

## NO LAUGHING MATTER: A LITERARY TACTIC IN HERODOTUS

DONALD LATEINER

*University of Pennsylvania*

“He who laughs last laughs best” or “Better the last smile than the first laughter” states popular wisdom found in many languages and folk-tales.<sup>1</sup> Laughter in Greek literature varies from the most innocent smiles (Eur. *Medea* 1162, but rare), through unmalicious human amusement (*Il.* 23.784) and, then, the untroubled, unself-conscious and fearless laughter of the gods (*Il.* 1.599; *Od.* 8.307; Aesch. *Eum.* 560), to the cruel mockery which meets Cassandra (Aesch. *Agam.* 1264, 1271) and obsesses Sophocles’ heroes (*Ajax* 79, 303, 367; *OT* 1422; *OC* 902). This last type of laughter, the most derisive, presents a common motif in tragedy: a real or feared expression, by an individual or a group, of low esteem for a character. I am here, however, interested not in purposeful mockery directed at another person, but in scornful unconcern, an attitude which betrays disdainful disregard rather than gloating pleasure. Not to denigrate another, but rather to hold someone or something of little account, whether or not he knows about it, more rarely finds expression in laughter (although see *Il.* 2.270; Eur. *Heracl.* 507; *Medea* 404; *Bacchae* 286). Herodotus seems almost alone

<sup>1</sup> In this form, the proverb is no older than the eighteenth century in English; H. L. Mencken, *A New Dictionary of Quotations* (New York 1942) 651B–654B. It is older in Italian, Norwegian, and French; e.g., “Qui rit Vendredi, Dimanche pleurera” (Racine). Antiquity also knew the explicit expression: γέλως ἄκαιρος κλαυθμάτων παραίτιος (Menander, *Monost.* 144 (88) and App. 2.22, 12.26 [ed. Jaeckel]); *risu inepto res ineptior nulla est* (Catullus 39.16). Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington 1958<sup>2</sup>) VI, 454, s.v. Laughter, and N399.2, offers an entirely inadequate treatment. The most extensive treatment of folk-tales in Herodotus: W. Aly, *Volksmärchen, Sage, und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen* (Göttingen 1921; reprint 1969). Aly did not include laughter in his *Sach-* or *Motiv-Register*. Herodotus comes closest to this proverb at the end of Solon’s programmatic speech (1.32.9): “One must look to the end in everything, how it comes out.”

in employing such amusement multivalently: as a narrational indication of a character's disdain and as an authorial intimation of disaster in store for the laugher. Homer's ghastly metaphor of the suitors' laughter furnishes the best earlier example (γέλῳ ἔκθανον, *Od.* 18.100; cf. 20.346, 347, 358). These men, like Herodotus' laughers, are marked for destruction. Laughter in Greek literature is rarely pleasant, but here—while revealing character—it is, so to speak, fatal.<sup>2</sup>

It should not surprise us to find improvident laughter important for Herodotus' sometimes ironic treatment of human history, because his *logoi* concern ascents and descents, and he states, of men and nations, that prosperity and power are slippery, they do not long remain in one place (1.5.4, 3.53.4). Change, the only constant (1.32.4), is at any moment apparently directionless, but some balance (*to ison*) appears when one properly understands the cosmic wheel of fortune (1.207.2; 2.120.5).<sup>3</sup> History in the long perspective shows neither progress nor regress to Herodotus, but he wants to inculcate in his readers some understanding of the proper bounds of human expectation.<sup>4</sup> Laughter, since it releases tension, can indicate, in life and literature, simple relaxation and happiness. Laughter in folk-tale and literature, however, can signal the excessive and scornful pride that comes before a fall. It can indicate lack of self-awareness. Laughter then functions as an author's weapon which informs the reader that some character, often at the height of prosperity, has lost all sense of his vulnerability. This conscious patterning or prefiguration provides a structuring device, which suggests some inadequacy of character and thus helps to justify for the reader his approaching destruction. When Cyrus decided he had divine good fortune, he was near catastrophe and death (1.204.2).

