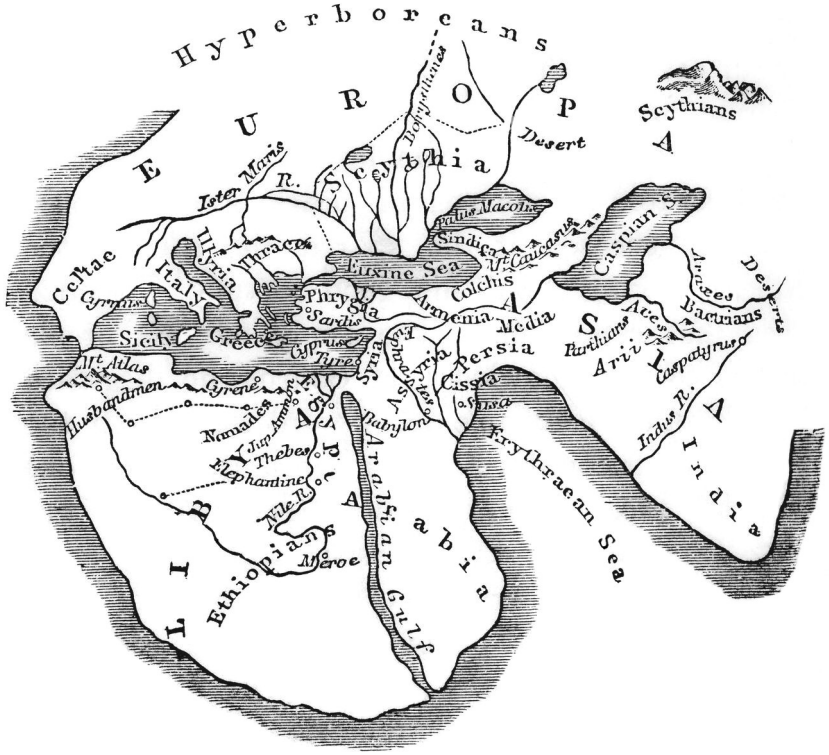
The Historic Monument

Herodotus' contribution to philosophic thought and a critique of Aristotle's *Poetics IX*



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO HERODOTUS.

Jacob Emmanuel Brown

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I. Introduction

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle inquires into the nature of poetry and its worth. Over the course of his inquiry, he discusses the nature of poetry in general as imitation, along with its major categories and its constituent parts. His central concern is with the nature of imitation, which he claims all poems are, and how imitation naturally resolves itself into plots which convey something to the reader. For instance, the tragic plot has the capacity to invoke pity and terror in the reader such as the tragedies of the *Oresteia* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Aristotle suggests in Book VIII that the plot ought to be whole without irrelevant material so as to be made a perfect imitation. But then he says in Book IX: "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular."[1] This comment, while offering glowing praise in favor of the poetic, leaves the historic maligned. This off hand comment in the *Poetics* has left the impression that the historical is inferior and not worthy of study. While Aristotle does not mean to put down historical study entirely, he does suggest that it is not a worthy study because it is less philosophical. Aristotle's thought acts as a foundation for western society, and because of this his words have had special weight. When he demeans history, he frustrates historians who argue their discipline lends itself to philosophical thought and therefore has philosophical value.

To offer a defense of history against Aristotle and put this comment to rest, we will need to examine what it is that makes the poetic philosophical for Aristotle. Poetry is not the same as philosophy because he calls poetry philosophical rather than philosophy. We therefore do not need to argue that history is philosophy but only that it is philosophical in the same or in an analogous way as poetry. But then in what way is the poetic philosophical? Aristotle suggests that the philosophical is tied to the universal. We then need to know what the universal is and how it is tied to the plot which is at the heart of poetry. Then we would need to see if those universals also appear in history which would then show that history would also be philosophical.

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1 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895), 1451b.

If we can show that the historical is philosophical in the same way as the poetic with its focus on universals, it would be expedient to see if there are any examples of philosophical history. Fortunately, Aristotle has two near contemporaries who wrote histories who can both can show history's philosophical value, Herodotus and Thucydides. Both could be used to as evidence in favor of the argument, but Aristotle in the *Poetics* makes direct reference to Herodotus and his *Histories,* so he will be used as the primary example. Herodotus shows that history can be as philosophical as poetry, but he also shows an area of philosophy which poetry is less able to consider, namely prudence in the face of particulars. Prudence is wisdom applied to action. Because history concerns itself with the particular and the universal, history can provide the perfect medium to train man in prudence. Herodotus therefore trains our prudential thinking because he trains us to think in a paradigmatic way, to think with comparisons, and trains us to make judgments about the life that has been set before us based upon the particular and the universal.

