

REVIEW

REVISITING THUCYDIDES'
TRAGIC RATIONALITY

Pierre Ponchon, *Thucydide philosophe: la raison tragique dans l'histoire*. Horos. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 2017. Pp. 415. Paperback, €34.00. ISBN 978-2-84137-329-1.

A surprising gap in the crowded field of Thucydidean scholarship is an up-to-date study of Thucydides' relationship with pre-Socratic and sophistic philosophy. Ponchon's monograph goes some way towards meeting this scholarly need with its helpful discussion of aspects of Thucydides' thought in relation to thinkers such as Antiphon, Gorgias, and Heraclitus; it usefully, too, provides a detailed comparison between the developmental model of Thucydides' *Archaeology* and the account of early human life in Book 3 of Plato's *Laws*. The book thus serves as a rich supplement to works such as Darien Shanske's rather idiosyncratic *Thucydides and the Philosophical Origins of History* (Cambridge, 2007) and (the monograph with which it perhaps merits closest comparison) Gregory Crane's *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Los Angeles–Berkeley–London, 1998).

As its provocative title suggests, however, a larger goal of Ponchon's book is to offer a characterisation of the generic affinities of Thucydides' work. He follows scholars such as Nicole Loraux in insisting that Thucydides should not be understood as a 'historian' in the modern sense of that word. In a long discussion of genre in the first part of the monograph, he suggests rather that Thucydides was indebted to the scientific literature of his time in his research methodology and his ideal of precision; to epic in his narrative technique and his dominant focus on war; and above all to tragedy. At the same time, Ponchon suggests that he was seeking to surpass these influences in the construction of a new type of work that could articulate a form of political philosophy. Notable largely for his absence from Ponchon's account of these literary and intellectual influences (as from the book as a whole) is Herodotus—an absence that may surprise those who have imbibed the picture of *Hérodote philosophe* offered in some recent scholarship.

The second part of Ponchon's work proceeds to explore these intellectual affinities more closely, reading Thucydides' 'tragic anthropology' (as evidenced, for instance, in the plague and *stasis* sections) against contemporary developmental narratives (Democritus, Protagoras, Hippocratic writings). The third part then analyses Thucydidean theories of power as expressed in the

Melian Dialogue and in speeches such as those made by the Athenians at Sparta and Hermocrates at Gela. Throughout, Ponchon offers sensible readings of his chosen passages and uses parallel material as a means of teasing out useful distinctions; the discussion is enhanced by judicious engagement with important items of modern bibliography (with a few notable absences, such as Edward Hussey's important 1985 article 'Thucydidean History and Democritean Theory', in P. Cartledge and F. D. Harvey, edd., *CRUX: Essays in Greek History presented to G. E. M. de Ste Croix* (London) 118–38), and there are some good treatments of language (for instance, pp. 144–6 on ἀντι-prefixes).

For all the strengths of Ponchon's work, the overall image of Thucydides that emerges does seem rather familiar. The modernity of Thucydides is at times asserted through assimilation to the tradition of political philosophy represented by Machiavelli and Hobbes, and Ponchon's analysis as a whole largely feeds on well-known passages such as the *Archaeology*, the plague narrative, and the Melian Dialogue. To probe one such discussion more closely, Ponchon's analysis of Thucydides' account of *stasis* offers thoughtful comments on the difference and similarities in his conceptualisations of *stasis* and *polemos* (with *stasis* seen as differing largely in degree), building on the work of Colin Macleod (who is consistently misspelt MacLeod) and Jonathan Price; some critique of the important articles of Nicole Loraux and Lowell Edmonds; an innovative (if implausible) linguistic suggestion (διάνοιαι as possible subject of ἀντήλλαξαν at 3.82.4, understood from διανοίας in the previous sentence); and an interesting comparison between Thucydides' discussion of changing language use and the Romance scholar Victor Klemperer's contemporary analysis of Nazi linguistic distortion (as it happens, Klemperer's diary is also adduced in an article Ponchon could not have seen: D. Piovan, 'The Unexpected Consequences of War: Thucydides on the Relationship between War, Civil War and the Degradation of Language', *Araucaria* 19 (2017) 181–97). Like the rest of the book, Ponchon's discussion of *stasis* does offer rewards, but readers who have dipped into much Thucydidean scholarship will not be too surprised by the final characterisation of the author's 'tragic rationality'.

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