<sup>2</sup> L. Woodbury, *Quo modo risu ridiculoque Graeci usi sint* (Diss., Harvard 1944), offers the most comprehensive analysis of laughter's function in Greek literature, but little on the historians. For epic, see Paul Friedländer, "Lachende Götter," *Die Antike* 10 (1934) 209–26 (= *Studien* . . . [Berlin 1969] 3–18); for tragedy, see esp. T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy* (Austin 1963) 105–07, and B. M. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1966) 30–31.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., H. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland 1966) 148–54.

<sup>4</sup> No one has published a thorough study of psychic boundaries in Herodotus. On one important aspect of boundaries, see R. von Scheliha, *Die Wassergrenze im Altertum* (Breslau 1931).

A similar use of a generic and conventional narrative structure appears in the "wise adviser" stories.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty-eight times we find mention of laughter in Herodotus (including all *-gela-* compounds), while Thucydides records but three instances.<sup>6</sup> One ought not to explain this fact either by a decline in the Hellenic sense of humor, or by the greater gravity of later events, or—more reasonably—by Herodotus' more comprehensive standards of inclusiveness. We see here, rather, Thucydides' peculiar and often more severe standards of historical relevance and accuracy. In truth, very few laughs are recorded for posterity. They are most often sub-historical non-events. Thucydides has marked two in political assembly, where they were notable in themselves, but many of Herodotus' alleged laughs could not in the circumstances have found an immediate record. The truths which concerned Herodotus, however, were not damaged by the inclusion of a facial rictus dramatically revealing mental and emotional attitudes. For in Homer generally, and in Herodotus, "a man is identical with his act, and can from his act be completely understood." Herodotus frequently speculates about motives on the personal and the political level (revenge, bad advice, oracles, inheritance; national mores, aggression, desire for national expansion, provocation). The stories, for example, of Croesus' attack on Cyrus, Cambyses' on Egypt, Darius' on Eretria and Athens, and Xerxes' on Greece, all combine motives trivial (to our thinking) and great.<sup>7</sup> But Herodotus' deceptively simple narrational mode of explanation should be judged as no more "imaginary" than the

<sup>5</sup> See H. Bischoff, *Der Warner bei Herodot* (Diss., Marburg 1932), and R. Lattimore, "The Wise Adviser in Herodotus," *CP* 34 (1939) 24–35. Laughter, of course, is only one aspect of the emotional state of great persons. Furthermore, the consequences of laughter vary greatly, but not its psychological and literary purpose.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydidean laughter is vicious and derisive: 4.28.5, the Athenians laugh at Cleon's manic promise; 6.35, some Syracusans laugh at Hermocrates' proper fears. Note that these two laughs are confounded by the upshot. Finally, 3.83.1, "Simple sincerity . . . was laughed down," a passage remarkable for its vehemence and for its unique use of *katagelô*. Similarly, we read of tears thirteen times in Herodotus, but only twice in Thucydides (7.75.4).

<sup>7</sup> For the quotation on motivation, see H. Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums* (Munich 1962) 88. H. Immerwahr, "Aspects of Historical Causation in Herodotus," *TAPA* 87 (1956) 241–80, discusses motivation in terms of narrative structure (motifs, connection by chains, cycles, etc.).

suggestions of other historians, ancient (including Thucydides) and modern, concerning men's personal motives and sentiments, about which we almost never have respectable information. Herodotus' serious, historical purposes are served by a sometimes grotesque, stage-managed presentation; fictive forms can vividly present our author's most important analyses, genuinely "historical" whether or not one agrees with their conclusions. What we call dramatization of speeches and gestures, including derisive laughter, represents part of this attempt to convey Herodotus' understanding.<sup>8</sup>

Almost all laughers in Herodotus can be distributed into three types. We distinguish those who are innocent of serious wrong-doing but ignorant of their own vulnerability to fortune; second, Cambyses who alone commits wicked acts so senseless that both his crimes and his glee can only find explanation in madness; third, those who laugh, insolently confident in their power. Xerxes, of course, presents the ultimate example in this category.<sup>9</sup> I will consider the three types in order.