II. Philosophic Poetry According to Aristotle

According to Aristotle, poetry is the art of creating an imitation of an action. A poem is a particular artifice, i.e. the thing made, which conveys a complete imitation of an action. When Aristotle speaks about poetry in general he is referring to all the genres which use imitation to create a poem. He lists four major genres of poetry—epic, tragedy, comedy and dithyrambic poetry or lyric—because they are all "in their general conception modes of imitation."[2] Aristotle focuses most on tragedy for poetry's philosophical value, because, in his day, tragedy was the most developed form of poetry available and tragedy has a certain rigor to it which is not necessarily seen in other genre. Therefore it was most expedient for him to take tragedy as a model of good poetry. But Aristotle suggests that all good poems are philosophical because all poems are imitations of an action, which is the same as the plot. Aristotle defines plot as "the imitation of the action:--for by plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents."[3] There can be multiple kinds of plots that are

2 Ibid., 1447a.
3 Ibid,. 1459a.

proper to each genre. Epics, according to Aristotle, partake in the poetic action in a way very similar to tragedy, so much so that he says:

> Whoever, therefore, knows what is good or bad Tragedy, knows also about Epic poetry: for all the parts of an Epic poem are found in Tragedy, but what belongs to Tragedy is not all found in the Epic poem.[4]

Epic too possesses a plot, but it is a plot that is the movement of a city instead of an individual. Its plot is a vast multiplicity of plots done by many actors which work together to add grandeur to the central action of the poem. The tragedy, on the other hand, only follows the plot of a single individual. Aristotle says:

> In Tragedy we cannot imitate several actions carried on at one and the same time. We must confine ourselves to the action on the stage and the part taken by the players. But in Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be represented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem.[5]

Tragedy can only offer one plot for consideration at a time. A single plot is required in order to produce the effect of pity and terror necessary for the tragedy. This is not to deride epic for having a multiplicity of plots but to show that is proper to tragedy to have one plot for the sake of the catharsis, which is the purgation of the passions resulting from pity and fear. If there were multiple plots occurring in a tragedy, then the causal links between actions and consequences are obscured, and on stage the effect becomes ludicrous. The epic poem, because it is a narrative as opposed to a play, does not suffer from the multiplicity of plots. If anything, the multiplicity of plots in the epic allow us to experience many actions, which enables us to see many nuances that come from the central action of the poem. whereas tragedy only allows us to see one action. But regardless of it's multiplicity of action, epic like the other genres also participate in the imitation of a central action.

Because all poems have plot, Aristotle argues that poetry expresses the universal through the plot and for that reason poetry is philosophical. He argues:

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4 Ibid., 1449b.
5 Ibid., 1459b.

> The universal tells us how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity and it is this universality at which Poetry aims in giving expressive names to the characters[6]

At first it is not clear what this universality is and how universality is philosophical, but Aristotle is giving a short description of the value of the universal in plot. The universal "law of probability or necessity" is meant to be a guiding principle for the plot and the arrangement of incidents contained in it. A plot is the central part of the poem and without it there wouldn't be a poem. In order for a poem to show the "law of probability or necessity" it would need to be shown in the the sequence of a plot. An action would need to be done and all the consequences would need to follow in accordance with the law of necessity.

The universal is meant to inform the particulars in the poem. There is an unfathomably large number of particulars that could be written into a plot, but the universal informs the poet how to write his poem and arrange the particulars. The poet does not need to worry about whether the particular pieces of the plot did or did not happen, as the historian would care about, but whether the arrangement of particulars illustrate the universal "law of probability or necessity" in the plot. This is the distinction that Aristotle makes between poetry and history saying:

> The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen.[7]

The poet is free to arrange the particulars in his plot to his liking in order to illustrate the universal, or 'what might happen.' The historian by contrast is in a sense confined by the particulars given to him by the world and would, according to this argument, be unable to as easily illustrate the universal. But the plot that follows the "law of probability or necessity" does not explain why it would be universal or why it would be philosophical.

These question can be better answered by the use of the *Ethics,* where Aristotle gives his definition of wisdom, and from it we can deduce what would be philosophical. He argues:

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6 Ibid.
7 *Ibid.*,1451b.

> [P]hilosophic wisdom is scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature.[8]

"Intuitive reason" is the capacity in man to apprehend first principles. It grasps the axioms which form the basis of knowledge. The "scientific knowledge" is the knowledge that is deduced by logic or experience from the first principles apprehended by the intuitive reason. Philosophy, which means love of wisdom, would then be the pursuit or love of the knowledge of the first unchanging principles and the knowledge that comes from those first unchanging principles. A philosophic text then would be a piece of writing meant to articulate the first principles in speech and derive knowledge from those principles.

However, a poem is not made for the sake of the articulation of principles, but it is made to invoke something, such as a catharsis in tragedy, in the reader or listener. How then is it related to philosophy? By the use of the plot. Through the plot, poetry gives us experiential knowledge of both principles and knowledge derived from them. A poem, therefore, is philosophical because it relates to philosophy though it is not itself philosophy. It gives the experience of truth, which is a kind of knowledge, though it isn't a pure articulation of that truth.

III. Why History Can—Or Doesn't—Look Like Poetry At Times

The primary distinction Aristotle makes between poetry and history is that one portrays the universal and the other the particular. According to him, poetry is that which is informed by the universal and history is that which is informed by the particular. By "history" and "the particular," Aristotle is thinking of the sort of history that is more akin to a mere chronicle.[9] This is argued by the Scholar Martin Ostwald, who says:

> If we were to take Aristotle literally, the only kind of historical writing he would recognize as such would be the kind of annalistic historical writing practised in his own times especially by Ephorus and the local chroniclers of several Greek states, including the Atthidographers, who tend to list events but do nothing to relate them to one another.[10]

8 Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. by W. D. Ross (New York, Modern Library, 2001), 1141b.

9 Silvia Carli argues Aristotle did not relegate history to mere chronology in "Aristotle on the Philosophical Elements of 'Historia,'" but there are many scholars on both sides of the issue. Certainty, when Aristotle says that "The particular is – for example – what Alcibiades did or suffered," suggests Aristotle made history merely a chronicle.

