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Long an expert on what he terms Athenian democratic courage, Ryan Balot’s wide-ranging, ambitious new book is divided into three Parts. In Part 1, after an introduction (ch. 1) explaining the program, ch. 2 first analyses Thucydides’ presentation of Perikles’ funeral oration, notably the statement (2.40.2-3) that Athens’ democracy uniquely combines courageous daring, reflective thoughtfulness, and a proper sense of shame, ‘based on carefully reasoned, articulate ideas about the appropriate ends for human beings and for the cities that nurtured them’. These ideas in turn are derived from ‘democratic practices of free speech’ (p. 35). In ch. 3, fourth-century Athenian orators reaffirm the need for careful reflection before acting. Ch. 4 traces back Perikles’ ideals to Aeschylus’ *Persians* and Herodotus on the Persian Wars, followed in ch. 5 by a demonstration how in Thucydides, the Athenians failed to live up to Perikles’ ideals, as *andreia* (‘manliness’) became imperialism and the harsh suppression of others. In ch. 6 on Plato’s *Laches* (a dialogue on courage), Sokrates criticizes Athenian democratic courage as only claiming to link *logos* and *ergon*. Of *Laches*’ two generals, Nikias is confused and in Sicily his *erga* failed, while Laches simple-mindedly favors only *erga*. Ch. 7 ‘Isokratean reflections: Athens’s courage, imperialism, and eudaimonism’ seemed less relevant to democratic courage, as Isokrates proposes a grand vision for Greece based on ethical harmony. Nonetheless, it is good to see current directions in Isokratean studies, even if Isokrates himself remains for me a bit pompously foolish, a Watson to Thucydides’ Holmes.

These first seven chapters are largely text-based and so require special care, as both the meaning of texts and their relation to reality are often uncertain. In one page (p. 14) Balot agrees with many that Thucydides wrote Perikles’ funeral oration, Balot’s cardinal text, but since Thucydides says he tried to preserve the general sense of what speakers said and there were many witnesses to this speech, Balot views virtually everything in it as Perikles’ own concepts. My view is that each of Perikles’ statements should be carefully evaluated, especially *vis-à-vis* Thucydides’ own perspectives. For example, Balot (pp. 30-32) is not alone in making much of Perikles’ bold comment that the Athenians should become ‘lovers’, *erastai*, of Athens. Would Perikles have used this word, with its overt sexual meaning? He was much ridiculed for a hyperactive sex life, and *erôs* always represented danger in contemporary texts, including Sophokles’ *Trachiniai*, Herodotus (who begins and ends with the disastrous
erôs of Kandaules and then of Xerxes for his brother’s wife), and Thucydides too, as when the masses feel erôs for invading Sicily (6.24.3). If Perikles used this word, he might well have been met with a thorubos of whistles and catcalls. An important democratic ideology was ‘living as one likes’, zên hôs bouletai tis, which conservatives scorned as ‘doing what one wants’ (an idea even democrats rejected). In 2.37.2 Thucydides has Perikles say that at Athens one can dran kath’ hêdonên, ‘do according to pleasure’, which no classical Athenian ever commended (but compare Perikles’ sex life: more catcalls I fear!). But in the plague, which is often judged to be this speech’s antilogy in erga, Thucydides says that the Athenians started ‘doing according to hêdonê’, very bad (2.53.1).

Balot (pp. 32-33 and elsewhere) makes good use of Perikles’ failure to mention justice as illuminating Perikles’ and Athenian thinking. On the other hand, as Malcolm Heath showed,1 in Thucydides virtually no Athenian speaks of justice, while in actual extant orations they do, and non-Athenians in Thucydides do. Heath concludes that Thucydides has misrepresented Athenian speeches. Thucydides evidently took pleasure in having every major Athenian democratic politician (Perikles, Kleon, Nikias, Alkibiades) criticize democracy, thus ‘confirming’ his own anti-democratic bias (‘confirming’ is in quotes because he wrote these speeches).

Balot does not question Thucydides’ Perikles’ statements on democratic reflective courage even though he knows that Thucydides rejects this idea and Thucydides’ Athenians rarely act in accordance with it. The funeral oration may not reflect Periklean or Athenian realities, but Thucydides’ deceptive logoi as opposed to clear erga. (Contrast the clear prose style of the erga to the often tortured writing of the logoi.) Is, then, what Balot calls reflective democratic courage an idealizing falsehood made by Thucydides to contrast with the brutal realities of the plague and war which teaches men to be violent? Thucydides was ever ‘the artful reporter’. Balot makes brilliant use of these ancient texts based on the view that they are historically accurate. In contrast to Thucydides, in the last paragraph of ch. 5 Balot acknowledges recent trends that the Athenians were mostly not such brutal imperialists but tried to run things well. Polly Low’s use of epigraphic evidence is especially impressive here. Like Balot (p. 123), most scholars accept as historical Thucydides’ presentation of the Melos episode as a travesty of justice. But for one thing, perhaps for a moment forgetting his themes as he sometimes does, Thucydides makes clear that Melos was a league action, allied hoplites nearly outnumbering Athens’ (5.84.1).