Cyrus (of type 1) laughs first in Herodotus, because to him Croesus' concern with fate (the Delphic oracle's version, at least) seems excessive

<sup>8</sup> See, for a similar evaluation, K. H. Waters, "The Purpose of Dramatisation in Herodotus," *Historia* 15 (1966) 157-71; also D. Grene, "Herodotus, the Historian as Dramatist," *Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1961) 477; F. Solmsen, "Two Crucial Decisions in Herodotus," *Mededelingen d. Koninklijke Nederlandse Ak.* 37, 6 (1974) 32, note 95; more briefly, How and Wells, "Introduction," I, 46. Such fictional devices are part of the historian's luggage which Thucydides condemns as fable (*mythôdes*, 1.21.1). This term, not found in Herodotus, appears elsewhere in Thucydides only at 1.22.4 where it is negated, again with disapprobation. Translations are varied but consistent: "the strictly historical character of my narrative" (Jowett); "the absence of romance" (Crawley); "the non-fabulous character of the narrative" (LSJ). The scholiast (FMac<sub>2</sub>) perceives a reference to Herodotus in particular among poets and logographers. So also Schmid-Stählin, I/2 (1934) 667, note 8. I expect that Thucydides has in mind narrative technique as much as the stories themselves. Gomme, *HCT*, *ad loc.*, does not comment on this. Thus considered, Herodotean laughter is *mythôdes*. It is yet true that Thucydides, too, to some degree created his speeches and frequently imagined, correctly or not, the motives of his principals. When he uses *eikos*, we must expect not fact, but reconstruction.

<sup>9</sup> To be exhaustive, I mention the uniquely innocent smile (*prosgelô*) of the babe Cypselus, whose smile saved his life, although he would destroy his city's liberty (5.92.γ3). No other happy smile or laugh is recorded; cf. the first sentence of *Anna Karenina*. Derision is clear in the chuckles of Herodotus himself at the maps of his fellow Greeks (4.36.2), and at Xerxes' ruse with the Persian corpses at Thermopylae (8.25.2). *Geloion* is also Hecataeus' term of disapprobation (*F. Gr. Hist.* F la).

(1.90.3). Such innocent but ignorant jollity had been Croesus', when he beheld Alcmaeon's fascinated greed before his own endless gold (6.125.5). Power, which frequently finds prosperity a concomitant, lessens human fear, and in Herodotus, laughter is almost a royal prerogative (cf. 1.99.1), or perhaps a royal disease. As Otanes says (3.80.3), monarchy will ruin the best of men. No Athenian ever laughs, and among Greeks, Herodotus is the only commoner to laugh (4.36.2). He scorns thoughtless writers who see the world as they wish it, perfectly round, and not as it is. Otherwise the only Greek laughers are the Sicyonian tyrant Cleisthenes (5.68.1) whose derision remains unpunished, the Spartan king Leotychidas (6.67.2) who suffers egregiously, and the Spartan regent Pausanias (9.82.2-3) who has the last laugh in Herodotus, but whose later notorious history needed no repetition (cf. the oblique reff.: 5.32, 8.3.2). The king of the Ethiopians has a legitimate laugh at Cambyses and civilization (3.22.2).

Scorn, however, generally indicates that trouble lurks nearby. When the Scythians—ignorant of their ethnocentricity as Herodotus is not (3.38)—laugh at Dionysiac enthusiasm, they lose their king (4.79.4 ff). The Egyptian soldiers guarding a corpse have only a brief laugh at the expense of a master-thief, before he exposes them to the Egyptian king's fury and eventually marries the king's daughter (2.121.84). These men laugh in thoughtless confidence only to find the tables afterwards turned on them. Laughter signals men's immoderation, not of course because it is wicked in itself, but because on the occasions worthy of Herodotus' historical record, it reflects a spirit too much at ease for human circumstances. Human ease is easily destroyed.

Cambyses, the example of type two, was utterly mad in Herodotus' opinion. In no other way can Herodotus explain his crimes against the gods and customs of Egypt as well as his harebrained campaigns: *ἐμάνη μεγάλως* (3.38.1-2; cf. 3.25.2, 30.1). Cambyses laughed when he failed to slay the god Apis (3.29.1); he laughed, but was in fear of being laughed at (3.29.2). When he "proved" his sanity to his adviser Prexaspes by shooting the latter's son through the heart, he laughed (3.35.3). Cambyses derided the statue of Hephaestus and jeered at everything sacred in Egypt (3.37.2, 38.1-2). No one in Herodotus laughs more (six times), or with less reason. Cambyses' laughter is

clearly part of the megalomaniac syndrome, but not all Herodotean madmen laugh (e.g., Cleomenes).

