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Branscome, David. *Textual Rivals: Self-Presentation in Herodotus' Histories*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. 262 pp. ISBN: 978-0-472-11894-6. \$70. Paper.

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Is Herodotus a political thinker? While not ultimately answering this question, David Branscome's *Textual Rivals: Self-Presentation in Herodotus' Histories* illuminates the ways in which Herodotus was a political *writer* – or at least a polemical one. Branscome presents us with an image of Herodotus wrestling with his logos, like Menelaus struggling with Proteus. For Branscome, one important site of this agon concerns Herodotus' relationship to other practitioners of inquiry. Herodotus, Branscome argues, takes both didactic and polemical angles as he presents himself through the *Histories*: guiding readers to evaluate the relative performances of others on the one hand; putting himself ahead of his rivals and distinguishing himself critically on the other. By contrasting himself with other figures engaging in historiographic activities, Herodotus thus both instructs his audience and measures his performance against ultimately less successful rivals. This didactic and polemical writing suggests a new approach to understanding Herodotus as a political thinker, making Branscome's study useful for any students of ancient philosophy, political theory, and historiography.

Branscome takes his departure from two important articles first published in a justly famous 1987 *Arethusa* volume edited by Deborah Boedeker entitled *Herodotus and the Invention of History*: Carol Dewald's argument for a variety of a comprehensive approach to understanding Herodotus' many voices, which presents him as a heroic warrior; and John Marincola's account of Herodotus as more committed to the tradition and connecting his work to the past.¹ Branscome builds on both of these studies by suggesting that Herodotus sought to distinguish himself (following Dewald) as well as to place himself as a successor to the poets (following Marincola), as a poet (of a kind) but one marked by his commitment to truth. Contesting readings of Herodotus as a *logios* (as Gregory Nagy named him) or a historian (as is common among many receptions), Branscome argues that we can reconstruct Herodotus' project as above all concerned with *inquiry* (16). This name is not just a turn of phrase: understanding Herodotus as an *inquirer* sets up a series of contrasts upon which Branscome builds his book; each chapter takes up a rival inquirer to elucidate, by contrast, unique facets of Herodotus' project. "Herodotus engages in polemic with poetic rivals," Branscome argues, "whose standards of truth Herodotus appears to question" (17). Herodotus appears thus not just as a researcher but as a persuasive presenter, a truthful purveyor of historical and ethnographic information.

Branscome treats five particular "textual rivals" across his study: Solon, Demaratus, Aristagoras, the Athenians in their speech about Marathon, and Xerxes. Solon has often been seen as a spokesman for Herodotus, yet Branscome's acute reading shows how Herodotus draws an implicit contrast between Solon's largely unpersuasive *logoi* and his

¹ *Arethusa* 20 nos. 1 – 2 (1987).

own. While both share a commitment to tell the truth, Solon fails to win Croesus in part because he does not wish to flatter him. Herodotus thus proves himself to be a better inquirer than Solon because Herodotus, unlike Solon, considers his audience. At the same time, however, Herodotus' treatment of Solon highlights commonalities between Herodotus and his rival. Solon's account of Tellus uses a historical figure as a way to date a story and also alludes to physical monuments as confirmation of this story; the Cleobis and Biton story repeats this approach. Solon thus does resemble Herodotus even while Herodotus shows his limitations.

The example of Demaratus also highlights commonalities as well as differences from Herodotus. When asked to describe the Spartans, Demaratus focuses on ethnological information yet fails to convince his audience, Xerxes. "All Demaratus can offer is the truth about Lacedaemonian customs; it is up to Xerxes to choose to believe it" (73). Demaratus' vocabulary of truth echoes Herodotus's as well, yet Demaratus ultimately must give up this strategy because of Xerxes' lack of comprehension.

Unlike Demaratus, Aristagoras deceives well, offering a more complex variation on the pattern of rival inquirer and a negative contrast from Herodotus. Although his summoning of geography and ethnology does not persuade Cleomenes to join the revolting Ionians, Aristagoras has a deceptive intention. Aristagoras seeks to use his inquiry to his own (and the Persians') advantage. Yet by deploying the Aristagoras episode where he does within the narrative, Herodotus deftly prepares his readers to embrace Herodotus' own map of the Royal Road: Herodotus lets Aristagoras provide a verbal map that Herodotus can then elaborate; Aristagoras' description thus "animates" the subsequent details and heightens a contrast with how Herodotus employs his researches.

