Truth Via Epic: A Case Study on the Prefaces of Herodotus and Thucydides

This paper assesses the form and content of the prefaces of Herodotus and Thucydides in order to challenge the long-held scholarly assumption that the literary aspects of ancient historiographical texts must render the genre inappropriate for seeking historical truths (Woodman 1983).

As is typical of both ancient Greek historiography and Greco-Roman literature as a whole, both Herodotus and Thucydides clarify their agendas by means of opposition to previous authors and texts (e.g. Marincola 1997). However, in their cases, I contend that allusions to their literary predecessors within their prefaces serve historical objectives. The allusions, in fact, serve as a foil against which to bring their ultimate objective into relief: to present the historical events behind the process of the war. Thus, while the literary and the historical coexist in both authors' prefaces, the literary perpetuation of epic narrative is in service to the search for historical truth.

This paper recognizes the debate in modern Classical discussions that has tended to polarize ancient historians and literary theorists on the nature of historiography (Pitcher 2009), and offers an alternative perspective. Historians, who must rely overwhelmingly on texts to collect evidence, assume that ancient historiography tells the truth unless there is error or dishonesty (Dover 1983). Meanwhile, for many literary critics, historiography often does not aim to tell the truth; and if the priority of historiography is literary, the scholarly response to it should be as well (ed. Moxon et al 1986). By contrast, I dispel the implied dissonance between the traditional terminologies of "historical" versus "literary" by arguing that the presence of literary aspects does not indicate intentional untruthfulness by the author. My approach is indebted to Hartog's (1980) and Foucault's structuralist, anthropological scholarship (1981), which

promoted a re-appreciation of historiography through the application of New Historicism (Thomas 2000, Harrison 2018).

In Section 1, I detect a pattern of imitation-then-rebuttal in Herodotus' preface, in which Herodotus presents history by first initiating an association with Homeric myth, only to later reject it, to show how he deems epic to be less historically reliable. For example, Herodotus initially alludes to Homer by employing language resembling various lines of the *Iliad* (9.189, 22.116, 24.27-28) and the *Odyssey* (8.81-82) and stressing his choice of warfare between large opposing forces as the primary thematic material. Later, he narrows those same descriptions to provide specific historical referents while deliberately maintaining the broadness necessary to avoid factual inaccuracies. The Persians, for instance are referred to generally as "barbarians" (1.1). In addition, Herodotus diminishes the relative significance of the Trojan War, creating a point of departure from Homeric myth. Herodotus' assertion is that his text is meant not to glorify or create mythology, but, rather, to establish historical truth.

In Section 2, I illustrate how Thucydides continues the pattern of imitation-then-rebuttal of his own predecessor Herodotus. While Thucydides' preface echoes Herodotean language often word-for-word, the context creates a different connotation, with a more precise, ergo more historical, connotation than those same words had for Herodotus. For example, I argue that *erga* for Herodotus (1.1) carries the more general meaning of deeds, while for Thucydides it specifically refers to factual evidence (1.21.1). Thucydides' allusions to Herodotus create a counterpoint from which Herodotus establishes the historicity of his work.

In sum, I propose a new model for accepting Herodotus and Thucydides as historical sources in which the historical and literary coexist, with truth sought via the epic, and in this way, the historians' intertextuality with their models is explored through a non-literary

lens. Much scholarship on Herodotus and Thucydides is limited to their depictions of historical events in a literary tradition and not the historical events themselves. This study opens the way for future work that seeks to recognize the historical truths that reside within the epic depiction of historiography. Understanding these authors as representative of and responsive to the tastes of their age creates opportunities for understanding, for example, the historical motivations for entering and sustaining the wars that were their inescapable reality, and that fascinated their accounts.

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