AB) (2002).

³⁴ Coleman (2019) 63.

indicates its currency even at a later date and in a far different context than early-fourth-century-BCE Sparta.

By the third century BCE, Kyniska's victory sets a clear precedent for other high-status women – and men. Marco Fantuzzi points out that her win 'must have seemed to every Greek of the third century sure and familiar evidence of the prestige that queenly individuals could win via agonistic successes in chariot races'; these queenly victories were not just their own but belonged to their dynasties and descendants.³⁵ Poseidippos integrates, for example, Ptolemy II into the context of family tradition by stressing his mother Berenike I's victory: 'and of my father's glory I boast not, but that my mother, a woman, won in her chariot – that is great' (πρὸς μέγα πατρὸς ἐμὸν τίθεμαι κλέος, ἀλλ' ὅτι μάτηρ/ εἶλε γυνὰ νίκαν ἄρμάτι, τοῦτο μέγα, AB 88.5–6).³⁶ Just as reference to Kyniska's father and brother gave her inscription and monument a competitive edge, so Ptolemy calls on his father and mother. With this context, rather than seeing the prominence of Kyniska's family as proof that she had less agency in the decision to compete, we can see it as a deliberate strategy that bolsters her fame and authority. But this too is an act of reception on our part. My intention is not to construct a linear narrative of women in sport from Kyniska to Berenike Syra, but to point to her resonance in the third century as a phase in her reception that is distinct from the Agesilaos-centred narrative. It shows her already portrayed as a champion of women, albeit high-status royal women, in sport. Intriguing, however, are parallels between Xenophon's and Poseidippos' Kyniska: both draw attention to Kyniska in order to minimise or otherwise qualify her victory compared to their subjects' achievements, and both use her as a byword to broadcast the status accompanied by an Olympic victory to the wider Greek world.

4. Kyniska in London

No ancient text available to us focuses solely on Kyniska aside from the epigram in her voice, and, as noted above, even whether the inscription places her in the foreground is a matter of scholarly debate. So, when did 'Kyniska' become an individual, in the sense of a subject of scholarly interest separate from her royal family, the festival at Olympia, or the queenly victors who followed her? One early answer may be the Englishwoman Mary Hays, seen as the inventor of 'female biography.' A novelist and close associate of the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, Hays published her 1803 *Female Biography*, a well-received and much-circulated multi-volume work of women's lives in 302 entries; Kyniska is one of 28 ancient Greek women she profiles.³⁷ Unlike Xenophon and the writers and rulers of the Hellenistic period, Mary Hays celebrates and individuates her as part of a program to shift the parameters of encyclopaedism, the 'prerogative of mostly male elites', to include women – as subjects

³⁵ Fantuzzi (2005: 258) notes that Sparta is linked to Macedonia and Battiad Cyrene by being 'one of only a few instances of monarchy (or rather dyarchy) inside the Greek-speaking world'.

³⁶ Fantuzzi (2005) 266; Remijsen (2010) 112.

³⁷ Walker (2018) 4.

and authors.³⁸ Though Hays did not read Greek or Latin, and instead worked by excerpting and adapting English or French predecessors almost verbatim, Ian Plant argues her research recovering ancient women ‘reveals a deliberate strategy to realise and promote female agency’.³⁹ Hays’ entry on Kyniska reads in part:

Cynisca. Agesilaus, king of Sparta, to prove his contempt for the ambition displayed in the races at the Olympic games, persuaded his sister Cynisca to enter the lists. The lady was successful, and bore away the prize from all competitors. She was the first woman who obtained this honour. She consecrated horses of brass, as a monument of her victory...⁴⁰

After her heading, Agesilaos’ name is conspicuously the first word of the entry. Hays hews closely to Pierre Bayle’s French account of Agesilaos from over a century earlier, whom she cites as a source, and who follows Xenophon closely with supporting evidence provided by Pausanias.⁴¹ But despite this inherited Agesilaos-as-mastermind narrative, we can see the active role given to Hays’ ‘successful’ Kyniska, who ‘obtains’ her win and ‘consecrates’ her own monument. As her preface makes clear, Hays pulls Kyniska out from Agesilaos’ shadow as a woman worthy to be imitated. Of her goals in writing her encyclopaedia, she herself writes:⁴²

To excite a worthier emulation, the following memorial of those women, whose endowments, or whose conduct, have reflected lustre upon the sex is presented more especially to the rising generation, who have not grown old in folly, whose hearts have not been seared by fashion, and whose minds prejudice has not yet warped.

