

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

A WAY TO READ HERODIAN: NARRATIVE PATTERNS AND THEIR FUNCTION IN *HISTORY OF THE EMPIRE*

Chrysanthou S. Chrysanthou, *Reconfiguring the Imperial Past: Narrative Patterns and Historical Interpretation in Herodian's History of the Empire*. *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* 15. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022. Pp. ix + 391. Hardback, €124.00. ISBN 978-9-004-51692-2.

Chrysanthou's book is a study of narrative strategies and techniques employed by Herodian, with the prime intent being to shed light upon the ways in which the ancient author attracts his readers' attention to particular moments in history and keeps the audience engaged with his own version of the imperial past. The author persuasively demonstrates 'a complex intratextual relationship' between Herodian's depictions of the reigns of various emperors and reveals the key role of patterning in shaping narrative features of Herodian's *History*. Chrysanthou's main argument concerns frequent structural, thematic, and verbal similarities and parallels between different scenes that he views as a conscious authorial strategy rather than mere coincidence. Therefore, this book aims to understand how Herodian constructs, deploys, and manipulates patterned narratives to create his own interpretative framework for the events of the recent past. A complex analysis has led Chrysanthou to the conclusion that, from the very beginning, Herodian had a deliberate and thorough plan of how to write and interpret history (313). This 'unitarian' reading of Herodian's text contributes to our understanding of the work as a unified whole and to a reconsideration of the role of Herodian as a historian. Having distinguished himself from those critics who discredit Herodian's narrative patterns as rhetorical platitudes employed to decorate the text at the expense of historical accuracy, Chrysanthou argues that 'patterning lies at the very heart of Herodian's literary and historical achievement' (321).

The book is divided into seven chapters. An Introduction provides essential historiographical and methodological settings for the study of Herodian. The succeeding five chapters are case-studies of Herodian's character introductions, accession stories, warfare and battle narratives, trans-regnal themes,

and Herodian's depictions of the Emperor's finale, while a conclusion summarises the main results of the analysis. This is additionally complemented by extensive bibliography and a full and accurate index (353–80).

In his Introduction (1–28), Chrysanthou provides the reader with some general considerations on Herodian's method and the place of the author within Greek and Roman historiography. Having characterised Herodian's opening claims about his commitment to *ἀκριβεία* and rejection of writing a panegyric account (1.1.1–3) as echoing Thucydides, Chrysanthou remarks that Herodian as a narrator can depart from the Thucydidean model (5).¹ Besides, unlike Thucydides, who lays stress on the usefulness of his account, Herodian not only assures his audience that he works with complete accuracy, but also expects his readers to derive pleasurable knowledge from his narrative (1.1.3). Chrysanthou rightly points to the fact that the 'pleasure–accuracy' binary was acceptable to some ancient theorists of historical writing, including Polybius and Lucian (6). One may be surprised that, in this respect, he does not refer to Cassius Dio, Herodian's contemporary and presumably major source, who begins his prologue by representing as an advantage his ability to combine 'a fine style', i.e., one that to some extent conveys aesthetic pleasure, and the 'truthfulness of the narrative' (Dio 1.1.2), though Herodian's message is more about the pleasure of knowledge than literary style. The emphasis on the pleasure of knowledge in Herodian's opening chapter has been insightfully interpreted by Chrysanthou as a *captatio benevolentiae*, a way to attract the attention of the audience to events which seem to be unpleasant (6).²

As has been noticed by Chrysanthou, Herodian, in accordance with the traditions of ancient historiography, employed various literary devices, adding to his narrative either a tragic flavour or moralising overtones, though in his prologue he refrains from positing a didactic purpose for history. The originality of Herodian, as Chrysanthou has pointed out, lies in the theme and time-span of his work, as well as the author's approach to writing about the times of troubles following the death of Marcus Aurelius. Influenced by the general trend of imperial historiography Herodian, as Chrysanthou highlights, naturally displays a strong biographical interest and focuses on the individual, with the way in which he makes his characters behave in similar situations providing the 'intratextuality' for his narrative.

¹ See also Sidebottom (1998) 2820; Kemezis (2022) 24.

