

## REVIEW–DISCUSSION

Mabel Lang, *Thucydidean Narrative and Discourse*. Edited by Jeffrey S. Rusten and Richard Hamilton. Ann Arbor: Michigan Classical Press, 2011. Pp. xxiii + 219. Hardcover, \$65.00. ISBN 978-0-9799713-4-1.

For nearly six decades Mabel Lang distinguished herself as a scholar of Mycenaean archaeology, the Athenian Agora, and Thucydides. Famed as a teacher at Bryn Mawr College, she attracted scores of undergraduates to the study of Greek, and advised some outstanding dissertations, including Virginia Hunter's *Thucydides: The Artful Reporter*.<sup>1</sup> Her Agora publications include very worthwhile pamphlets for the general public.

The fifteen essays collected here include four unpublished pieces that Lang wisely passed through her colleague Richard Hamilton to Jeffrey Rusten, a scholar ideally suited to editing them. The handsome volume they have produced will prove useful for scholars interested in Lang's own work or in the wider sweep of Thucydidean studies over seven exciting decades. (A significant unexplained omission is Lang's 'Cleon as the Anti-Pericles', *CP* 67 (1972) 159–69.) Additional essays by Mary Patterson McPherson and Eleanor Dickey honour Lang's outstanding teaching, administrative service, and scholarship in other areas.

Rusten's useful introductory notes and a fine review by Timothy Doran (<http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2012/2012-01-45.html>) remove the need for further summary but heighten the obligation to examine the value of Lang's work for contemporary and future scholarship. To capture the evolution of her thinking, I rearrange the book's chapters in chronological order:

- (a) Early articles on the revolution of the 400 in Athens (1948) and on the murder of Hipparchus (1955).
- (b) Four methodologically kindred studies from 1967–68 (on Ithome, Kylon, Pausanias and Epidamnus), and a follow-up on the 400. The Cleon essay (1972) fits into this group.
- (c) The full and useful exploration of 'participial motivation' of characters (1995); 'Alcibiades and Phrynichus' (1996); 'Thucydidean thought' (2002); and a study of speeches in Book I (1999).

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Hunter, *Thucydides the Artful Reporter* (Toronto 1973).

- (d) Four unpublished essays on speech-writing, first-person statements, paired speeches, and direct and indirect speeches ('Necessary for Whom?').

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(a) 'Revolution of the 400: Chronology and Constitutions' (1948) is the earliest and longest published essay in the book, still cited, though rarely accepted *in toto*, six decades later.<sup>2</sup> Lang ingeniously attempts to reconcile Aristotle's and Thucydides' analyses of the oligarchic takeover at Athens, arguing that each author emphasises a different side of the same event: historical action or 'effect' (Thucydides); constitutional history (Aristotle). The 1967 sequel adjusts the chronology, parenthetically accusing Max Cary of 'thinking that our historical judgment is superior to the evidence' instead of making 'a serious effort to understand the accounts of Thucydides and Aristotle' (104). This is oddly severe, considering that Cary, in the very article Lang critiques, had been one of the few scholars to endorse her 1948 findings (*JHS* 72 (1952) 56–61), and that Lang herself often dismisses Thucydides' analyses.

b) The studies from the late 1960s and 1972 offer new interpretations of selected passages in Thucydides. 'A Note on Ithome' credits Sparta with astonishing cleverness: prevented by an earthquake and Helot rebellion from openly aiding Thasos' secession from the Delian League, Sparta sought covertly, Lang suggests, to reduce pressure on the island by requesting Athenian military aid against the Helots. The double-carom shot, if such it was, failed: Athens both aided Sparta, and suppressed the secession.

In Lang's eyes, 'oddities' mar Thucydides' account of the Epidamnus affair (Thuc. 1.25–44). She dismisses Thucydides' report of early Corinthian hatred of Corcyra (1.25.3–4), and concludes that Thucydides 'has made clear the innocence of the Corcyraeans.' But as Edith Foster has shown, perceived slights, 'honour', and mutual hatred drove both Corinth *and* Corcyra to destructive decisions that cost Corcyra more than 7000 men and scores of ships, and dangerously destabilised the city. Foster's verdict is not 'innocence' but 'irrational recklessness'.<sup>3</sup>

In the famous Kylon–Pausanias–Themistocles sequence (1.125–38), Lang declares first that Thucydides added details 'for verisimilitude' and uncritically relayed an 'Alkmaionid version' of Kylon's failed coup (31–2), and then

<sup>2</sup> Martha Taylor, 'Implicating the Demos: A Reading of Thucydides on the Rise of the Four Hundred', *JHS* 122 (2002), 91–108; Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides: Volume III* (Oxford 2010), 912 mentions the 1967 supplement to this study.

