

## REVIEW

## THE MORALS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Lisa Irene Hau, *Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2016. Pp. viii + 312. Hardback, £80.00. ISBN 978-1-4744-1107-3. Paperback, £24.99. ISBN 978-1-4744-2713-5.

This excellent volume is ordered in an original way. The first half of the book begins with an analysis of Polybius' techniques of moralizing and moral themes, proceeds to an analysis of these same topics in Diodorus, and then looks at the moralizing tendencies (as far as they are recoverable) of the fragmentary Hellenistic histories. However, the second section returns us to the beginnings of ancient historiography, discussing first Herodotus, next Thucydides, then Xenophon, before looking at the Oxyrhynchus historian, Ephorus, and Theopompus. This anachronistic arrangement allows the author vividly to describe the full-blown moralizing of the Hellenistic historians before advancing her arguments about the first historians.

The brief conclusion (272–7) argues that from the fifth century to the second century historiographic writing displays a variety of different strategies for representing moral themes and information. However, the moral lessons of historiography are 'remarkably constant' throughout this period (272). For example, the instability of human fortune (272) and the necessity for moderation in the face of this instability (273) are persistently emphasized; likewise, the basic virtues (e.g. moderation, kindness, piety, courage) and vices (e.g. greed, impiety, cruelty) are fairly consistent throughout the historians. This long-lasting agreement is surprising, says the author, but again not so surprising when we remember, first, the basically traditional mindset of ancient societies, and second, that historiographic writing itself emerges from a moralizing impulse, an argument the author takes from Hayden White's analyses of historiography (5, 274).

The author has found a great deal of compelling evidence for her arguments, and any particular quibbles I might express in this review should not be taken as disagreement with her basic observation that the ancient historians intended to teach about ethical behavior and its consequences, and that to ignore the 'moralizing impulse' of ancient historiography is to ignore what was to them an important and sometimes central priority (1–6). The author's contribution is therefore an important one, and the following arguments should be taken as reflections on a well-argued case.

It seems to me that the author's descriptions of the narrative strategies and moral emphases of Polybius and Diodorus form the strongest chapters of the book, although the chapter on the fragmentary Hellenistic histories is also a *tour de force*, which pays due attention to the priorities of the 'cover texts' while extracting reasonable evidence for the moralizing tendencies of Timaeus, Duris, Phylarchus, Agatharchides, and Posidonius.

These initial chapters on Polybius and Diodorus are also longer than the concluding chapters on the classical historians, and include extensive and vivid sample passages. They first discuss a variety of narrative strategies, for example moralizing digressions (about one quarter of the extant pages of Polybius: 70), evaluative phrasing, direct speeches containing moral evaluations, and the presentation of morality that emerges through emplotment, especially through the creation of correlations between actions and their results, such as when good actions are rewarded and foolish actions punished.

They then discuss the particular virtues emphasized by each historian: in Polybius, intelligent courage and moderation are important; however, piety is not discussed and (perhaps in order to distinguish himself from historians he considered sensationalists) he does not chastise cruelty (68–70). By contrast, Diodorus is fascinated with cruelty and emphasizes the importance of piety (85–91). Thus, whereas Polybius explains Rome's success by showing the Romans' superior virtues (39), for Diodorus 'only moral causation, driven by divine justice, can make sense of the world' (120). Despite these differences, Diodorus' moral lessons were generally 'very similar to the moral lessons propounded by Polybius' (121). Thus, one can conclude that not only 'moral didacticism but also a canon of moral lessons were an established part of the genre of historiography by the first century BC' (121). An important comment on this information is the author's frequently renewed argument that the ancient historians saw no conflict between moralizing and historical writing (e.g. 3–4, 243, 258, 276). If I have understood correctly, in her view the two in fact depended on each other: as far as the Hellenistic historians were concerned, the moral lessons that emerged from history writing reflected the truth about the events, and deriving this truth so that it could be related was the motivation for organizing experience into narrative in the first place.

The author's remarks about the 'canon of moral lessons that existed by the first century' show that the context in which Polybius and Diodorus produced their histories was different from that of the first historians. Polybius and Diodorus wrote after (for instance) Aristotle and Isocrates, and for the audience of the Roman era. The author does not elaborate on these important developments, and it is hardly any wonder that she does not: the book already accomplishes a great deal by reviewing the moral themes of so many historians. Nevertheless, one can ask whether it is possible to compare Polybius and Diodorus to Herodotus and Thucydides without indicating something about their vastly different contexts. The experimental initiators of historiography may have

stood under no expectations from their readers or listeners other than the ones they themselves created with their prologues, whereas Polybius and Diodorus were operating in a context, as this volume well demonstrates, in which the lessons that would emerge from historiography reflected well-established ethical norms. Thus, the systematized, recognizable moral tropes that were available to (or which burdened) Polybius and Diodorus were not available (or did not burden) Herodotus and Thucydides.

This is not to suggest that Herodotus and Thucydides did not stand under the influence of a moralizing tradition of their own: Homer might be considered a highly moralizing predecessor, not to mention figures such as Solon, Aeschylus, etc. The author, however, discusses Herodotus and Thucydides not in this context, but rather according to whether they displayed the moral themes found in the Hellenistic historians. She speaks, for instance, in the following terms: ‘moral lessons are there ... and this places Herodotus completely in line with the genre of historiography that developed after him’ (172). Or also: ‘Another Hellenistic type of moralizing found in Herodotus is the moral digression’ (176). Likewise for Thucydides: ‘In this chapter, we will search Thucydides’ *History*, first for the types of moralizing we have seen in Polybius and Diodorus, then for other ways of teaching moral lessons, and finally we shall ask what those moral lessons might be’ (194). Rather daringly, the question of the chapters on Herodotus and Thucydides is whether the classical historians display the characteristics of a future moralism.