10 Martin Ostwald, "Tragedians and Historians," Scripta Classica Israelica 21 (2002): 9-10.

That Aristotle thinks history is the same as chronicle is also suggested by the Scholar M.I. Finley when he says:

> No wonder the ninth chapter has been perhaps the worst victim of all the familiar 'grousing about what are thought to be Aristotle's omissions' in *Poetics.* It has been called 'inadequate'… or it has been politely dismissed as not dealing with history at all. This last argument has a dangerous element of truth in it.[11]

A chronicle is a list of dates and a recounting of events that happened on those dates. In a chronicle there is nothing to link one event to the other except for its relation in time with other events. An example of a chronicle, as Aristotle would have thought of it, would have been something like the *The Parian Marble,* which was discovered sometime in the 16th century and was written sometime after 264/3 BC. Unfortunately the stone was damaged and the author is unknown, but it is clearly a chronicle written by an Attic Greek commenting on the events that preceded his own day. The *Parian Marble* in its opening lines says:

> [From all the records and general accounts] I have recorded [the previous times], beginning from Cecrops becoming first king of Athens, until [____] uanax was archon in Paros, and Diognetus in Athens.
> 1) From when Cecrops became king of Athens and the place was called Cecropia, which had previously been called Actica from Actaeon who was native there, 1318 years.
> 2) From when Deucalion became king near Parnassus in Lycoreia when Cecrops was king of Athens, 1310 years.
> 3) From when there was a dispute at Athens between Ares and Poseidon, because of Poseidon's son Halirrhothius, and the place was called the Hill of Ares, 1268 years, when Cr[ana]os was king of Athens.
> 4) From when there was a flood in the time of Deucalion, and Deucalion fled the waters from Lycoreia to Athens to [Cranaos] and [founded the temple of Olympian] Zeu[s, and] made offerings for his deliverance, 1265 years, when Cranaos was king of Athens.[12]

Aristotle says that poetry is not like a chronicle and gives a short commentary on the nature of chronicle, saying:

> Herein [poetry] differs from the ordinary histories, which of necessity present not a single action, but a single period, and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as the event may be.[13]

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11 M.I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York, Viking Press, 1975), 11.

12 "The Parian Marble: Translation," Ashmolean Museum of art and archaeology University of Oxford, last modified March 7, 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20150402111350/http://www.ashmolean.museum/ash/faqs/q004/q004008.html

13 Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1459a

Aristotle's main criteria for a thing to be a poem is a unity of plot, and a chronicle does not have a plot at all, which makes it something different from poetry. When history is simply a list of many different things put together on the grounds of their chronological date then there is no plot. Even when there is a followup event to a previous event there is no plot because nothing links the one event to the other event except by the happenstance of time, which does not involve the "law of probability or necessity." Because there is no plot in history, there is no universality in history.

Aristotle favors poetry over history because, as he claims, the focus on the universal is more philosophic than the focus on the particular. The universal is so integrally connected to a cohesive plot that he claims that any poem which does not cohere to a central plot must by necessity be a bad poem because it does not convey the universal. He calls such poems "episodic", and he says:

> Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence. Bad poets compose such pieces by their own fault, good poets compose such pieces to please the players; for, as they write for competing rivals, they draw out the plot beyond its capacity, and are often forced to break the natural continuity.[14]

Like the bad poet, the historian, according to Aristotle, focuses too much on the particulars and not on the universal that unifies the particulars into a cohesive whole. Similarly, when a poem loses all cohesion of a plot, becoming episodic, it loses the "law of probability" and loses the universal. Clearly, Aristotle does not acknowledge that there is a qualitative difference between the chronicler and the historian because both loose the cohesiveness of the plot and the universal.

But Herodotus is not a chronicler! He makes use of chronicles and questions chroniclers like the Egyptian record keepers, but he himself is not a chronicler but a historian. Herodotus's *Histories* are qualitatively different from those chronicles, because he arranges the events and facts into something more coherent and meaningful for the readers. Herodotus constructs narratives that have a beginning, a middle, and an end which express complete actions of a certain magnitude. Herodotus does not arrange events merely on the basis of chronology but on the basis of plot, and

14 Ibid., 1451b.

because of this he is like the poets because he conveys universals through the plots that are to be found in life.[15]

There is therefore no distinction in the structure of a good poem and a good history. Just as the poet will remove actions or facts that do not matter to the plot, the historian needs to not include every fact but only the relevant facts that convey what exactly there was that influenced a particular actor. Both the poets and the historians create plots, as said by Ostwald: "The creation of coherence and persuasiveness is up to the tragedian and historian, respectively."[16] They use the same tools to create plot, but whereas the poet constructs plots based upon a universal he has somewhat arbitrarily chosen, the historian constructs plots on the basis of the universals *and particulars* which are present before him. Ostwald comments that the construction of plots is common to both poetry and history saying:

> In order to achieve this goal, each has to arrange the basic facts at his disposal in a pattern of 'probability and necessity', that is, each has to convince his audience that the sequence of mythical or historical events is credible, because it embodies the way human beings 'must' or 'are likely' to act in the circumstances in which they have been placed. In other words, the circumstances are given; to link them together so as to make them humanly intelligible is the task of tragedian and historian, each in his own way.[17]

Both the poet and the historian need to arrange the particulars around a universal. Both are concerned with particulars; the poet and historian need to know what particulars are used and how they are arranged in the plots. The difference lays in that the poets do not need to work with exact particulars while the historian is obligated by the particulars to write about the universals. Ultimately, Aristotle's distinction between poetry and history as the distinction of the universal and the particular is false. Like a poet, the historian too constructs plots in accord with universals, but instead of inventing them like the poet he uncovers the plots that are already embedded in human life.

