

READER RESPONSES

Comments on P. Stadter, 'Herodotus and the North Carolina Oral Narrative Tradition' (above, pp. 13-41)

There are many interesting and important points in Philip Stadter's paper, 'Herodotus and the North Carolina Oral Narrative Tradition'. I found particularly compelling the arguments which follow from the assumption of Herodotus as part of a true oral society (of the sort that we more often imagine for Homer). I think Stadter has made a good case that Herodotus did not read from a written text. Also important are the suggestions that Herodotus' text as we have it represents a particular address to a specific audience, and may not have been that used when he spoke before other audiences (n. 53); interesting too are the possible scenarios of how Herodotus' stories acquired their obvious 'Greek' nature (nn. 63-66).

I found particularly illuminating some of the material at the end of the paper, especially since these observations overlap with many of my own concerns in 'Odysseus and the Historians' [orig. *Histos* 1 (1997); now in *SyllCl* 18 [2007] 1-79; references below are to this version]. I could address many, but will focus specifically on: (i) the remarks about Odysseus' character, with its mixture of truth and falsehood; and (ii) the audience reaction to (or interaction with) Herodotus' stories.

The character of Jack in the stories has much in common, of course, with Odysseus. Ray Hicks in his defense of Jack (n. 79) could well be speaking of Odysseus when he cites his cleverness and resourcefulness, as well as his occasional foolishness and greed. As with Odysseus, Jack's craftiness is part of his approach to the world, and for the storyteller it becomes essential to place this trickiness—which can be seen as a destructive force—within an overall positive framework: Jack is, after all, a good person (not a goody goody), and Ray Hicks' stories tell 'important truths about the world' (Stadter at n. 81). So too Odysseus' craftiness is in the service of a socially acceptable goal (getting home and winning back his property) and it validates the accepted morality of his society (see 'Odysseus' at pp. 62-3); so too, his 'lies' also tell important truths about the world ('Odysseus' 61 n. 177). No doubt, many will find it problematic to think of Herodotus as an Odyssean figure, particularly if that means assuming that the 'truth' of his account is not straightforward and easily accessible. It's hard to imagine an historian telling 'lies' in the service of truth. But as Stadter has shown in his analysis of the North Carolina oral tradition, the story-telling activity is deeply imbedded in the very society that produces and enjoys it, and its authors carefully tailor it to audience expectations and the world that they know (Stadter at nn. 63-

67). Part of the audience's responsibility is to decipher it and to evaluate whether or not it makes sense given their own view of the world, and we must not assume that that audience was incapable of understanding the deeper truths that Herodotus' account was attempting to convey. It is possible that his audience saw irony and distancing where we do not (or, because of the loss of the immediate context, cannot).

The question of audience and performance (Stadter at nn. 78-84; 'Odysseus' pp. 57ff.) is crucial for an appreciation of Herodotus, and I am encouraged to see that Stadter and I are on the same track, although we have come to it by different routes. It is very valuable to have from an actual storytelling society the parallels that show the audience as much more actively involved than in a literate society, and evaluating for themselves the stories that they heard, testing them against their own experience, and also against their evaluation of the speaker. This is the society of performance that G. E. R. Lloyd posited for fifth-century Athens, and it implies a complicated interaction between audience and speaker, in which both alike work towards establishing the truth (whatever they conceive that to be). Unfortunately for us, we have only one speaker in that dialogue, the text of Herodotus, and as Stadter has (persuasively, in my opinion) argued, that text is the performance of a single time, and may in fact be significantly different from another performance before another audience and in a different context. We are accustomed (using our Thucydidean goggles) to seeing an *ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν* as something negative and limited. But it may, in fact, be the way author and audience—particularly in this oral context—work together towards a view of the world. It is not so much a 'passing performance' as it is the immediacy of a present struggle (*ἀγώνισμα*). Such a contrast may also help explain the different narrative personae of Herodotus and Thucydides, the one active, engaged, and inviting, while the other is detached and forbidding, secure that the path to truth is travelled by the lone historian beyond the reach of any listeners, except an imagined, future audience.

Union College, Schenectady, New York

JOHN MARINCOLA