² Alternatively, Kemezis has suggested that Herodian's take on pleasure is an appeal to read the history 'in a detached fashion, taking pleasure in stories that are not one's own, and whose accuracy one is neither overly concerned with nor immediately able to verify' (Kemezis (2014) 232).

In his overview of modern scholarship on Herodian, Chrysanthou rightly advocates for not imposing modern standards on ancient perceptions that the generic features of *historia* were not inconsistent with dramatic and rhetorical embellishments (15–16).³ Therefore, Chrysanthou not only allows Herodian to secure his status as a historian, but also proposes reconsidering his literary artistry given recent tendencies in the scholarly interpretations of Herodian's method and style. The author of the book generally accepts the conception of Cassius Dio as a *Hauptquelle* for Herodian, as well as the idea that the differences between the two result from Herodian's modifications of Dio's narrative rather than from his use of the evidence derived from different sources.⁴ Such an approach raises questions. None of the other potential Severan-era narratives (such as Marius Maximus, Asinius Quadratus, or Septimius Severus' autobiography) have survived. So, how can one define with certainty whether Herodian owes his materials to Dio or a common source for both authors? On the other hand, how can one exclude the possibility that some of the scenes in the *History of the Empire* are based on the eyewitness data unless Herodian is entirely detached from his environment and personal observations?

Inspired by modern studies of the thematic and compositional issues of Herodian's narrative, Chrysanthou tends to read the *History of the Empire* from a narratological perspective and highlights the key role of patterning in understanding the work as a literary whole. As Chrysanthou has demonstrated, the patterns, primarily the formulaic representation and parallelism in the imperial succession-stories, shape the structure of the narrative and make the history of those chaotic and turbulent times more intelligible and comprehensible for the audience. Describing his methodological approach (21–7), Chrysanthou focuses on 'intratextuality' as a central category to his analysis, which implies the author's special attention to the interrelationships between the parts of the narrative. Other concepts from narratology, and important tools employed by Chrysanthou to explore Herodian's compositional techniques, are 'focalisation' and 'characterisation'. Fundamentally following the reader-response approach, particularly Iser's theory,⁵ Chrysanthou has suggested that Herodian deliberately worked with the envisaged expectations of the audience, encouraging comparisons, associations, and

³ For a similar point, see: Kemezis (2022) 22.

⁴ For Dio as Herodian's main source, see: Alföldy (1971) and (1989) 70; Kolb (1972) 74–6; Sidebottom (1998) 2781–2; Zimmermann (1999) 7, 324; Scott (2018) 455; Chrysanthou (2020) 621–2. However, Galimberti advocates for not exaggerating the dependence of Herodian on Dio (Galimberti (2014) 15–16).

⁵ Iser (1989).

contrasts between emperors and thereby keeping the readers engaged with his historical enquiry.

In Chapter 1 ('Character Introductions', 29–63), Chrysanthou explores the narrative techniques employed by Herodian for representing shifts of imperial power from one person to another and demonstrates the impact these introductions have on the plot of the *History*. Of course, the introductory characterisations are quite conventional for ancient historians. What Chrysanthou highlights as specific to Herodian is his selectivity in providing materials for construction of characters in such a way that the reader is encouraged to view and evaluate the emperors in relation to each other.⁶ Chrysanthou is convincing when arguing that a function of Herodian's introductory remarks was to produce certain expectations in the readers and stimulate their reflection on the actions, character, and morality of the emperors and claimants to power. Thus, for example, Marcus Aurelius' concerns about the looming succession to the imperial throne of his adolescent son (1.3.1) encourage the reader to trace how Commodus followed the paths of corruption anticipated previously by his father. On the other hand, Pertinax' entirely positive introduction prompts the audience to reflect on the causes of the emperor's quick and disastrous end. This method, as Chrysanthou has demonstrated, appears to be complemented by the technique of downplaying negative features in the introductions of some of the characters, be they Niger or Maximinus, and revealing them gradually in the subsequent narrative.