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15 For examples of plot in Herodotus, refer to Section IV below.
16 Martin Ostwald, "Tragedians and Historians," 16.
17 Ibid.

IV. Plots and Universals seen in Herodotus

We can see Herodotus uncovering a plot in the life of Croesus, the last king of Lydia, who is the first major figure to appear in the *Histories*. In his brief introduction of him, Herodotus says:

> He was the first foreigner so far as we know to come into direct contact with the Greeks, both in the way of conquest and alliance, forcing tribute from Ionians, Aeolians, and Asiatic Dorians, and forming a pact of friendship with the Lacedaemonians. Before Croesus' time all the Greeks had been free; for the earlier Cimmerian attack on Ionia was not a conquest, but a mere plundering raid.[18]

The life of Croesus sets the tone for the rest of the *Histories* because his life illustrates the idea of fortune, and this introduction introduces all that is to come. In Herodotus's mind, his *Histories* continue the narrative of events that happen around and as a result of the Trojan War. The *Histories'* primary concern is with the Persian Wars, which is the interaction between Greece and Asia. This is the grand narrative, i.e. epic plot, of the *Histories*. Croesus acts as the first epic character after the Trojan War and he represents Asia's response to the aggression of the Greeks during the Trojan War.

The first major plot—after the not-insignificant interlude with king Candaules of Lydia, king Gyges of Lydia, and his wife—appears when Solon visits Croesus on his travels away from Athens.[19] Croesus, after giving him a tour of his kingdom, asks him:

> Well, my Athenian friend, I have heard a great deal about your wisdom, and how widely you have traveled in the pursuit of knowledge. I cannot resist my desire to ask you a question: who is the happiest man you have ever seen?[20]

Solon is unimpressed by Croesus's show of pride and request for flattery, and goes on to tell him of the life of Tellus and his reason for naming him the happiest man:

> [H]is city was prosperous, and he had fine sons, and lived to see children born to each of them, and all these children surviving; secondly, he had wealth enough by our standards; and he had a glorious death. In a battle with the neighboring town of Eleusis, he fought for his countrymen, routed the enemy, and died like a brave man; and the Athenians paid him the high honour of a public funeral on the spot where he fell.[21]

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18 Herodotus, *The Histories,* 5.

19 Unfortunately, there is dispute about whether this meeting happened based upon chronological grounds. Croesus came to power in 560 B.C. and if Solon's travels happened during his archonship in 580-570 B.C. then he wouldn't have seen Croesus. Apparently there is another tradition that states Solon's travels were after Pisistratus's tyranny, but then one would have to abandon another tradition that Solon dies in 559/8 B.C.. The meeting is not out of the question, but one would need to make prudential judgments of the facts. (Endnote I.18 in *The Histories*)

20 Ibid., 14.

21 Ibid.

Croesus does not take kindly to not being named as the happiest man, and after some further dialogue retorts: “what of my own happiness? Is it so utterly contemptible that you won’t even compare me with mere common folk like those you have mentioned?”[22] To which Solon replies:

> Croesus… I know God is envious of human prosperity and likes to trouble us; and you question me about the lot of man… Great wealth can make a man no happier than moderate means, unless he has the luck to continue in prosperity to the end... whoever has the greatest number of the good things I have mentioned, and keeps them to the end, and dies a peaceful death, that man, Croesus, deserves in my opinion to be called happy.[23]

Croesus is displeased by Solon’s words. Herodotus at this point interjects by saying:

> [Croesus] let Solon go with cold indifference, firmly convinced that he was a fool. For what could be more stupid than to keep telling him to look at the ‘end’ of everything, without any regard to present prosperity?After Solon’s departure nemesis fell upon Croesus, presumably because God was angry with him for supposing himself the happiest of men.[24]

This whole dialogue is a setup for the rest of Croesus’s life and provides an interpretation to all that follows in Croesus’s life. He is at the height of his prosperity during the dialogue, and he will in a couple years lose everything.

What can be seen in this dialogue is the beginning of a tragic plot. In this dialogue we see Croesus at the height of his power and wealth while the wise man Solon appears and exposes a tragic flaw in Croesus. Croesus’s flaw is his pride in his wealth and power. Solon offers Croesus some practical wisdom by warning him about the laws of fortune and the gods’ jealousy. Solon as depicted here resembles Sophocles's Tiresias. Like Tiresias, Solon appears in the middle of the action and imparts wisdom from gods and man. Croesus fails to understand this message and falls into the role of an obstinate tyrant who fails to listen to the wise prophet and who suffers the consequences.

Herodotus, who was presumably well versed in his own city’s plays, would have expected his readers to recognized the tragic flaw and the theme of the wise prophet coming before the tyrant.

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 15-16.
24 Ibid., 16.

In this way he is able to convey to his readers what is about to happen to Croesus and his tragic fall.[25] Herodotus gives a tragic plot that Aristotle claims to be a necessary part of tragedies: "The change of fortune should be not bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty."[26]

This whole encounter between Solon and Croesus is already philosophical in the same way Aristotle would describe poetry. We have the establishment of a principle: fortune. Even to the richest of men, fortune can still change and cause even the most wealthy or powerful man to fall. Solon is not impressed by Croesus's wealth and power because he knows about fortune. Solon will only consent to call Croesus happy if he maintains what he has till the end. Croesus refuses to learn this principle when Solon tries to educate him. Because of his obstinance, Croesus will need to learn this principle the hard way in the rest of his life. His life as depicted in the rest of Herodotus's account illustrates the principles of fortune clearly and memorably.