Just as in the Hellenistic era, Kyniska becomes a model for women, and perhaps for all people, as the remark ‘whose minds prejudice has not yet warped’ suggests. As Séverine Genieys-Kirk shows, Hays’ work defied the early-nineteenth-century norm, and though written for a popular audience, ‘it is nonetheless driven by a scholarly impulse ... she creates an alternative history in which women’s real voices can be heard, and in which their real identities and selves can be grasped from a psychological rather than moral perspective’.⁴³ That Hays successfully turns Kyniska into a subject in her own right to be remembered and emulated is even more noteworthy given that at the time of composition the inscribed statue base had not yet been found at Olympia, nor is there any indication in Bayle’s entry that he consulted

³⁸ Walker (2018) 9.

³⁹ Plant (2018) 83–4.

⁴⁰ Hays (1803) 3.444.

⁴¹ Bayle (1702) 137. I refer here to the second edition of Bayle’s *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*. Kyniska is mentioned at the end of the entry on Agesilaos (1702: 134–7). Bayle seems to have misread Pausanias to understand that the epigram for Kyniska was by Simonides.

⁴² Hays (1803) 1 pref. 5–6.

⁴³ Genieys-Kirk (2018) 172.

the *Palatine Anthology*, which was then housed in Rome, hostile territory for the Huguenot philosopher. Even without knowledge of Greek, we can see that her intentional focus on Kyniska reflects, in the words of Lorna Hardwick, how ‘competition to appropriate the classical canon ... made the classical texts part of the battlefield of social change’ in the early nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Working from male dominated sources, Hays pulled Kyniska from the margins.

5. A Kyniska for the Modern Age?

So far, we have surveyed Kyniska in the Xenophonic literary sources, her victory monument, the commemoration of Hellenistic royals’ victories, and in Mary Hays’ feminist biographies. How do we link them all? Indirectly. I have demonstrated that the reception of the first female Olympic winner was not linear, but piecemeal, and driven by the needs and goals of both author and audience. It is not surprising, then, that the needs of the modern athletic world have led us back to contesting the legacy of Kyniska. As part of the ancient past used to legitimise the modern games, our reception and representation of Kyniska matters. As Barbara Goff writes, though the official IOC documents repeatedly celebrate the version of ancient Greece idealised by Pierre de Coubertin, who notably resisted women’s participation in the games years after women began to participate, even the concept of antiquity changes as the context requires; idealised Hellenism is a ‘highly flexible instrument’.⁴⁵

As a highly flexible instrument, the reception of the ancient past has historically bent toward exclusion. Aileen Riggin, an American swimmer in the 1920 games, spoke about the opposition to her competing:

It wasn’t from the general public. It was from the ruling body. They didn’t want women to compete in any sport in the Olympic Games. They wanted it to remain as it had been in ancient Greece, with women forbidden to not only compete, but they weren’t allowed to be spectators. There was one instance of a woman who was about to be thrown off a cliff, but they pardoned her because she was watching her son compete.⁴⁶

Though Kyniska has become a fixture in sourcebooks and on the IOC’s own informational pages, the popular perception of an all-male ancient Olympics persists. In several of the organisation’s publications, all from the past ten years, women’s exclusion from the games as spectators and participants is emphasised, but Kyniska is consistently called upon as an exemplary exception. One page geared toward classroom use reads: ‘It must be noted that the winners were not the jockeys or the charioteers, but rather the owners of the horses. This is how Kyniska of Sparta, owner of a stable of horses,

⁴⁴ Hardwick (2000) 180.

⁴⁵ Goff (2011) 3–4. For Coubertin’s ‘exclusivist’ ideology of Olympism in terms of gender and race, see Chatziefstathiou (2008).

⁴⁶ Riggin (1999) 18–19.

became an Olympic champion.⁴⁷ Another 2017 IOC ‘ancient Olympic fact sheet’ mentions that she ‘broke with tradition’ by winning as an owner – never mind that all winners were owners by the same standards that Kyniska was.⁴⁸ Still another characterises her involvement as ‘indirect’ and uses scare-quotes to call her ‘Olympic Champion’.⁴⁹

There are two ways of thinking about the IOC’s representation of Kyniska. On one hand, we can consider that it is to our knowledge largely historically accurate; after all, the ancient Olympics did ban women, as owner she did not drive her chariot, and nothing about her victory indicates ancient sporting culture changed much due to her win. On the other hand, we can think back to the way ‘accurate’ history has been used to exclude athletes like Kyniska, Berenike I, and Aileen Riggan. Moreover, even the challenges to this narrative reinforce the gender binary. Men compete, but women find loopholes. Celebrating Kyniska is an easy win for the IOC and its close companion, World Athletics (formerly the IAAF), even as their discriminatory ‘sex verification’ practice continues, which bars intersex and female athletes with naturally high testosterone levels. Athletes argue that this practice disproportionately affects Black women, like the famous track athlete Caster Semenya. On this topic, historian Amira Rose Davis says: ‘Sports must maintain this really, really violent binary at all costs, no matter who it hurts.’⁵⁰ The bodies of women and non-binary folks are still, just as when Kyniska won, the site of contestation about what counts as a real victory. This is reflected in the IOC’s promotional and educational materials. Even when including her, their reticent tone suggests the IOC is using Kyniska to nod toward inclusion while turning away from it in practice.

