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## Debra Hamel, Reading Herodotus. A Guided Tour through the Wild Boars, Dancing Suitors, and Crazy Tyrants of The History.

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*Other Late Essays*, Austin 1986, 4). Wright encourages us to see comic writers as playing explicitly to this audience already in the fifth century, however. I expressed some concerns above about drawing conclusions about a topic so lacking in direct evidence. At the same time, Wright's treatment of this provocative thesis makes me willing to rethink what evidence we do have.

This is a book full of interesting ideas, one that scholars and students should consult often. Unfortunately, at \$120 this will be beyond the means of readers without access to a research library. I hope that the press will do something to make it available in a more affordable format.

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Debra Hamel, *Reading Herodotus. A Guided Tour through the Wild Boars, Dancing Suitors, and Crazy Tyrants of The History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. xviii + 329. Paper (ISBN 978-1-4214-0656-5) \$29.95.

Herodotus' *History of the Persian Wars* is a long book. As Hamel points out (2), it runs from five hundred to seven hundred pages, depending upon the translation. Furthermore, some parts of the *History* can be boring, while other parts are obscure, requiring a knowledge of Greek history and culture to understand them. The purpose of Hamel's book is to make Herodotus' *History* more accessible to the first-time reader by taking out the boring parts and telling the rest of the story in an engaging manner, providing explanatory notes when needed. The hope is that, after reading Hamel's book, curious readers will want to read the original, and perhaps even seek out scholarly discussions of some of the more interesting points of contention. To encourage this process, Hamel provides a list of available translations and a bibliography of Herodotean scholarship in the back of the book.

Hamel's goals are laudable. At a time when fewer and fewer people have sufficient background to read the Greek and Latin classics with profit and enjoyment, even in translation, it is incumbent upon classicists to find ways to make these texts more accessible without damaging their integrity. For a complex text like Herodotus' *History*, however, picking the right excerpts, and presenting them in the right way, in the right translation, with the just the right amount of explanation and background information is an

unusually difficult task. And while Hamel succeeds in attaining some of her goals, other aspects of the book are less successful.

The book is well organized. There is a timeline in the front covering all of the major events mentioned in the *History*, followed by several clear and easy-to-read maps. After a brief introduction, in which Hamel explains her approach and gives an outline of the main events in Herodotus' *History*, there are thirteen chapters that generally follow the order of events as Herodotus presents them. A brief timeline also introduces each chapter, making the events discussed in that chapter easier to follow. The chapters are divided into short, easily digestible sections, each with a subject heading and a brief quote from Herodotus to pique the reader's curiosity. In each short section, Hamel narrates the relevant events, providing a good balance of narrative, background information, and commentary.

Hamel has chosen her passages well. She includes all the most important historical events and key thematic passages, in addition to the fascinating stories that make Herodotus' *History* so attractive. Hamel's prose is lively and engaging; she has a delightful sense of humor and an irreverent style that Herodotus might have appreciated. And while Hamel has read deeply in Herodotean scholarship, allowing her to provide helpful explanations for difficult and confusing passages, she wears her learning lightly. She manages to provide just the right amount of help for a novice reader without being didactic or self-aggrandizing. Hamel succinctly describes, for example, the scholarly debates surrounding the story of Intaphernes' wife and her choice to save her brother's life rather than that of her husband and children (*Hist.* 3.118–19) and Antigone's similar arguments in Sophocles' *Antigone* (908–12). This is precisely the type of clear and helpful commentary that a non-classicist first-time reader of Herodotus would want and need.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Hamel's book is her sensitivity to the broad themes that underlie Herodotus' *History* and her ability to explain them in a way that highlights the meaning of the text. On page 21, for example, after describing the oracular responses given to Croesus, Hamel explains: "He finds in the oracles what he expects to find and ignores information that doesn't fit his preconceived notions." Similarly, after describing how Croesus learned about the Spartans' misadventures in Tegea, Hamel comments: "A more insightful man than Croesus might have pondered the implications of the Spartans' experience for his own situation" (24). As these examples show, Hamel is able to articulate key themes in a way that Herodotus himself does not; thus, a novice reader can easily understand

the thematic import of these apparent digressions.