It has been commented that plots written in the *Histories* shares a remarkably resemblance to those in Sophoclean plays, including Martin Oswald who emphasizes Herodotus's kinship with Sophocles—as an aside it should be mentioned that Sophocles was a contemporary of Herodotus, which would imply that these two men held similar views because of the social climate of their time and place. He begins by highlighting what Sophoclean characters are like, saying:

> However good their intentions, however rational their aims, Sophoclean characters discover the limits of their humanity as set by inscrutable and inexorable forces. An Oedipus or a Creon may be warned of what is to come by a Teiresias, but no warning can avert what is in store for them.[27]

Herodotus's characters are like Oedipus and Creon who, while noble, ultimately fall due to a flaw or circumstance. For example, Xerxes, who invaded Greece in the Persian wars, is warned by

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25 Whether or not it did or did not happen will depend on the reader's judgment of Herodotus as reliable source. If he is making this up, then he is acting as a poet and not a historian. If he is giving us an account which to the best of his knowledge he thought to be true, then he is acting as a historian and not a poet. It ultimately falls to the reader to decide if this is a historical truth or a poetic fable. But this does not invalidate the point that there are plots to be found in history and certainty the rest of the events described in Croesus's life can be reasonably accepted as having happened. The story with Solon makes it easier to see the tragedy that is occurring in Croesus's life.

26 Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1453a.

27 Martin Ostwald, "Tragedians and Historians," 16.

Artabanus that the Persians' greatest enemy is the land and the sea and that "men are at the mercy of circumstance, and not their master." Xerxes discounts this advice, and as a consequence Xerxes loses his navy at the battle of Salamis and he can no longer supply his army with the provisions required to pursue the war.[28] Oswald continues to say:

> A remarkably similar view of the human condition is taken by Herodotus both in working out the theme of his work as a whole and in innumerable details in his narrative that serve as building blocks for his structure. [Characters in history must act as reasonably as they can within the bounds of their social knowledge and their personal experience] A decision once made is subject to the inexorable laws of an external necessity, a force which, though transcendent, can be communicated to men by gods, especially by Apollo and his oracle, but is apparently not determined by them.[29]

Herodotus, like Sophocles, shows his characters acting in a certain time and place and with certain actions available to them. The tragic character acts within his environment and according to his knowledge and beliefs. Once the action has been done, the inevitable consequences soon follow. However reasonable the action may have been at the time it soon shows itself to be incomplete and unable to cope with the harsh realities of the world. Sophocles shows Oedipus announcing his own exile before he learns of his culpability, and he suffers the consequences of that action without knowing the full consequences of it at the time. Similarly, Herodotus shows Croesus naively trusting in his own wealth and the favorable oracle he received because he believed their reliability. As a consequence, he loses his whole empire because of his mistakes and flawed character.

Returning to Croesus, as an intelligent reader would suspect, Croesus immediately suffers a terrible turn in fortune. Herodotus tells us that Croesus had a dream that his son would die, which becomes true when Adratus—a man Croesus had forgiven and given sanctuary after his crime of manslaughter—accidentally murdered Croesus's son in a boar hunt. After grieving two years, he sees the growing empire of Persia and begins to consider an invasion of Persian territory.

The second major plot occurs in Croesus's life at this point. Before engaging in a war, he wants to get a favorable message from an Oracle, as was the custom in those days. He wants to

28 Herodotus, *The Histories,* 434.
29 Martin Ostwald, "Tragedians and Historians," 16.

know whether a war with Persia and their king Cyrus would result in a Lydian victory. Croesus shows a surprising amount of prudence in how he asks this question. Knowing that there are many false oracles and priests; he wants to test them with something insignificant before trusting them with something as valuable as his empire. This would seem to suggest a certain type of wisdom in the face of the world and he acts prudently to try and protect what is his. He sends his messengers to "consult the oracles, and inquire what Croesus, son of Alyattes and king of Lydia, was doing at the moment."[30] To which question only the Oracle at Delphi was able to give a satisfactory answer to the question. Upon hearing the response from Delphi Croesus "accepted it with profound reverence, declaring that the oracle at Delphi was the only genuine one in the world, because it had succeeded in finding out what he had been doing."[31] Croesus was apparently preparing and cooking a tortoise and a lamb in a big bronze pot on the beach at the time the messengers were questioning the oracles. After sending gifts to Delphi to win favor, Croesus again sent his messengers to ask the Oracle whether he should march against Persia, and the Oracle replied "if Croesus attacked the Persians, he would destroy a great empire."[32] Croesus was pleased with this answer—not seeing the ambiguity in the prophesy—and asked a further question: how long his reign would be? The Oracle replied:

> When comes the day that a mule shall sit on the Median throne,
> Then, tender-footed Lydian, by pebbly Hermus
> Run and abide not, nor think it a shame to be a coward.[33]

Croesus is pleased by this prophesy and according to Herodotus believed "that [it] meant he and his line would remain in power forever,"[34] because he found it unlikely that the Lydian people would ever want a mule for a king. Unfortunately for Croesus, by following what he thinks the oracles meant, he leads his kingdom to destruction because he assumes he is invincible by the gods' will. In this second plot, Herodotus is highlighting prudence, specifically when it comes to the gods. Croesus shows a mix of prudential action and lack of it. He is worldly wise and able to deliberate

30 Herodotus, *Histories*, 20.
31 Ibid., 21.
32 Ibid., 23.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 23-4.

about what to do to weed out false oracles, but he seems incapable of using the same deliberation to understand the Oracle's and the gods' will. The plot shows the reader that there is a prudence that is proper to the gods and the action that should be done in relation to them.

