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REVIEW

GREEN-AND-YELLOWS OF THUCYDIDES 6 AND 7

Christopher Pelling, ed., *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War Book VI*. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xviii + 352. Hardcover, £79.99/$105.00; ISBN 978-1-107-17691-1. Paperback, £24.99/$32.99; ISBN 978-1-316-63021-1.

Christopher Pelling, ed., *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War Book VII*. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xvi + 290. Hardcover, £69.99/$89.99; ISBN 978-1-107-17692-8; Paperback, £22.99/$29.99. ISBN 978-1-316-63022-8.

These two volumes constitute not only a useful aid to students confronting Thucydides for the first or fourth time, but a substantial contribution to our understanding and appreciation of Books 6 and 7 of *The Peloponnesian War*. Macaulay called Book 7 'the *ne plus ultra* of human art', and Book 6 is not far behind, so Pelling provides us with a significant piece of work, all the more so because of his close focus upon literary matters, in which he excels. He is in full control of the text, its grammar and syntax, major and minor themes, and the enormous secondary literature that afflicts the scholar trying to explicate Thucydides' rhetorical genius.

Among the many things a reviewer could single out, I choose a few of what I consider the most noteworthy, primarily in Book 6. Pelling usefully begins by telling his reader (Book 6, p. 2 (*ta erga*), 22–9 (*hoi logoi*)) what he takes from Book I on Thucydides' general approach to historiography. For example, with regard to the numerous speeches in Book 6 (26): 'This commentary will be concerned with what Thucydides does with his material and only rarely with what was said in the real-life equivalents'. That comment could also serve as Pelling's overall goal, namely, to analyse the historian's shaping of the results of his research into a finished presentation of what happened, according to his own lights. Such an approach accords with the main line of scholarly inquiry into Thucydides' work for the past seventy or so years.

In his Introduction to Book 6, Pelling delivers many fine judgements on major issues of interpretation: Thucydides' relationship to Homer and

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Herodotus; his audience; oral vs. written composition; likely public performance of certain passages; the book trade just starting at the end of the fifth century BCE. Pelling is not doctrinaire, but after canvassing competing solutions to difficult questions, he comes down to a position, often a moderate and persuasive one. For example, on the oft-noted juxtaposition of the Melian Dialogue at the end of Book 5 and the dramatic portrayal of the Sicilian venture at the beginning of 6, he concludes (19) that Thucydides aimed at emphasising the contrast between two emotions, hope and fear, and the Athenians' 'paradoxical combination of fearlessness and fear'. That conclusion is nicely put and gives readers confidence that they are in good hands, probably the most important service a commentator can render to those grappling with such a complex text.

Pelling provides detailed comments on Sicilian geography and topography, crucial to an understanding of Thucydides' account, which frequently presumes his readers' knowledge of those details. His grasp of Thucydides' sources is firm and authoritative, as is his knowledge of the messy politics of Sicilian cities, deriving, as they did, from their colonial past and their competitive present. He is equally at home with the broad picture and the minute particular, a rare quality in commentaries written by specialists. The reader will learn a great deal from these two volumes, which manage to add value to a crowded field of strong commentaries already available and well known.

After this general appreciation, I want to express disagreement with Pelling's handling of one particularly intriguing passage, the Tyrannicide (6.54–9). I do so not because I find it seriously deficient, but for essentially the opposite reason: because it invites deeper thinking, it provokes exploration and critique. After an excellent introduction to the excursus (219–21) in which he acknowledges that Thucydides' argument is weak at certain points and that 'his own feelings about the *demos* may have clouded his judgement here', Pelling nonetheless struggles to give the benefit of doubt to Thucydides' clearly biased interpretation of this paradigmatic episode in Athenian history. At the very start, it is evident that 6.54.1 contradicts 53.3: 53.3 stipulated that the Athenians knew by *akoē* two things (with which Thucydides agreed), that the tyranny ended by becoming harsh and that it was the Spartans who deserved the credit for ending it, not themselves and Harmodius; 54.1 says that 'neither the others [probably Hellanicus] nor the Athenians themselves knew anything at all accurate [*akribes*] about their own tyrants or about what happened'. Thucydides uses four negatives in the latter sentence to underline 'the others' and the demos' ignorance about the tyrants and about what happened. Pelling notes that the *gar* in 54.1 is 'surprising on the face of it', given that this sentence contradicts the previous one, but avers that *gar* here 'introduces all 54–59'. That reading makes *gar* intolerably misleading to a reader following the text, especially aurally, and given the fact that this *gar* introduces the third in a series

of four consecutive sentences beginning with *gar*. He then tries to remove the contradiction itself by arguing that '*ouden* should not be taken literally'. But *ouden* is in fact emphatic here, preceded by three other negatives and most closely by the strong *oude*. Finally, he says that '*akribes* also makes a difference, as one can know something vaguely without Th'.s own high standard of *akribeia*'. But in Thucydides *akribeia/akribes* almost always designates his own precision in getting *ta erga* exactly right, or, in the negative, others' (especially Hellanicus'—cf. 1.97.2; 5.20, 26—see below) failure to get things right; the comparative adjective in 6.55.1 does not alter that fact. Rather than finding ways around the 'strange *gar*', the fortified *ouden*, and the decisive *akribes*, we should adopt a far more economical interpretation: the Tyrannicide begins as a bald and independent polemic.

