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'They came into an agon nevertheless': Thucydides writing in the agon

The set-piece debate, or agon, in Thucydides has provoked much criticism regarding its function within the *History*: why these speeches, why at this point in the narrative, why in this form? As yet, however, no study has been devoted to examining the ways in which the narrator embeds these voices in debate in his text. In this paper I explore two particularly striking examples of Thucydides' framing of debate and outline some possible consequences for reading his authority.

Previous studies have concentrated on the relationship between the speeches and deeds of the historical agents. While proving invaluable for thinking about how the actors in the *History* influence and react to events in the war, or for assessing more generally how rhetoric works, they tend to overlook the performance of debate within the narrative and the reader's *experience* of it. Drawing on two contemporary theoretical approaches, dialogism and narratology, I investigate the interrelationship between the scenes of debate and Thucydides' construction of authority. In doing so, I hope to challenge the popular and persistent image of Thucydides as a control freak, best illustrated by Ober whose own analysis of debate concludes with the assertion that '[Thucydides] has already done the interpretative work that Herodotus asks his reader to do' (1998, 84).

According to Ober, debate as *Thucydides represents* it is shown to go wrong, whereas the narrative itself stands as the solution to the interpretative crisis. It is my thesis that debate cannot be so easily divorced from the narrative but inevitably plays a role in it - which raises fundamental issues for thinking about Thucydides' authority and what we take his narrative to be doing. My two examples are chosen on the basis that they are frequently read as demonstrating the failure of the agon to provide a clear outcome. Thucydides' framing of the Plataean debate most explicitly confronts the irrelevance of debate: the judges, simply repeating their question 'what good have you done us?', condemn the Plataeans to death. Yet the debate itself, by raking up old (Persian war) ground, determines that the question is not the same for a reader and acts as an empowering force to dissent from the tyranny of the present. The Mytilenean debate prompts Ober's claim that the agon in Thucydides is 'a narrative strategy that obscures the dialectical tendency of Athenian public debate' (1998, 103). In doing so, Ober accepts the terms of Cleon's attack on the assembly as a spectacle that pleases the audience, even as he lays the responsibility for the Athenians not debating properly with Cleon. I argue that Thucydides invites such a compromising reading by labelling this debate *as an agon*, provocatively leaving his reader open to being persuaded by Cleon. Depending on how we understand Thucydides' description rests our interpretation of the agon. In this way, Thucydides recoups the agon for generating responsible reading.

Writing in the agon, Thucydides explores the constant, on-going contest over the representation of contest. His use of it does not demonstrate the superiority of his written text. It *performs* that superiority by opening the reader up to a process of monitoring and self-criticism each time he enters the agon. Far from providing the reader with the

solution to the crisis of debate, the ways in which Thucydides frames the agon reproduces the crisis of interpretation and implicates the reader into doing politics this way.