Thus the stage is set for war between Lydia and Persia and the tragic fall of Croesus. After various episodes of the Lydian-Persian war we find Croesus on a pyre awaiting his doom. He was there because his assault on Persia failed. Cyrus succeeded in repulsing the invading army by the use of a calvary of camels which scared the Lydian horses. Cyrus chased Croesus to Sardis and after a siege of fourteen days took the city. As Croesus awaits his death upon the pyre, Herodotus says:

> Croesus, for all his misery, as he stood on the pyre, remembered with what divine truth Solon had declared that no man could be called happy until he was dead. Till then Croesus had not uttered a sound; but when he remembered, he sighed bitterly and three times, in anguish of spirit, pronounced Solon's name.[35]

Croesus has finally learned the lesson that Solon was trying to teach him, that no wealth can stand against the forces of fortune and that no man should be counted happy till he is dead. Cyrus was intrigued by what Croesus was saying and sent messengers to inquire into who Solon was, and Croesus answered how:

> Solon the Athenian once came to Sardis, and made light of the splendour which he saw there, and how everything he said had proved true, and not only for him but for all men and especially for those who imagine themselves fortunate – had in his own case proved all too true.[36]

Herodotus tells us of Cyrus's response upon hearing these words, saying:

> [T]he story touched [Cyrus]. He himself was a mortal man, and was burning alive another who had once been as prosperous as he. The thought of that, and the fear of retribution, and the realization of the instability of human things, made him change his mind and give orders that the flame should at once be put out.[37]

Croesus has been saved and the first plot starting with Solon has been completed. While Croesus is alive, he has lost his wealth and his kingdom.

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35 Ibid., 40.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.

Croesus after being saved from the pyre is asked by Cyrus: "What man persuaded you to march against my country and be my enemy rather than my friend?"[38] To that question Croesus replied:

> The god of the Greeks encouraged me to fight you: the blame is his. No one is fool enough to choose war instead of peace – in peace sons bury fathers. But in war fathers bury sons. It must have been heaven's will that this should happen.[39]

Croesus, after becoming Cyrus's councilor, asks Cyrus if he may use his messengers to accuse the Oracle at Delphi for leading him astray. Cyrus agrees and the messengers are sent. Upon arriving at Delphi, the messengers convey their message and get this response from the oracle:

> As to the Oracle, Croesus had no right to find fault with it: the god had declared that if he attacked the Persians he would bring down a mighty empire. After an answer like that, the wise thing would have been to send again to inquire which empire was meant, Cyrus' or his own. But as he misinterpreted what was said and made no second inquiry, he must admit the fault to have been his own. Moreover, the last time he consulted the oracle he failed to understand what Apollo said about the mule. The mule was Cyrus, who was the child of parents of different races – a nobler mother and a baser father… When the Lydians returned to Sardis with the Priestess' answer and reported it to Croesus, he admitted that the god was innocent and he had only himself to blame."[40]

This marks the end of the second major plot in Croesus's life. While he was prudent to find the right Oracle who had the truth, he failed to read the oracles words with any measure of deliberation. The whole plot is therefore a movement into wisdom. This type of wisdom would be a certain suspicion about the gods, or perhaps their oracles, and the capacity to not take them at their word, which would involve finding the trick to the riddle hidden in their words. Croesus has practical wisdom about earthly things but apparently has no practical wisdom about the heavenly things. What the plot is concerned with is how one ought to relate to the gods, and according to Herodotus that way is a certain wariness or skepticism. This is a good lesson to teach because it shows the gods' words are not as simple as some would believe. The words that are received from the oracle need to be acted on with care. Croesus had to learn this lesson the hard way, but his life is capable of transmitting this lesson to his readers.

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38 Ibid., 41.
39 Ibid., 41.
40 Ibid., 43

Let this examination of Croesus's life as told by Herodotus suffice as proof that there are plots in good history and furthermore that there are good philosophical topics worthy of consideration. Croesus's life is an imitation of an action of a certain magnitude. Croesus begins in the book with wealth, a good state, and moves to slavery, a bad state. It would provoke pity and terror in the reader because—if he had not been saved from the pyre—we would sympathize with the loss of fortune Croesus suffered. Therefore there is a tragic arc to the plot. Croesus is a generally a good man but still has a tragic flaw in pride and lack of prudence. He is therefore a tragic character according to Aristotle, with universals to teach us because of it.

In addition to having individual plots, Herodotus also has a vast vision of the time in which he lived and the events that transpired during his life. While there is not space for an in-depth exploration of every event in the *Histories*, in general all the events and narratives contribute to the overall vision of the Persian Wars. A major theme is the question of culture and custom and how one ought to live. Herodotus's love of different cultures often directly challenge Greek customs and makes the reader think of the best way one ought to live. He comments that, almost universally, people believe that the best way to live is in the culture and customs they are born into.[41] Another major theme is the question of democracy against autocracy. The Greek city states are often shown to be divided and the question emerges whether the smaller disorganized cities can withstand the massive onslaught of a large autocratic power. The question emerges in many forms including discussions among the Persians about whether to invade and among the Greeks about whether they can withstand Xerxes's massive army. Since the Greeks won, the answer seems to be that a democracy emphasizing freedom is the better and stronger way to live. But again a major theme in Herodotus is the idea of fortune and therefore it is possible that Greece could fall and another better nation can take its place.