It remains a polemic throughout, full of ideological bias against the tyrant-slayers and in favour of the tyrant family, and completely lacking in evidence for the story of the love triangle, which Thucydides is the first to reveal (he simply says he has better oral evidence than others, hardly reassuring). Pelling does not mention the fact that major scholars have found the excursus seriously wanting in historical credibility: Wilamowitz (it derived from a Peisistratid source); Jacoby ('somewhat far-fetched'; and (*Atthis*, 338 n. 47): 'We cannot eliminate by any art of interpretation the inconsistency that according to 6.53.3 the demos knows (even if only *akoēi*) exactly what it did not know according to 1.20 and 6.54.1; and the inconsistency proves (we may say here "irrefutably") that the digression was inserted later'). Thucydides was, Jacoby adds, 'building an emergency bridge'; Romilly (too coherent a story to be at all credible); Mabel Lang (replete with striking inconsistencies); Charles Fornara ('… only Thucydides could have turned the motives of the tyrannicides against themselves. Thucydides, such is his genius, makes us think that there is something shabby about them because they acted out of personal motives';[1] David Lewis (Thucydides' account was motivated by anger at the restoration of democracy and the public honouring of Harmodius and Aristogeiton).

In short, Thucydides' Tyrannicide is a *parti pris*, an insertion into his narrative meant for a live audience, a performance piece (a possibility that Pelling allows in Book 7, p. 11). As such, it is an intriguing late addition to the text, thus joining several other noteworthy insertions, such as 1.97.2 (Rusten),[2] 2.2 and 5.20 (Lendle),[3] and 5.26 (multiple scholars). Pelling's notes have the

[1] Charles Fornara, 'The "Tradition" about the Murder of Hipparchus', *Historia* 17 (1968) 400–24, quotation from 405.

[2] Jeffrey Rusten (2020) 'Τὴν ἐκβολὴν τοῦ λόγου ἐποιησάμην: Thucydides' Chronicle in the *Pentekontaetia* (1.97–117) is Not a Digression', *Histos* 14: 230–54.

[3] Otto Lendle, 'Die Auseinandersetzung des Thukydides mit Hellanikos', *Hermes* 92 (1964) 129–43.

virtue of pointing out the problems in the passage, which certainly alerts the reader to beware, but his suggested solutions are not convincing in this case, as they are in so many others.

I conclude with a few words about Pelling's Book 7. Again the level of erudition is high and the analysis of grammar, syntax, and rhetoric admirable. The introduction to this volume is very thorough, almost unnecessarily so: Pelling takes up all major and some minor aspects of the book and gives them full treatment, leaving little for the reader to consider for herself. But perhaps this is understandable, given the rhetorical significance of this crowning achievement of Thucydides' labour.

Of Pelling's many fine judgments in Book 7, I am particularly grateful for his astute and balanced remarks about Thucydides' estimation of Nicias. The historian went to great lengths to provide a nuanced portrait of that tortured leader, one that evinced not only a deep respect for his integrity and un-Athenian prudence, but an empathy that may reveal something personal about Thucydides himself: perhaps he saw in Nicias some of his own equivocations as general, and certainly a temperament similarly out of sync with that of his city. Thucydides' portrait famously concludes with Nicias' death at chapter 7.86.5, an encomium of his constant effort to live an upright life. Here and elsewhere in Books 6 and 7, but particularly here, Pelling refuses to take the easy way out by condemning him outright when describing his weaknesses. Instead, he offers insight into the drama building gradually around Nicias' fate and commends his attempts to merge his own interests with those of his city, while at the same time correctly contrasting Nicias' leadership with that of Pericles, which Thucydides portrays as (remarkably) governed by purely public motives to the exclusion of private ones. To a significant degree Thucydides presented his 'first war' as one dominated by the political and military foresight and determination of Pericles, and the beginning of his 'second war' as one dictated by the agonising personal caution of Nicias. It is standard critique to see Thucydides' Pericles as the perfect leader, his Nicias as a miserable failure. Is this actually Thucydides' view? Pelling does not think so: he shows that Thucydides enables his readers to see both men in their full complexity, imbued with strengths and weaknesses in a world they cannot control, though Pericles comes close and Nicias tries, but dies tragically along with his fellow citizens. On this salient dichotomy Pelling excels, and that counts for a lot: Thucydides was not a cold-hearted realist but a compassionate man capable of the deepest feelings for the sufferings of his fellow human beings. That quality is what makes his history a consummate tragedy. Macaulay was right.

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