In Chapter 2 ('Accession Stories', 64–129), the author provides an effective overview of the interconnections between the imperial accession stories in Herodian. It has been long noticed by scholars that Herodian's succession narratives have a certain formulaic structure and, therefore, can be considered as special compositional units.⁷ Having focused more specifically on how imperial power is acquired, Chrysanthou reveals Herodian's unique manner of deploying the accession stories and traces the changes in Herodian's technique as a reflection of historical reality and the author's narrative purposes. For example, the soldiers are given more space in Julianus' accession story, compared with the previous emperors; the senators, on the other hand, play a key role in selection of Pupienus and Balbinus, while common traits of Pertinax and Gordian I appear to encourage readers to draw some parallels between the circumstances and motives of their rise to power. Thus, Chrysanthou demonstrates the modes of transfer of imperial authority in Herodian's work, as well as the links between various accession stories,

⁶ For similar observations, see: Hidber (2006) 148–9, 154, 157.

⁷ Fuchs (1895) 229–35 and (1896) 193–201; Hidber (2006) 152; Andrews (2019) 130.

prompting consideration of similarities and contrasts in the circumstances, ways, and motives of those coming to power. He reveals some recurrent themes behind the stories, particularly the role of noble origins and personal virtues in securing imperial power. He also adds to a number of modern studies on the behavioural patterns in Herodians' representation of young emperors as failed political actors.

Chrysanthou rightly suggests that some of the stories produce 'the effect of bringing back repeated themes' (125). However, his focus on the intratextual relationship between the accession stories raises a methodological question: can it be established with certainty whether some of the similarities between different sections of the work result from Herodian's literary plan and belong primarily to the sphere of narrative techniques and patterns, or could the correspondences in the representation of certain scenes and details be a reflection of historical evidence? Of course, one doesn't necessarily exclude the other, and, consequently, the issue can be specified as the distinction and correlation between Herodian's literary technique and the historical realities to be narrated. For instance, Herodian's depiction of the accession of Pupienus and Balbinus, especially the scene of the people of Rome preventing them with stones and sticks from leaving the Capitol (7.10.7), has an analogy in the representation of the popular hostility to Julianus' accession (2.6.13), and this is something Chrysanthou rightly points to (123). However, the remarkable and unusual details of both stories, especially the depiction of the events of 238 CE that were close to the time of the composition of the work, could be based on eyewitness data and shared by the author with his readers because of the very extraordinariness of the situation, and not necessarily because Herodian wanted his Roman populace to respond to the accession of Julianus and the two senatorial emperors in a similar manner. Another example is Herodian's representation of the 'shared rule' of Severus' sons, as well as Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, and Pupienus and Balbinus. The opposition between the leaders and their strife for hegemony is hardly surprising, all the more so given that Herodian operates with well-known facts. Therefore, it's not quite clear from Chrysanthou's analysis (123–4) why all these stories should be read from the perspective of a particular literary model or pattern encouraging 'a backward glance at the earlier narrative' (124), rather than a mere reflection of objective historical regularity.

Chapter 3 ('Warfare and Battle Narratives', 130–96) considers Herodian's description of military leadership and battle scenes. As Chrysanthou has highlighted, Herodian's battle narratives incorporate various fixed topics and formulaic elements that correspond to the ancient historiographic tradition (131), while the representation of strong military leadership is conventionally

based on the idea of ‘courage’ (*ἀνδρεία*) and energetic fighting against the enemy.

As in the previous and the subsequent chapters, much of Chrysanthou’s attention is devoted to revealing behavioural patterns and intratextual interconnections evoking comparisons of the emperors, which has led the scholar to the conclusion that Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and Pertinax form ‘a triad, which programmatically establishes a yardstick against which the succeeding emperors are explored’. Such a reading is not impossible, though there is a feeling that the formulation, as well as the entire idea of ‘a kind of triangulation of events’ of the 190s CE might not necessary reflect Herodian’s narrative strategy, but rather an impression produced by the ancient text on a modern scholar. Definitely, Marcus Aurelius was a paradigm for Herodian and his envisaged audience in many respects including the military role.⁸ As has been shown by Chrysanthou, Herodian’s Commodus deviates from the standards set by Marcus Aurelius and, jointly with Niger, Julianus, Albinus, Severus Alexander, and Gordian I, exemplifies a pattern of inappropriate imperial behaviour in relation to war, with its essential features being idleness and underestimation of threats, along with panic and despair in action. Therefore, the relation between the positive and negative paradigms of military leadership represented respectively by Marcus Aurelius and Commodus can be characterised as a binary opposition. As for Pertinax, his military conduct, as Chrysanthou himself recognises (191), adheres to Marcus’ pattern and can hardly be viewed as unique or fundamentally different from Commodus’ father. Septimius Severus, with his own approach to warfare based on his ability to manipulate the soldiers through eloquent speeches (2.9.7–11), to increase his popularity by his own example of military prowess (2.11.2) and to catch the enemy off-guard, is more promising in this respect. Chrysanthou demonstrates the parallels between Severus’ military performance and that of Maximinus (185, 187), though the latter’s relationship with soldiers proved to be a complete failure.