41 Ibid., 187.

V. What is Pertinent to Philosophic History

As has been shown, the historical partakes in the universal because the historical is able to find plots in the world. From what has been said, it could be argued that Herodotus is a poet instead of a historian, and certainty he participates in the poet's primary task of writing plots, which again are an imitation of an action. A certain passage in Aristotle that would suggest that Herodotus could be classified as a poet instead of a historian:

> It clearly follows that the poet or 'maker' should be a maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions. And if he chances to take an historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some real events should not have that internal probability or possibility which entitles the author to the name of poet.[42]

Aristotle believes the poet can take a historical example for his plot. By that he means he can look at the events that a chronicle contains and expand upon what is said to turn it into a plot. Aristotle also confirms that plots exist in the world, and it only takes a writer to take those plots and turn them into an imitation of an action. Yet, Aristotle still does not accept Herodotus as a poet but a historian, and he gives us the ground by which he makes that distinction:

> The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen.[43]

While Herodotus could be construed as a poet, he is in fact a historian. A historian while making use of plot, and therefore the universal, intends to try and say what did happen through inquiry *(historia)* into events. Where the poet does not particularly care about the factual truth of the plot and the actions he imitates, for the historian it is essential. The historian constructs plots, but the plots the historian constructs need to conform to the events and evidence that are being described. While at times the plot is clear in life, such as Croesus falling from power due to fortune or Xerxes falling due to overconfidence about his power, other events are unclear and need to be prudently interpreted by the historian.

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42 Aristotle, *Poetics*,1451b.
43 Ibid.

Ultimately, the virtue that is most applicable to history and the historian is prudence or practical wisdom. This is because the historian is in the exact place where this virtue is needed most. The historian on the one hand needs to account for universals, which he has been shown to do, but on the other hand the historian must account for the particular and the variable. The historian therefore needs to have an understanding both of the universal and of the particular in order to write a good history.

Aristotle breaks wisdom up into philosophical wisdom and practical wisdom. Philosophical wisdom is knowledge about invariable things. Practical wisdom is knowledge about variable things. Philosophical wisdom is generally considered higher than practical wisdom because we tend to want to know what does not change rather than that which changes. (Again, history is connected to philosophical wisdom and not merely practical wisdom because it is concerned with universal principles in addition to the particular. For example, Herodotus shows that freedom is good and desirable through events like the battle of Marathon.) Further, Aristotle argues that practical wisdom is concerned with knowledge related to man and "since man is not the best thing in the world" it is the lesser wisdom.[44]

This should not be reason to completely abandon practical wisdom in favor of philosophical wisdom. Aristotle describes men who have only philosophical wisdom without practical wisdom, saying:

> This is why we say Anaxagoras, Thales, and men like them have philosophic but not practical wisdom, when we see them ignorant of what is to their own advantage, and why we say that they know things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but useless; viz. because it is not human goods that they seek.[45]

Aristotle suggests that if someone only has philosophical wisdom, i.e. knowledge of invariable things, he will not be able act for his own good and bring himself to virtue. This is not to say that it is bad to possess philosophical wisdom, but to have wisdom in an unqualified sense would involve both the possession of philosophical wisdom and practical wisdom. Wisdom in the unqualified

44 Aristotle, *Ethics,* 1141a20.
45 Ibid., 1141b5.

sense involves knowing all principles, including principles which are based upon the variable. Aristotle continues:

> Practical wisdom on the other hand is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate; for we say this is above all the work of the man of practical wisdom, to deliberate well, but no one deliberates about things invariable, nor about things which have not an end, and that a good that can be brought about by action. The man who is without qualification good at deliberating is the man who is capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at the best for man of things attainable by action.[46]

Without practical wisdom, man would not be able to act. But because practical wisdom is not merely concerned with the variable, it also needs to understand universals in order to properly judge what the particulars convey. Aristotle says as much: "Nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals only—it must also recognize the particulars; for it is practical, and practice is concerned with particulars."[47] Aristotle gives his official definition of practical wisdom, saying: "Practical wisdom, then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods."[48] Once practical wisdom has been defined, the step to prudence is simple. Prudence is merely practical reason which is then acted upon. This is the definition Aquinas gave to prudence in the *Summa Theologica*: "Now it belongs to prudence… to apply right reason to action"[49]

It is precisely practical wisdom which the historical is most apt to train. At various points Herodotus challenges our reason to choose one of a variety of narratives. In book II of the *Histories,* Herodotus offers arguments that Helen's abduction as presented in the *Iliad* probably did not happen as depicted there. Herodotus gives an account where he talks with the Egyptian priests and asks them if they knew anything about the story of Helen. The priests respond that Paris and Helen sailed to Memphis after her abduction where king Proteus discovers Paris's offense and confiscates Helen and Menelaus's stolen property but lets Paris leave to return to Troy. After giving this account, Herodotus discusses why their account contradicts what is given in the *Iliad* by Homer:

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46 Aristotle, *Ethics,* 1141b5.
47 Ibid., 1141b14-15.
48 Ibid., 1140b20.
49 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* II-II, Q. 47, Art. 4. Corpus.

