

REVIEW

MAKING SENSE OF HISTORY-WRITING IN
THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD:
AN ANTHOLOGY

John Marincola, *On Writing History from Herodotus to Herodian*. London: Penguin Books, 2017. Pp. lxxi + 600. Paperback, £12.99. ISBN 978-0-14-139357-5.

Arnaldo Momigliano famously stated that the Greeks, who were the first to write down history as we know it, never considered it a specific subject for school instruction.¹ This is John Marincola's starting point in collecting this impressive set of texts: since in classical antiquity there were no formal training in either history or historiography, no teachers, and no professional historians, for an ancient theory on history-writing we have to rely on 'the explicit remarks made by Greek and Roman historians and critics concerning the writing of history' (xvii). Marincola thus proceeds to translate and comment upon passages from twenty-nine historians from Hecataeus to Ammianus Marcellinus, as well as authors such as Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (his rhetorical treatises as well as the *Roman Antiquities*), Quintilian, the Elder and Younger Senecas, Fronto, and Sextus Empiricus. The chronological sequence helps to appreciate the diachronic development of various topics and issues related to history-writing tackled by historians and literary critics. It also shows the cross-fertilisation and dialogue among Greek and Latin historians.

Two anonymous papyri, both belonging to the second century CE, namely *P.Oxy.* 4808, an evaluation of Greek Hellenistic historians, and *P.Oxy.* 853, the beginning of a commentary on Book 2 of Thucydides, are placed at the end of the book. Both papyri are of paramount interest for students of ancient historiography and Marincola has done a great service by including them in his book and offering an English translation of the Greek text.²

¹ A. Momigliano, 'The Introduction of History as an Academic Subject and its Implications', *Minerva* 21 (1983) 1–15, at 1 (= *Ottavo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome, 1987) 161–78; Italian transl. in A. Momigliano, *Tra storia e storicismo* (Pisa, 1985) 75–96); see also H. Strasburger, *Die Wesensbestimmung der Geschichte durch die antike Geschichtsschreibung* (Wiesbaden, 1966) 9–11.

² See I. Matijašić, *Shaping the Canons of Ancient Greek Historiography: Imitation, Classicism, and Literary Criticism* (Berlin and Boston, 2018) 97–8 and 215–17 for further bibliography on both papyri.

Two quibbles. It is not clear why the title of the book reads ‘from Herodotus to Herodian’ when the actual chronological starting point is Hecataeus of Miletus, while the endpoint is Ammianus Marcellinus, ‘the last great pagan historian of the classical world’ (411). I am in no doubt that Herodotus is much more appealing than the fragmentary and blurry Hecataeus, but at the same time classicists and historians are usually more acquainted with Ammianus than Herodian; alliteration as well as marketing strategies might have played a part on the choice of the title. The other pertains to disposition: the opening pages (xxv–xxviii) contain a section ‘Abbreviations’ which includes standard collections, frequently cited modern works, and journals, while at the end of the book there is a short ‘Bibliography’ (563–4): the reader has to fight their way backwards and forwards to find the relevant reference. There is a logic in that: works included in the bibliography are quoted by author name and year of publication, while the section ‘Abbreviations’ comprises only abbreviated references. Still, this reviewer, and no doubt other readers, would have preferred a common section for all abbreviations and bibliography.

The English translation of Greek and Latin texts is enjoyable and consistent throughout, despite the initial warning that the translations ‘might seem unusual or unique’ (xviii). Marincola is very careful to use the same English expressions for those semi-technical words such as *alētheia/veritas*, *mythos/fabula*, *mimēsis/imitatio*, *heurēsis/inventio*, etc., so that the reader can recognise the threads of identical or analogous ideas in different passages and often chronologically distant authors. Each author is preceded by useful and brief introductory information that will help the reader, be it an experienced scholar or an undergraduate, to navigate through the centuries and easily contextualise the numerous authors.

The length of the selected passages differs greatly among the various authors, so that the famous Hecataeus of Miletus and the lesser known Granus Licinianus cover one page each (4 and 394 respectively), while Polybius encompasses almost seventy pages (53–119). This has clearly nothing to do with Marincola’s choices, but rather with the history of the transmission of classical historiography, which has often been referred to as a *naufragium*, a shipwreck (cf. xxx–xxx1). It would be pointless to linger on each author that Marincola has included in his book. However, it is perhaps worth mentioning that one can find here fresh translations of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ *On Thucydides* (182–240), of a large portion of the *Letter to Pompeius Geminus* (namely 3.1 to 6.11, the section dealing with ancient historiography: 240–8), of Plutarch’s *On the Malice of Herodotus* (296–328), and of Lucian of Samosata’s *How to Write History* (368–92): these are fundamental texts to the understanding of ancient approaches to classical historiography, even though they have often been neglected or purposely set aside in modern scholarship.

Besides the impressive range of authors included in this book, another remarkable feat is the ample introduction (xxix–lxxi) divided into twelve chapters: ‘Sources and Limitations’, ‘Definition, Subject Matter, Audience’, ‘Eye-witness and Inquiry’, ‘Effort’, ‘Truth’, ‘Bias and Impartiality’, ‘Utility, Pleasure and Purpose’, ‘Moralism’, ‘Myth’, ‘Rhetoric and Embellishment’, ‘Speeches’, ‘Style’. Marincola smoothly leads the reader through these complex and often contradictory topics, offering a brilliant overview of the main issues in the study of ancient Greek and Latin historiography, with accurate and balanced references to past and present scholarly debates. There is food for thought for everyone, from the seasoned scholar to the interested layman. To name a few examples: the influence of Homeric epic on historiography (xxxii and xxxviii); the importance of polemic as a context for methodological pronouncements (xxxii); the cautious considerations on ‘tragic history’ (xlix); the acceptance that ‘every narrative history is a rhetorical creation by definition’ (lv), which should not be considered in contrast with Polybius’ statement that ‘the aim of history is truth’ (Pol. 34.4.2 quoted at xli, to be compared with lvi–lvii). The sections on thorny issues such as speeches in classical historiography (lviii–lx) and the importance of style (lx–lxiii) are well balanced and highly instructive.

This anthology is an outstanding tool for the investigation of the methods and theories on the writing of history in antiquity. It makes most of the Greek and Latin sources related to this problem eminently accessible to a range of different audiences. Even the craft of modern historians might benefit from the collected texts and the many useful observations that are to be found in this book.

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