The book has three serious shortcomings, however, that detract from its overall usefulness. First of all, the short quotations from Herodotus that form the epigraphs to each short section are all taken from Rawlinson's nineteenth-century translation. This is an unfortunate choice, since the translation is stilted and archaic to the point of being obscure. The following quotation introduces the section on Solon's conversation with Croesus: "But in every matter it behoves us to mark well the end: for oftentimes God gives men a gleam of happiness, and then plunges them into ruin" (13). Ignoring the sheer awkwardness of the translation, the Britishism "behooves," instead of the more familiar but still archaic "behooves," may well confuse a novice reader. Furthermore, the anachronistic conception of deity implied in the word "God" is dangerously misleading. These epigraphs make Herodotus seem like an antiquarian from the Victorian era, which he most certainly is not. Hamel's own translations of short passages provided in the course of her commentary are clear, lively, and engaging, just as her own prose is. The book would have been much improved if Hamel had used her own translations throughout.

A related problem is that Hamel rarely allows Herodotus to speak in his own voice. Herodotus is one of the most gifted storytellers of all time, but Hamel rarely allows him to tell his own stories, preferring to narrate them herself. While Hamel is an adequate raconteur, no one can match Herodotus' skill in foreshadowing, suspense, drawn-out detail, and surprising denouement. To take only two examples, Hamel's re-telling of the story of Solon and Croesus (*Hist.* 1.29–33) falls rather flat, and her narration of the Persian war council (*Hist.* 7.5–11) lacks the power and panache of Herodotus' *oratio recta* account. Hamel would have done better to simply translate many of the stories she retells, allowing Herodotus' distinctive voice to come through.

The most disappointing aspect of the book, however, is that, despite the helpful timelines, Herodotus' broad historical narrative is not made sufficiently clear. This lack of a clear historical context lessens the impact of some important events. Hamel's retelling of the death of Cyrus (*Hist.* 1.201–14), for example, is strangely anticlimactic, even though it is set in the context of his ill-omened battle with the Massagetae and ends with the striking image of Cyrus' head being placed in a wine-skin full of human blood. The reason for this sense of anticlimax, I believe, is that Cyrus' death gains significance from its place in Herodotus' larger story of the growth of the Persian empire and its eventual, and unlikely, defeat at the hands of

a loose coalition of Greek city-states. Without a strong, historical narrative to help us understand its importance, Cyrus' death becomes just another tale of outlandish peoples and their barbarian customs. Conversely, Cyrus' ignominious defeat helps to build up the larger story of the Persians' eventual failure. Without a strong historical narrative, it is difficult for the reader to understand the full impact of Herodotus' work.

In conclusion, this is a valuable book, but its goals are imperfectly realized. While Hamel provides a good sampling of stories, helpful background information, and insightful explanations of key themes in the *History*, she does not adequately convey Herodotus' distinctive voice or his historical insights. But perhaps a classicist is not the best person to review a book intended for a popular audience. If Hamel's book inspires new readers to seek out Herodotus' *History*, then it will be a success.

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Roberta Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*. Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Pp. ix + 229. Cloth (ISBN 978-1-4051-9628-4) \$89.95.

In this book Stewart proposes to contextualize Plautus' representation of slavery as a part of the larger discourse surrounding the Roman slave society of the third and early second centuries BCE. In order to do so, she juxtaposes readings of legal and historical documents with readings from comedy. The premise, as stated in the introduction, is that comedy documents this discourse about Roman slavery as it was at the moment when Rome was becoming a slave society in which the common good is equated with the interests of slave holders (cf. Finley's *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*). Comedy, according to Stewart, was not merely an impartial witness to these developments, but rather "formed, supported, and perpetuated the political, social, and legal institutions of slave society," thus functioning as an Althusserian ISA, Ideological State Apparatus (19). Stewart's critical move produces fresh insights into comedy as a reflection of social discourse, but does not embrace the full range of Roman comedy's responses to slavery. The following account of Stewart's useful findings will point to some reading strategies that might supplement and modify her conclusions.

In chapter 1, "Human Property," Stewart's point of departure is