Chrysanthou shows convincingly that Herodian ‘knits’ Severus’ civil and foreign wars together to afford a more coherent picture of Severus’ military career. One may also agree that Herodian ‘works hard to present a more favourable picture of Severus’ military career’ as compared with Dio (159). However, this is not always the case, and, therefore, some of the examples employed by Chrysanthou, especially Severus’ Eastern campaign (159–60), can be viewed as problematic. Describing Severus’ defeat at Hatra, both, Cassius Dio and Herodian lay stress on the military capacity of the locals, and all the sophisticated weapons they had to successfully resist the imposters (Dio

⁸ Hidber (2006) 188.

76[75].10.1, 11.1–4; Hdn. 3.9.4–5). Therefore, I can hardly agree with Chrysanthou that there is a fundamental difference between the two authors in this respect (159), though the idea that Severus had the potential to take Hatra had he not been prevented from doing that by a divine force (Dio 76[75].12.3–5) makes Dio’s narrative sound more favourable to the emperor as a military commander than Herodian’s account of how Severus accomplished nothing and had to give up the siege because of the enormous amount of casualties, with his army being greatly disappointed by the failure (3.9.7). According to Herodian, Severus captured Ctesiphon ‘more by good luck than good judgement’ (3.9.12). This remark does not appear to be viewed as more favourable than what the epitome of Dio says about the unexpected attack of the Romans on the Parthian city (Dio 76[75].9.3–4).

Chapter 4 (‘Trans-Regnal Themes’, 197–248), nicely suited to Chrysanthou’s overall project, focuses on a number of themes that reappear in various parts of Herodian’s work. The concepts ‘trans-regnal themes’ and ‘trans-regnal continuity’, as well the methods of studying them are owed by Chrysanthou to Pelling’s seminal article on Cassius Dio.⁹ Chrysanthou demonstrates Herodian’s interest in interaction between emperors and their entourage. Indeed, such recurrent themes as the corrupting influence of imperial freedmen, women, or soldiers on the ruler, and, on the other hand, the problem of the emperor’s capacity to follow proper instruction and counsel from his advisers, are well contextualised within Roman imperial historiography. A peculiarity of Herodian, as Chrysanthou has highlighted, is ‘the elusiveness of education and wise advice in the post-Marcus world’ (208). Another trans-regnal theme, and actually another literary *topos*, is the emperor’s inclination towards goodwill (*εὖνοια*). Chrysanthou highlights that the people’s lack of *εὖνοια* towards a political leader, or the juxtaposition of *φόβος* and *εὖνοια* by some of the emperors, functions as an indication of tyrannical rule in Herodian’s work. As this chapter elucidates still further, there are some other markers of tyranny, as well as of proper leadership, that belong to the sphere of imperial representation or self-representation. Thus, Chrysanthou rightly points to Herodian’s interest in the theatricality of imperial power, particularly the dissonance between appearance and reality as a sign of despotic rule. The scholar’s observation is that appearance could be used by Herodian to indicate certain features of imperial character and morality and to mark significant events and turning points in history.