Xerxes, of type three, is foreshadowed in his laughter by Leotychidas: both transgress limits appropriate to their power and exalted status. Leotychidas successfully schemed to have Demaratus deposed and himself chosen king of Sparta. Not content with this great prize, for a nasty laugh (*ἐπὶ γέλωτί τε καὶ λάσθῃ*, 6.67.2), he sent a servant to question Demaratus. The abuse, a grievous insult, meets its just reward. Herodotus opines pointedly that Demaratus later got revenge for *this* jeering mockery at his deposition, when afterwards Leotychidas was caught red-handed in bribery, went into exile, had his house destroyed, and died an outcast in Tegea (6.72).

It was an offense to laugh (or spit) in the presence of the Eastern King (1.99.1), and Herodotus portrays the Persian nobility as quick to fear itself laughed at.<sup>10</sup> The only two men who laugh more than once in Herodotus are the mad King Cambyses and the insatiate King Xerxes (six times and four, respectively). The most artful example of Herodotus' use of laughter as a signal to the reader appears in Xerxes' infatuate attempt to conquer the Greeks. Many earlier narrative patterns and motifs reappear in the climax of Herodotus' work. The wise adviser, the ruler who opposes nature, the transgressor of boundaries, and the fool who laughs, these are but a few of the ways Xerxes' character and mistakes are articulated. Xerxes epitomizes the despot's failings. One of the most moving utterances in Herodotus' *Histories* is Demaratus' quiet but bold speech to Xerxes after the King had reviewed at Doriscus his marshalled troops and fleet. The significance of his blunt speech is increased by Xerxes' own reasonable logic (7.103.2, 3, 5) and his respect for the enemy Spartans (7.101.1). Also noteworthy are Demaratus' need for reassurance before speaking plainly (7.101.3–102.1), and his Laconic, unqualified assertion that the Lacedaemonians will not yield. Xerxes laughs aloud, then disbelieves and questions Demaratus (7.103.1). Demaratus expands his answer without qualifying his former statement. He explains that law is despot of

<sup>10</sup> Zopyrus speaking to Darius once (3.155.2), Mardonius to Xerxes twice (7.9.1, 8.100.4). The Greeks are once reported to imagine themselves the victims of derision (at Troy, 2.118.4). They are in general more clever and sophisticated than barbarians, Herodotus asserts (1.60.3).

the Spartans, that the law is unchanging, and that the law commands them not to flee before any number of enemy soldiers (7.104.4-5; here the Spartan *nomos* is contrasted implicitly to Xerxes himself). Xerxes laughs again (7.105). The laughter recorded before and after Demaratus' praise of Sparta—a statement of an admiring, respectful attitude which Herodotus certainly shared<sup>11</sup>—is unconvincing as historical report but dramatically decisive, for Xerxes laughs at the plain truth, a truth which contributes significantly to the utter failure of his western imperialist enterprise. Demaratus, a former king himself, does not forget this derisive laughter. Before the battle at Thermopylae (7.209.2), he, when questioned once again, recalls to Xerxes how formerly he had scornfully laughed at him for suggesting the Spartans would stand and fight. Xerxes still thinks it absurd (*geloia*, 7.209.1) that hundreds will stand against his myriads. Herodotus now makes explicit what he has suggested before: Xerxes, a creature of passion rather than reason,<sup>12</sup> laughs because he does not understand, he cannot fit together, the pieces of reality (*οὐκ εἶχε συμβαλέσθαι τὸ ἐόν*; cf. Persian incomprehension at Marathon, 6.112.2-3; Artemision, 8.10.1). Xerxes does not believe Demaratus any more now than before, imputes mad folly to his enemies, and attacks. Demaratus was right.