<sup>3</sup> *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism* (Cambridge 2010), ch. 2.

that the Pausanias narrative is fraught with ‘inconsistencies’ that Thucydides accepted only because they must have had an ‘unimpeachable source’ (37–41): i.e. the Spartan government, seeking to scapegoat innocent Pausanias (46–7).

Why should we believe that that Spartan or Alkmaionid propaganda would mislead Thucydides, or that he would not impeach an inconsistent source? Why should Thucydides, elsewhere harshly realistic about Spartans, suddenly deem them ‘unimpeachable’? Lang does not say, and provides next to no documentation. At the end (46) she acknowledges that this is all a hypothesis, intended to discredit an argument advanced in 1912.

The suite of personal histories in 1.125–38 has been notorious since antiquity: ‘Here the lion smiled’, a scholiast famously said. Since the 1880s (!), scholars have been busy unearthing ‘inconsistencies’ in the narrative. That they did this so easily, in study after study, may signal that Thucydides was after different game. Writing about an earlier era, he adopts Herodotean discourse and deploys Herodotean devices: an incredibly evil Spartan, an improbably adroit and prescient Themistocles, vivid chases, unlikely supplications, unbelievable epistolary sequences, narrow escapes. Far from falling victim to Alkmaionid agitprop or Spartiate scheming, Thucydides was alertly chronicling men’s neglect of due diligence, the wide gap between Spartan and Athenian values and decision-making, and the rare quality of Themistoclean intelligence (1.138.2–3): and, possibly, suggesting that *today’s* history-writing requires far greater rigour.

One short passage here (32–4) offers the following locutions:

It is clear  
 Attempts might reasonably have been made  
 A version ... which might lessen the blame  
 What might have been known  
 Would naturally use  
 It should have been less useful  
 The answer must be  
 It seems most likely  
 We might expect  
 If we assume  
 It may well be  
 If this is a possibility it would give us ...  
 Would have been

‘Assume’, ‘naturally’, and a flood of conditionals and potential optatives exercise, perhaps, disproportionate analytic weight, allowing the out-of-hand dismissal of anything that seems ‘unnatural’, encouraging conclusions that

are based only on assumptions of the moment. It is less a methodology than a set of predilections, yielding inconsistent results.

Now we can turn to the later essays grouped under (c) above. ‘Participial motivation’ (1995) catalogues all occasions in the narrative in which a character’s motivation is described with a participle. The analytical element of this contribution is brief, but the impressive catalogue of examples remains valuable.

The value lies partly in revealing that motivation is unevenly distributed: Athenians (Nicias, Alcibiades, Demosthenes, Cleon) are generally Thucydides’ most motivated leaders. Brasidas is the only Spartan whose thinking receives much attention. Archidamus, Astyochus, and Gylippus—a saviour of Sicily!—seldom ‘think’ or ‘feel’ much in Thucydides (9–10). These Spartans seem stylistically denuded, the flattest of flat characters, without affect.

Lang herself puts participial motivation to work in ‘Alcibiades and Phrynichus’ (1996), insisting that we no more need a ‘source’ for the thinking of Phrynichus in 8.50 than we do for that of Cleon (Christophe Schneider<sup>4</sup> and Virginia Hunter had, of course, argued along these lines a quarter of a century earlier). Oddly, this perception does not deter Lang from insisting on a source where others require none, for instance Phrynichus’ first letter to Astyochus.

Here, as elsewhere, the discursive element of Thucydides’ historiography, his manipulation of tone, his skill at juxtaposition, requires more careful attention. Readers will remember that another clever Athenian leader—Themistocles—had outdone a Spartan at letter-writing and gained an edge. Indeed, Phrynichus’ ‘foresight’ echoes Themistocles’ (8.51.1 / 1.138.3). Hornblower observes *ad* 8.50–1 that both passages have a comic quality and that both men are clever tricksters. True, but this is not Ealing comedy: it underlines important cultural differences. The search for Thucydides’ sources is undeniably important: but claims about real or imagined sources cannot be allowed to crowd out other, possibly more fruitful, interpretive approaches.

(d) The essays on Thucydidean ‘thought’ and speeches are clustered at the end of the volume. Chapter 10, ‘Thucydidean Thought’ (2002), follows on (but does not credit) studies of ‘ring-composition’ by Katicic and Hammond half a century earlier.<sup>5</sup> Lang observes, in ‘Thucydides as a Speech-Writer’ (previously unpublished), that ring-composition dominates

<sup>4</sup> *Information und Absicht bei Thukydides* (Göttingen, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> R. Katicic, ‘Die Ringkomposition im ersten Buche des Thukydideischen Geschichtswerkes’, *WSt* 70 (1957) 179–196; N. G. L. Hammond, ‘The Arrangement of the Thought in the Proem and in Other Parts of Thucydides I’ *CQ* n.s. 2 (1952) 127–141.

in three speeches Thucydides is unlikely to have heard (4.59–64, 4.85–7, 6.89–92). His hand, she claims, may be more evident in these, while the absence of ring-composition in other speeches of Hermocrates, Brasidas, and Alcibiades may reveal their greater authenticity.