In his final case-study (‘The Emperor’s Finale’, 249–310), Chrysanthou examines Herodian’s narratives of the last day(s) of emperors. Unlike Hidber, who regards Herodian’s descriptions of the imperial deaths and accessions as

⁹ Pelling (1997) 130.

two parts of *Machtwechselgeschichten*,¹⁰ Chrysanthou considers ‘the emperor’s finale’ to be an independent and important structural unit of the composition of Herodian’s work. Partly as a result of this approach, or simply because this chapter ends the study, the author, as he himself confesses (251, 252, 273), has to revisit some of the themes and episodes explored previously in various chapters of the book, which results in repetitions. For instance, Chrysanthou’s considerations on the idleness and inactivity as causes of the falls of Niger and Albinus (272–3), Macrinus (288) and Alexander Severus (291) are oddly disconnected from the discussion of the pattern of failed military and political leadership in Chapter 3 (*passim*, especially 170, 171, 179). Another example is Marcus Aurelius’ dying speech (1.4.2–6) which is discussed by Chrysanthou twice, in Chapters 4 (206–7) and 5 (252–3). As the author puts it, the ‘speech is closely modeled on that of Cyrus to his sons in the *Cyropaedia* (8.7) as well as that of Micipsa to his sons and Jugurtha in Sallust’s *Bellum Jugurthinum*’ (10) (252). It should be noted here that Hidber is quite convincing when arguing that the narrative setting of Marcus’ speech, as well as the entire conception of the beginning of Herodian’s work, are closer to the Sallust passage than *Cyropaedia*.¹¹

Having given attention to themes which are not unfamiliar to modern scholarship on Herodian’s depiction of imperial downfalls,¹² Chrysanthou sheds more light on the structural template of the death narratives, the space Herodian devotes to the role of soldiers in the transfer of the power and the issues of the relationship of a ruler with various social groups and his surroundings. The critical aspect of Chrysanthou’s fifth chapter is his analysis of the thematic, structural, and verbal narrative devices employed by Herodian to let the account of the death of an emperor evoke his accession story in order to illustrate key aspects of the emperor’s character and his reign. Furthermore, Chrysanthou rightly points to Herodian’s technique of developing comparisons and associations between imperial death narratives to place the characters within the larger framework of apt and bad leadership. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius’ or Septimius Severus’ ‘dignified exit from the *History*’ contrasts sharply with final moments of those failed political figures who meet their end ‘deserted’ and ‘isolated’.

The Conclusion (311–22) provides the reader with an overview of the major outcomes of the analysis. The main question here is how this complex and multifaceted web of intratextual connections revealed and scrutinised by the author of the book contributes to our understanding of the general historical

¹⁰ Hidber (2006) 152, 160.

¹¹ Hidber (2006) 199–201. For Marcus’ dying words as modelled on Xenophon, see Alföldy (1989) 18.

¹² Marasco (1998); Timonen (2000); Scott (2018).

conception of Herodian's work (if, of course, there is any). As Chrysanthou has demonstrated, structural and thematic patterning serves multiple narrative functions. Notably, the scholar is not inclined to search for straightforward political messages in Herodian's *History*, which is not surprising, given the fact that very little is known about Herodian's social standing and public career, and one may even suggest that it was a deliberate narrator's choice to obscure his background under the harsh political circumstances.¹³ However, Chrysanthou admits that Herodian's narrative is not devoid of moralising or didactic impulses, with some of the behavioural patterns being designed to draw lessons about the relationship between good leadership, character, and morality. As Chrysanthou has noticed, there is a sort of paradox in Herodian's depiction of an emperor's good character and virtuous behaviour as being at odds with the conditions and demands of the moment (261, 300). This basically corresponds to Kemezis' idea of dysfunctionality as the main characteristic of Herodian's post-Marcus narrative world.¹⁴ Therefore, Chrysanthou appears to be correct when suggesting that Herodian employs patterns to make it easier for the reader to navigate through the turbulent circumstances of the era, providing the audience with a more coherent picture of events and, importantly, offering 'a sense of the past and present as a continuum' (313). In this respect, I find it difficult to disagree with Chrysanthou that patterning by no means diminishes, but rather enhances the literary and historical quality of Herodian's narrative against the background of Greek and Roman imperial historiography.

As one of a few recent volumes on Herodian, Chrysanthou's discussion appears to be an important contribution to Brill's *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* series. It is a pleasure to read this text which sheds more light on what narrative techniques were employed by the ancient author to write a history of a time of troubles and anxiety, and, in this respect, can be valuable not only for experts in Greek historical narratives of the second and third centuries CE, but also a broader audience of historians and philologists.

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¹³ Hidber (2006) 10; Kemezis (2022) 40–1.

¹⁴ Kemezis (2014) 238–9.

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