Xerxes' last laugh comes again at a Spartan's expense (8.114.2). He laughs at the Spartan herald who, at Delphi's insistence, officially requests reparations of the King for the death of King Leonidas at Thermopylae. Xerxes' laughter seems to include the gods as its butt; this and the threat that Mardonius' army will be reparations enough constitute all the answer that the herald receives. But Xerxes' answer is laden with irony: "Mardonius here will give such requital (*dikas dôsei*; cf. 7.5.2) as those men deserve." This response, worthy of Delphi, contains unconscious irony; Xerxes' words are truer than he thinks, but when the *peripateia* comes, the *anagnôrisis* is ours alone. The requital will be the great Greek victory of Plataea, just as the earlier laughter at Thermopylae cost many good Persian lives. The last and best laugh will be on Xerxes' presumption and on the ambitious Mardonius, who urged the expedition and played on Xerxes' fear of

<sup>11</sup> See Ch. Fornara, *Herodotus, An Interpretive Essay* (Oxford 1971) 49.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Immerwahr (above, note 3) 177. Note, however, Xerxes' several reasonable assertions at Doriscus (7.103.2, 3, 5); at Thermopylae (7.209.5, 210.1, etc.).

appearing to be a "weak, pitiful giant." Laughter in Herodotus is not funny; it is a symptom (although not the cause) of approaching catastrophe.

We cannot say whether Herodotus knew that any specific laugh which he reports was historical fact, *or*—if we assume with reasonable certainty that sometimes he did not—whether he inserted them to indicate something to his reader (symbolic action), *or* without thought (a formulaic section of a given *mythos*?), in which case they are merely examples of the skill of archaic Greek story-telling techniques. I incline for two reasons to the hypothesis that he inserted them for valid literary and historiographical purposes. Reason one is grounded in an incidental remark: "Somehow (*kôs*) there is usually some early signal (*prosêmainein*) whenever great disasters are about to fall upon city or nation" (6.27.1; cf. 1.45.2, a son's death; 6.98.1). Thus Herodotus reveals, in an anecdote reporting a massive loss of Chios' sons, his belief about the way in which the world works. The signal is a warning, immediate if anyone can understand it at the time, subsequent for the discerning reader. We call these incidents chance occurrences, natural phenomena. Herodotus, however, believes either that both nature (better, the gods' direction of it) and human nature coincide sufficiently, *or* that the latter is but an aspect or analogue of the former, so that to the percipient the outcome can be suggested. Gesture, stance, speech, even laughter, similarly point to future events, because for Herodotus, character is a component of a man's fate, and his actions reveal—at least, to a retrospective consideration—his doom (cf., once more, 1.32.9). In terms of the event itself, signs from the gods are *prodeictic* but obscure (6.27.3; cf. 1.209.4; 7.37.3), while Herodotus' retelling is *apodeictic* and paradigmatic (proem). Therefore the literary pattern of revelation is analogous to the divine administration's, except that Herodotus offers hindsight, not foresight. He clearly doubts that men understand divine communications (2.3.2).

The second argument for seeing such incidents as part of Herodotus' historiographical plan is that such a high percentage of the laughs (about eighty per cent) have a reported comeuppance, more often distant than immediate, but most clearly related. All who consider Herodotean modes of explanation recognize the measured punishment of pride and



of ignorance concerning the human condition.<sup>13</sup> The despot-syndrome describes autocrats who are slaves to their passions: anger,<sup>14</sup> laughter, sex,<sup>15</sup> etc. Men whose laughter deserves report are marked, because laughter connotes scornful disdain, disdain a feeling of superiority, and this feeling and the actions which stem from it attract the wrath of the gods (1.207.2; 3.53.4; 7.10. ε). Laughter, then, in Herodotus indicates a hybriatic state of mind. Power and prosperity are dangerous in themselves. Incidents of laughter are to be protreptic for the reader, a demonstration after the event in easily understood human terms meant to warn him against wrong actions in the future. Herodotus seems to intend such a nexus of action and punishment for

<sup>13</sup> Like the often discussed adviser motif (cf. above, note 5), laughter is a fictional signal of the poetic and philosophic dimension of the "deeper" Herodotus; see Fornara (above, note 11) 22–23. "Fitting the punishment to the crime" appears first at 1.11.5.