The final comparison with Xerxes underscores Herodotus' polemical approach to his rivals. After the Battle of Thermopylae, Xerxes attempts to promulgate his account of the past yet proves less successful than any previous rivals. The sailors scramble to see the corpses but are then immediately disappointed. Xerxes' simulated past was bound to fail: given the time constraints and the rapidity of the corpses' decomposition in the summer heat, "the end result of Xerxes' efforts would have been an enormous heap of Greek corpses – all of them nude and thus devoid of any distinctive paraphernalia"; the mass of rotting flesh could hardly have been very persuasive – deprived of their equipment and clothing, all corpses would have looked virtually the same (202).

Herodotus declares Xerxes' spectacle "absolutely laughable" (8.25.2; 210). As Branscome points out, this moment recalls Herodotus' laughter at the products of contemporary map makers in 4.36. He laughs, writes Herodotus, when seeing the overly schematic and overly symmetrical maps that have been produced. Both accounts of laughter highlight Herodotus' polemical contrasts with potential rivals. Anyone who tries to beat Herodotus at his own game is laughable indeed.

Branscome aptly illuminates Herodotus' implicit project through this series of contrasts, but the comparisons often rely on an unsubstantiated claim about Herodotus' own

persuasiveness. This claim seems strange considering the reception of Herodotus both in his own time and subsequently: Herodotus has long been decried and subordinated to the superior Thucydides; only recently have the *Histories* recaptured broad attention.² How then can we assume that Herodotus persuades his audience? Who is Herodotus persuading and of what? Without any specific audience or rhetorical goals with respect to a specified audience, Branscome's claim lacks basis. Can we speak of an implied audience's being persuaded? While Branscome's study elucidates an important approach to understanding the *Histories*, it thus prompts more questions than it answers, in particular about who read Herodotus and why— both in his own time and in ours.

Who read Herodotus in the ancient world? The same *Arethusa* volume from which Branscome begins his study also contained a seminal article by Kurt Raaflaub, one that Branscome strangely leaves unmentioned. Raaflaub argued that with the *Histories* Herodotus meant to warn his Greek audience (and perhaps the Athenians in particular) of their own tendencies toward excess, using his historical investigations to illuminate how his contemporaries' parallels with past tyrants.³ This suggests a different audience from the information-minded one Branscome implies: Herodotus may have needed to provoke his audience with vivid portrayals of Persian tyrants above all else; his persuasive intent, Raaflaub leads us to think, might be better understood as one of provocation rather than enlightenment. We might better measure Herodotus as a rhetorician by examining how his modes of argument resemble or improve upon dikastic rhetoric or the debates depicted in the Platonic dialogues.

But if Branscome's study fails to articulate Herodotus' audience in historical terms, the implied audience upon which *Textual Rivals* relies suggests a how we might conceive of Herodotus as a political thinker. If Herodotus had a political audience in mind – and not just the quasi-scientific one Branscome tacitly suggests – then he might also be read with politics in mind today. Here the contrast with Thucydides becomes important: Thucydides' reception has almost universally come to support so-called “realist” views of the world, favoring a power politics and the law of the stronger to the detriment of Thucydides' complicating form; Herodotus, by contrast, seems to anticipate a much more nuanced view of politics, one attentive to the particular customs, terrains, and histories of different people. As Daniel Mendelsohn has recently written, Herodotus' “hybrid genre” and “postmodern style” may be better suited for reflecting on our times than Thucydides.⁴ Branscome has prepared us to see the distinctiveness of Herodotus' approach to social and political phenomena; it remains our task to translate these for the present.

² See Paul Cartledge's Introduction to Tom Holland's translation of the *Histories* for a current state of the reception of Herodotus: Herodotus, *The Histories*. T. Holland, trans. New York: Penguin, 2013.

³ Kurt Raaflaub, “Herodotus, Political Thought, and The Meaning of History,” *Arethusa* (Vol. 20, 1 & 2 [1987]), 221 - 248.

⁴ Daniel Mendelsohn, “Arms and the Man,” *The New Yorker*. April 29, 2008. Cf. the recent argument for Herodotus' “realism” in Joel Alden Schlosser, “Herodotean Realism,” *Political Theory*. June 2014 vol. 42 no. 3 239-261.