> I think Homer was familiar with the [Egyptian version of] story; for though he rejected it as less suitable for epic poetry than the one he actually used, he left indications that it was not unknown to him. For instance, when he describes the wanderings of Paris in the *Iliad* (and he has not elsewhere contradicted his account), he says that in the course of them he brought Helen to Sidon in Phoenicia. The passage occurs in the section of the poem where Diomedes performs his great deeds and it runs like this:
>
> > There were the bright robes woven by the women of Sidon
> > Whom the hero Paris, splendid as a god to look on,
> > Brought from that city when he sailed the wide sea
> > Voyaging with high-born Helen, when he took her home.[50]

Here Herodotus is building a case and providing evidence to disbelieve the narrative given in the *Iliad,* with all deference to Homer. Herodotus then asks the priest about the events that took place during the Trojan war. The Egyptians reply that, based on the testimony of Menelaus himself, the Trojans claimed that they had neither Helen nor the stolen property but that it all was in Egypt. The Greeks did not believe the Trojans and sacked their city, but finding nothing there went to Egypt and retrieved Helen and the property. Herodotus then gives his argument for his belief in the story, saying:

> I am inclined to accept [the Egyptian version] for the following reasons: had Helen really been in Troy, she would have been handed over to the Greeks with or without Paris' consent; for I cannot believe that either Priam or any other kinsman of his was mad enough to be willing to risk his own and his children's lives and the safety of the city, simply to let Paris continue to live with Helen… surely, I repeat, in such circumstances as these, there can be little doubt that, even if Helen had been the wife of Priam the king, he would have given her back to the Greeks, if to do so offered a chance of relief from the suffering which the war had caused.[51]

He asks us to use our judgment to decide whether the account given in the *Iliad* or whether the account that Helen went to Egypt appeals to our sense of reason. Herodotus challenges us to ask whether it is more likely that the Trojans would have kept Helen to their destruction or given her over for the sake of their city. Given Herodotus's argument, it would be reasonable to conclude that his narrative which differs from Homer's would be the correct one. In this instance in particular we see Herodotus exhibiting practical wisdom about how the world would work given the circumstances. He prudently offers his interpretation, his plot, of the events that surrounded Helen.

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50 Herodotus, *Histories,* 139. Herodotus is quoting Homer, *Iliad,* VI.289ff.
51 Ibid, 141.

At another point, Herodotus has Xerxes' uncle Artabanus give an argument for why Xerxes should not go to war against Greece, saying:

> Sire, like other men I have seen in my time powerful kingdoms struck down by weaker ones, and it was for that reason I tried to prevent you from giving way to your youth. There is danger in insatiable desire, and I could not but remember the fate of Cyrus' campaign against the Massagetae and Cambyses' invasion of Ethiopia. Yes, and did I not march with Darius, too, against the Scythians? My memory of those disasters forced me to believe that the world would call you happy only if you lived in peace.[52]

Cyrus died in battle against the Massagetae and Cambyses lost his army in an invasion of Ethiopia and Darius lost the battle at Marathon against the Greeks. In this example Artabanus is not giving an argument based upon philosophical principles—which would be something like 'act with moderation, especially since you own the largest empire in the world'—but historical ones. The historical argument sets up a parallel between the present or future possible action and the actions done in the past. Artabanus is making a prudential decision based upon previous events to argue that Xerxes should not go to war with Greece. Since Xerxes lost the war with Greece in the end, it seemed that Artabanus's arguments were justified. This ability to look at previous events and make prudential judgments on the past is one of the values of history. History, among other things, provides examples from the past which are able to inform our actions now. Because history is primarily about finding out about the past, it is a perfect medium to provide examples with which to judge the present and the future.

VI. Conclusion

If we were to only have chronicles, think how dull our conception of the past would be. Without the historian to write down the meaningful plots in history and provide explanation for them, then the figures listed in the chronicle would be without a story but would be merely statistics on a page. While the poet can provide plots and explanations, they can at times feel like Socrates sitting in the clouds and contemplating the sun. The historian shows that the stories he tells happen in life and that gives his writing a certain forcefulness and weight. One can see the change of

52 Ibid., 424.

fortune when Sophocles shows Oedipus losing his kingdom, but that can be legendary and one could claim that never really happens. But when Herodotus points to Croesus losing his whole kingdom and the evidence for it, then we take notice. Or another example, we can read Plato's *Republic* and be impressed by the city in words, but when it is made incarnate by Plutarch in his depiction of Sparta in *Life of Lycurgus*, we begin to change our opinions about the perfect city. The historian is then philosophical and he shows with force and evidence the principles he see in life. The historian produces a monument of human action which can stand the test of time and provide the plots that happened in that time. The poet can show universals but cannot prove that the stories they depict can actually happen in life. The historian can provide that universal with the additional reassurance that it did indeed happen in life and that the universal can happen again in particular ways. Furthermore, the historian teaches us practical wisdom. He helps to train the ability to put a thing under scrutiny and make sure that the plots and narratives given by certain accounts are indeed the way the world works. This is not to deny the rightful place of the poet but to point out the significance of the historian. The poet can provide a world which gives perfect account of universals and the ability to inquire into certain character and actions. The historian inquires into what was and provides the events as they happened in their own narrative, which can also be the inspiration for future poets. Neither discipline should strive to be superior to the other because in the end the poetic and the historic aim at different ends—what might happen and what did happen. Each should be acknowledged as valuable, and each discipline should acknowledge the virtues and goods that the other possesses. Poetry and history are therefore equally worthy as objects of philosophical value.

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