If we consider that our historical sources are instances of reception in much the same way as Mary Hays’ *Female Biography* is, the notion that we must qualify her victory at every turn feels less than satisfactory. Just as we can acknowledge that the gender norms of Xenophon’s day likely impact his depiction of her, we can also note that the IOC’s reception of her legacy serves their self-promotion as inclusive and equitable, while true gender parity in their decision-making spaces has not been reached.⁵¹ On the other hand, Kyniska Advocacy, the grassroots group formed in 2021 and named for the Spartan royal, advocates for ‘progressive policies in women’s sport’ that prioritise ‘safety, protection, and equal rights’.⁵² In a podcast segment, the founders say they want structural change for ‘all women in all sport’ and are pushing for policy change specifically in the U.K., which does not have an equivalent to the U.S. constitutional amendment Title IX, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex; one of their initial action items is to end sexual abuse in

⁴⁷ The Olympic Museum Educational and Cultural Services (2013).

⁴⁸ IOC, The Ancient Olympic Games (2021a) ‘The Athlete’.

⁴⁹ IOC, The Ancient Olympic Games (2021a) ‘Chariot Racing’.

⁵⁰ Block (2021).

⁵¹ See Milsberg (2021) for the fact that, as of July 2021, only about one-third of their executive board and little more than one-third of their committee members are women.

⁵² Kyniska Advocacy (2021), ‘Our Story’.

sport.⁵³ Another modern moment of reception of Kyniska's legacy is found in the 2019 documentary film by Beatriz Carretero, *Hijas De Cynisca*, which 'aims to show the current situation of discrimination that takes place in the daily life of women athletes. We want to show how much progress has been made and how much remains to be done'.⁵⁴ Moreover, even the film's title *Hijas De Cynisca* allows women, especially Olympians, to link themselves genealogically to Kyniska, and thus to the legacy of the ancient Olympics in a way long denied to female athletes.

I am not advocating for an uncritical embrace of Kyniska's many instances of reception. Even if for good causes, like limiting athlete abuse or speaking up for pay equity, Kyniska Advocacy ties their namesake's image to a limited notion of women in sports. As of September 2021, nowhere on Kyniska Advocacy's website is there any mention of non-binary, transgender, or intersex athletes, or a definition of who they believe to fall under the umbrella of 'woman.' Given that this is the first Olympics in which transgender and non-binary athletes have openly competed, athletes who are even more susceptible to abuse and online misogyny, this omission is notable.⁵⁵ In a similar way, Kyniska's claim to victory – and womanhood – was and still is subject to public scrutiny. But there exists already a different, overwhelmingly positive strand of her reception in the LGBTQ+ community. For example, in a 2009 story for the website Outsports.com, Patricia Nell Warren both situates Kyniska in the context of ancient Lesbianism and compares her favourably to women owners of professional sport franchises.⁵⁶

As we have seen, the history of Kyniska's reception is profoundly shaped by the literary, historical, and political goals of authors and audiences, but also by the concepts of gender, femininity, and masculinity reflected and constructed in each particular snapshot. Our idea of womanhood, much less what makes a woman 'worthy of emulation', for example, is much different from Mary Hays' early-nineteenth-century ideas, which is in turn far different from what Pausanias meant by 'very eager for distinction' in the second century, or from what Kyniska's win meant in its original context in the fourth century BCE. In the future, perhaps we can look forward to Kyniska being used to interrogate both ancient and modern assumptions on gender. These competing modern portrayals should be on the minds of ancient historians and classicists alike, for they demonstrate that the contestation over who she is, and what she gets to represent, is still ongoing – much as it was at the time of Xenophon's, Plutarch's, and Pausanias' accounts. By reframing the search for Kyniska's motivations and agency in entering the Olympics, we can see more clearly our own motivations in commemorating her.

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⁵³ Zimmerman (2021).

⁵⁴ Carretero (2019a). Quotation from press kit, see Carretero (2019b).

⁵⁵ Ronan (2021).

⁵⁶ Warren (2009).

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