This is not to suggest that the author assimilates the historians one to another, seeing only what fits her thesis. On the contrary, she offers original readings and makes many good individual points about both Herodotus and Thucydides. I did miss the lengthier examples that were offered for Polybius and Diodorus, and, in respect to Herodotus, I especially missed a discussion of his pervasive use of irony and his relativism, both core aspects of his writing that deeply affect the presentation of anyone’s justice or virtue in the *Histories*. The author shows that historians after Theopompus lack this ironic relationship to moral rules and instead consciously deploy historiography in the service of an approved moral education. Herodotus operates in a different mode, and the application of the Hellenistic norms therefore leads to unsatisfyingly general results. As the author concludes: ‘the overall didactic lesson of [Herodotus’] *Histories*, then, is not to feel too comfortable in success and not to let good fortune go to your head’ (187). This is surely not enough said in response to Herodotus’ empathetic understanding of so many and such various characters and fates.

Thucydides is another ironist, and escapes most radically from the Polybian/Diodoran categories, a fact the author faces directly (cf. e.g. 273). Her discussion of Thucydides focuses, *inter alia*, on the Melian Dialogue, on Thucydides’ author essay on the Corcyraean revolt, and on his presentation of Alcibi-

ades and Nicias. Given more space, she might have discussed less famous Thucydidean passages that are more in accord with the Hellenistic views that form her standard, for instance, the following assessments of the Spartan commander Brasidas (in the Crawley translation):

... his just and moderate conduct toward the allies generally succeeded in persuading many to revolt... Later on in the war, after the events in Sicily, the present valor and conduct of Brasidas, which was known by experience to some, by hearsay to others, was what mainly created an esteem for the Spartans among the allies of Athens. He was the first who went out and showed himself so good a man at all points so as to leave behind him the conviction that the rest were like him (4.81.2–3).

The short remarks contain, *in nuce*, a character evaluation in which the outcome of good character is general esteem; this is, as the author shows, a frequently emphasized moral lesson of the Hellenistic historians (cf. e.g. 36–7). And certainly, if the statements weren't so deeply ironized by the surrounding narrative, the passage would line up nicely with Hellenistic categories. But Brasidas uses lies (4.108.5), stealth (many demonstrations, see e.g. 4.110–11), and threats (4.84.2, 87.2), as well as his famous 'moderation' (here certainly not the same thing as moderation in Polybius!), to convince or compel Athenian allies to join his side. Moreover, the allies were not only mistaken about Brasidas, but mistaken that 'the rest were like him', i.e. that other Spartans were similar to their idealistic delusion about Brasidas. As Thucydides shows, Brasidas may have promised the allies independence, but the Spartans quickly sent harmosts (4.132.3).

Thucydides' treatment of Brasidas is an example of the deeply ironizing tendencies of both Herodotus and Thucydides. The ironic mode of the first historians causes problems for the author's attempt directly to apply the sincere categories of the Hellenistic historians to an analysis of their writing, and perhaps it is not surprising that the author's description of Thucydides seems to conclude in an aporetic way. For her, Thucydides represents a 'bleak' world:

it is a world with no gods, where virtue does not pay, and the wicked come off better than the good ... [Thucydides] would prefer the traditional virtues to prevail, but has learned from experience that they do not. This means that he cannot recommend any way to act in the world ... he offers understanding of the world, of human motivation and interaction, and of military success and failure, but no very certain recipes for how to obtain it. This is the 'clarity' promised in his preface (215).

This conclusion seems to me to miss the usefulness of Thucydides, an author still read today by scholars of classics, political theory, international relations, and military history, as well as by military personal and politicians (who often arrive at problematic interpretations, but that's not the historian's fault). Isn't it precisely Thucydides' ability to see through moralizing arguments that forms a large part of his usefulness? Both Thucydides' Athenians and his Spartans were determined to justify their actions with moral claims, for instance. Thucydides helps us to see these claims for what they were. It is his very unveiling of such moralizing that helps us to understand ourselves and others. To my way of thinking, Herodotus and Thucydides taught 'moral' lessons in the broader sense that they were concerned to teach something useful about human life, but they taught somewhat different lessons than the Hellenistic historians, and by different means. Thus, while the author is undoubtedly correct that all the ancient historians were animated by concerns about justice and virtue, and that this forms an important commonality between them, it is important also to keep the differences between the historians, and between their contexts, in mind.

With Xenophon we are back on firmer ground. Here we find the font of subsequent practices (240), since Xenophon abandons Thucydides' attempted impartiality and is unafraid to take sides and level moral judgements; moreover, the active role of the gods in human history, after the brief Thucydidean hiatus, is restored. The author's final chapter about Xenophon's contemporaries, the Oxyrhynchus historian, Ephorus, and Theopompus (who was not the initiator of moralizing historiography, as her argument has shown), are as careful as her arguments about the fragmentary Hellenistic historians.

In sum, this volume, from which I personally have learned a great deal, is a tremendous achievement and can be recommended to all readers. The sections on Herodotus and Thucydides may be slightly less successful than the others, but this is no bar to learning: the juxtaposition of their works to the Hellenistic categories sets their writing in a new light, and encourages us to look again at the character of their ethical teachings. To conclude, it must be reiterated that the author demonstrates a wonderful grasp of ancient Greek historiography as a whole and an astonishing knowledge of the modern scholarship. This very coherent book would and will form an excellent introduction to ancient Greek historiography for any graduate student, in particular as it offers a complete bibliography for further research.

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