This is not exciting. Ring-composition (not the term Lang uses) is quite common in early Greek literature, and ring-composition was hardly Thucydides' only compositional tool. It is a very gross gauge of Thucydidean intervention.

Too, the rough (I use the word advisedly) outlines Lang provides are hardly the only meaningful distinctive feature of style. Although Lang insists that 'style and substance' distinguish her three speeches from their more 'authentic' companions, both of Alcibiades' direct speeches are characterised by smooth and beguiling parataxis and all three of Hermocrates' speeches feature short, staccato antitheses, 'doubled' nouns (*ιδιώτην–ιδιώτη, πόλιν–πόλει*) and rhyme and other plays on sound, while Brasidas, in all three of his speeches, uses the potential optative and nouns ending in *–σις* more than his fellow Spartans. These details of style, in other words, do not vary according to Thucydides' supposed exposure to the speeches that were delivered.

Chapter 15, 'Necessary for Whom? Direct vs. Indirect Speeches in Thucydides' (previously unpublished) again combines substantial original research and dubious interpretation. The research creates a valuable catalogue of direct and indirect speeches, and these are further broken down in various ways. Lang argues that the direct speeches may bring positive, negative or null responses, and that the 'null' cases may show that 'they are not so much for the immediate audience as for the reader': 'to ponder', as Rusten remarks (168; xxiii). That means, for example, that we, not the Athenians, are the targets of the Funeral Speech, of Phormio's speech at Naupactus, and the Mytilene Debate.

The distinction between 'intended audiences' seems contrived. When Aeschylus' Clytemnestra addresses the chorus, Othello rages at Desdemona, or Strether reflects to Little Bilham in James' *The Ambassadors* we recognise that a dual audience exists: the characters onstage—even if they do not respond at once—and ourselves. The chorus and Desdemona and Bilham are somehow affected by what they hear, even if the effect is not immediately evident. We are affected as well. Why should this not be true in Thucydides? That is not a rhetorical question. Lang remarked in an earlier chapter that 'Any consideration of the speeches ... should begin with Thucydides' own statement concerning their composition' (153), and her fascination with *τὰ δέοντα*, 'what was called for', seems to drive her insistence here that normal interpretative approaches don't work for Thucydides. Such is the haunting

force of Thuc. 1.22.4. But what if we replaced ‘should begin with’ with ‘need not begin with’? Adam Parry and Colin Macleod spent very little time on 1.22.4. Despite or because of that, their studies of the speeches continue to be used with great profit today. (For a more detailed discussion of Thucydidean indirect speeches, with comments on Lang, see Edith Foster, ‘Some Recent Work on Direct and Indirect Discourse in the Ancient Historians’, *Histos* 6 (2012), especially 6–11: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/histos/documents/2012RD02FosterDirectandIndirectDiscourse.pdf>.)

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Mabel Lang was a strong and independent voice in Thucydidean studies. Contemporary and future scholars will gain from studying her work but only if the study is critical and not slavish.

One of Lang’s great strengths was her insistence on looking at the text itself, trying to make sense of ‘oddities’, as she called them. Her impressive command of the Greek language enabled her to mine a range of works—Herodotus, Aristotle, the Old Oligarch—for suggestive cross-references.

Another strength was her readiness to put forward her own, often ingenious, suggestions. She admitted at times that these were ‘hypotheses’. Her skill was such that even though her positions about the 400, Phrynichus, Epidamnus, among others, won little favour, the efforts reward study.

The obverse of Mabel Lang’s independence was a certain scholarly remoteness. Rusten is slightly off key in speaking of her ‘lack of enthusiasm for doxography and quibbles with other scholars’ (xv). To call Classical Studies a community implies the utility of communication. Would the essay on Cleon or ‘participial motivation’ have gained from closer study of *others’* work on demagogues or motivation? Might a reading of W. R. Connor’s *Thucydides* have convinced her that ‘oddities’ may imply something other than Alkmaionid conniving? These are not ‘quibbles’: time and again in this book, one finds positions that would have gained from increased dialogue with fellow scholars.

At the same time, ‘increased dialogue’ can cripple: the perceived need to hunt down every previous study of a topic can obstruct research, and sometimes we are indeed better off for plunging into unprovable but stimulating comparisons. At such moments, sentences like the following can be positively welcome:

Let us look to see what might be the results of assuming Cleon to be the author of the oligarchic *Athenaion Politeia* ('Cleon', 166)

That is typical of Mabel Lang at her ingenious, comparative, best. It is an appropriate high note on which to conclude this review.

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