<sup>14</sup> One might briefly compare Herodotus' treatment of anger, another passion only monarchs can afford, or rather suffer from. Of the fourteen occurrences of *thymoumai* and *thymos* (in the sense of anger), five refer to Xerxes, four to Cambyses, two to Greek tyrants, and one to Cyrus. Twelve of fourteen occurrences of the words thus refer to men who are too powerful, who have excessive means to vent their passions (cf. the not inapposite first sentence of 7.128.2). At 1.137.1, Herodotus praises the Persian law, unfortunately unenforceable, which prohibits the King from executing any man for but one fault. Nine of the fifteen occurrences of *orgê* (made palpably equivalent to *thymos* at 1.155.3 with 156.2, and 3.52.3 with 5) refer to Cyrus (2), Cambyses (2), Xerxes (1), other Eastern kings (2), and Periander (2). Note that absolute rulers, not entire nations, anger (except, potentially, the Spartans, 6.85.2). To grow wroth seems both a privilege and a symptom of the syndrome of power. Herodotus' pathology of autocracy wishes to show us that the untrammelled exercise of absolute authority, admired or desired by the unthinking, in reality produces an unhealthy environment which gives rise to unbalanced souls—Cambyses the paradigm here above all—until morbidity destroys them and maims their subjects. K. H. Waters, *Herodotus on Tyrants and Despots. A Study in Objectivity* (Wiesbaden 1971), fails, in my opinion, to prove his contention that Herodotus does not draw out any patterns in his work. Waters argues that the lives of autocrats are naturally repetitious, a statement in itself not false but inadequate as an explanation of observable literary organisation. For a brief discussion of madness in Herodotus, see Harry Avery, "Herodotus 6.112.2," *TAPA* 103 (1972) 19–21.

<sup>15</sup> Sex in Herodotus is too vast a topic for a note. I remark here only that seven of the eight appearances of *erô* and two of the three appearances of *erôs* refer to kings. Of these nine, three involve incest, four involve adultery, and Candaules' love (2) leads to conspiracy and assassination. The other two occurrences are metaphorical (1.96.2, 5.32), but the metaphor is significant. They refer to forcible seizure of unlimited governmental power, i.e., uncommendable lust for power. All uses of "love" therefore involve immoral and illegal acts, and furthermore, all involve actual or would-be autocrats. I plan to investigate further Herodotus' connections between the lust for sexual and for political mastery. For a similar view, see briefly, Seth Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries* (The Hague 1969) 137–38.

our instruction. Such warnings constitute Herodotus' ethical purpose in publishing his investigations. Laughter is thus functional in both literary and historical terms. Croesus requires attention (i.e., for us, laughter) because of his wealth, Cyrus and Leotychidas because of their methods of acquiring power, Cambyses and Xerxes because of their inheritance and perhaps consequent abuse of power.

In many other ways, to be sure, Herodotus creates for his eastern potentates a narrative economy which prefigures Xerxes. So from their blind chortling, Herodotus imaginatively and soberly develops a pattern and creates an expectation in us that Xerxes' laughter too augurs him no good. The basic facts about him and his end, in history as in tragedy, are known; the process is still interesting, and the pattern helps the account carry a non-explicit interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Herodotus structures his stories in a way that aids us to experience vividly Greek attitudes. The *Histories* gain impact from probably imaginary incidents which help explain motive and character without in the least falsifying *ta genomena*, the past, in the only way the present can know the past.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For this last point, see Immerwahr (above, note 3) 176; H. Wood, *The Histories of Herodotus* (The Hague 1972) 18-19; Albert Cook, "Herodotus: the Act of Inquiry as a Liberation from Myth," *Helios* 3 (1976) 35, 42-44.

<sup>17</sup> Our distinction between historical fact and creative fiction is too easily drawn and certainly requires reexamination before being applied to Herodotus and to the reported reasoning of Thucydidean characters. Cf. Cook, *ibid.*, 28. My thanks to Professors A. E. Raubitschek and D. P. Tompkins for wise advice which I sometimes followed. All errors are my responsibility.