A Note on Woodhead’s “Thucydides’ Portrait of Cleon”

A. G. Woodhead in his article “Thucydides’ Portrait of Cleon” states on page 298: “The Mytilenean debate introduces us to Cleon, and Thucydides here does what he seldom does—on introducing him he adds a short description of the man as he sees him. I will endeavour to show that Cleon is not introduced in an extraordinary manner as Woodhead, apparently following Classen and Steup, maintains, but that Thucydides does here what he does elsewhere.

All references to historical characters in the History of Thucydides may be classed according to four types:

(a) Where merely the name is mentioned in the form x, or x the son of y, e.g. (II. 21. 3):

παντὶ τὸ τρόπῳ ἀνηρέθιστο ἡ πόλις, καὶ τὸν Περμιλάχ ἐν ἄργῃ ἔχειν; or (II. 102. 1):
καὶ Κόννητα τὸν Θεολύτου ἐς Κόροντα καταγεγράφησεν ἀνεχόρησαν

(b) Where the name is mentioned as described in (a), but with some additional comment which is undoubtedly a fact, e.g. (I. 57. 2):

Περδίκκας τὸ δ’ Ἀλεξάνδρου Μακεδόνων βασιλέως ἑπετολέμοντο ἐξυμμακχὸς πρότερον καὶ φίλος ὄν

(c) Where a psychological remark is added, i.e. a remark which lets the reader into the thoughts of the historical character and so enables him to see the motives which determine actions or attitudes. E.g. (II. 13. 1):

Περμιλάχς ὁ Ἐκανθίππου στρατηγὸς ὄν Ἀθηναίων δέκατος αὐτός, ὡς ἐγὼ τὴν ἑφθολὴν ἐσομένην, ὑποτοπῆσας, ὅτι Ἀρχίδαμος αὐτῷ ἔξος ὄν ἑτύγχανε, μὴ πολλάκις ἢ ἄλλη βουλήμενος χαράζεσθαι τοὺς ἀγροὺς αὐτοῦ παρακλητή καὶ μὴ δημώσῃ, ἡ καὶ Λακεδαιμονίων κελευσάντων ἐπὶ διαβολὴ τῇ ἐξωτερικῇ γέννατι τούτῳ, ὀσπὲρ καὶ τὰ ἄγη ἑλαύνειν προεῖπον ἑνεκα ἑκείνου, προηγόρησεν τοῖς Ἀθηναῖοις

(d) Where the name is mentioned as x, or x the son of y, with some additional comment which is a judgement or evaluation, be it of Thucydides himself, or the generally accepted appraisal of a person which Thucydides is merely reporting. E.g. (VI. 72. 2):

Ἐρμοκράτης ὁ Ἐρμομόνος, ἀνήρ καὶ ἐς τάλα τύψειν οὐδενὸς λειτώμενος καὶ κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον ἐμπειρίας τῇ ἱκανός γενόμενος καὶ ἕνδρείᾳ ἐπιφανῆς, ἐθάρσαυε...
The introduction of Cleon will, therefore, be a reference of the type (d). In this category of remarks we have the ‘introduction’ of Pericles (I. 127. 3); ὥν γὰρ δυνατότατος τῶν καθ’ ἐκυτὸν καὶ ἄγων τὴν πολιτείαν ἡμαντίκοτο πάντα τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις...

and again later (I. 139. 4):

Περικλῆς δὲ Ἑκατηπποῦ, ἀνήρ κατ’ ἐκείνον τὸν χρόνον πρῶτος Ἀθηναίων, λέγει τι καὶ πράσεων δυνάμεως παρήγει...

that of Athenagoras (VI. 35. 2):

παρελθὼν δ’ αὕτως Ἀθηναγόρας, ὡς δῆμου τε προστάτης ἦν καὶ ἐν τῷ παρόντι πιθανότατος τοῖς πολλοῖς, ἔλεγε τοιάδε...

that of Hermocrates (VI. 72. 2)—quoted as an example in category (d’); that of Antiphon (VIII. 68. 1):

'Αντιφόν... ἄνὴρ Ἀθηναίων τῶν καθ’ ἐκυτὸν ἀρετῇ τε οὐδὲν ὅστερος καὶ κράτιστος ἐνθυμηθήσατα γενόμενος καὶ ἔγνωτι εἰπέν... that of Theramenes (VIII. 68. 4); that of Hyperbolus (VIII. 73. 3); that of Nicias (V. 16. 1); that of Alcibiades (V. 43. 2); in fact the introduction of most, if not of all, of the prominent historical characters.

To say, therefore, that “Thucydides here does what he seldom does—on introducing Cleon he adds a short description of the man as he sees him”, is erroneous unless the emphasis is entirely on “as he sees him”. If this is the case, Woodhead must show that this evaluation of Cleon in the introduction is Thucydides’ own judgement, whereas the evaluation of a Nicias, Alcibiades, Athenagoras, Hermocrates, Antiphon, Theramenes, and even Hyperbolus, who are all introduced by a similar type of evaluation, is not Thucydides’ evaluation of these characters, but the generally accepted view of the time, or even the view of Thucydides’ source of information, which he is merely reporting.

If, however, the differentiating factor is the fact that the words used in this description, viz. βιασύνης and πιθανότατος, are “smear words”, it must be shown that these are indeed words expressing unfavourably qualities which are in fact more favourable. Merely being unfavourable is not sufficient to warrant the term ‘smear word’. Βιασύνης although an unfavourable term, may very well be a fact rather than a purely Thucydidean judgement, for we know Cleon as such in Thucydides, in Diodorus Sicaus, in Plutarch, and

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3 By ‘introduction’ I understand not necessarily the first mention of a character by name, but the occasion at which the name of an historical character is given (invariably with some additional comment) when events force the character into a prominent role and his actions or attitude become politically significant. Some characters even have a second introduction, as seen in the case of Cleon in III. 36.6 and IV. 21.3.

4 See also Pearson’s article (which Woodhead refers to) in T.A.P.A. 78 (1947) 37-60: ‘Thucydides as Reporter and Critic’. Pearson points out that Thucydides displays a willingness to judge.

5 A. W. Gomme (A Historical Commentary on Thucydides, Vol. II, on Bks. II-III, 1956) comments on III. 36.6: ‘he (Cleon) is at once judged, βιασύνης τῶν πολίτων. However, both this and τὸ δὴμο πιθανότατος are well witnessed in the speech which is now given to him.” A. Andrewes (Phoenix XVI, 1962, on page 76) says of Cleon’s speech in this Mytilenean debate: ‘Under the veil of Thucydides’ language Cleon
in Aristophanes. Unless we can prove that Cleon was not μικρότατος or not viewed as such by that section of the population with whom Thucydides sympathized, we are not in a position to say that Thucydides here gives an unfavourable description of a quality which was in fact more favourable.

Very much the same may be argued about πιθανότατος—a term used elsewhere in Thucydides of Athenagoras, as Woodhead points out. Athenagoras and Cleon are demagogues, leaders of the people relying for their leadership inter alia on a particular type of persuasive ability—it may very well even be the art of carrying conviction against what really is or ought to be so.

Nevertheless, this persuasive art involves the exploiting of a sentiment already present in the Assembly. Πιθανότατος is perhaps an unfavourable word, but none the less apt in describing the political speech-making of a Cleon, so different to the oratorical art of a Pericles. Less colourful phrases may not exhibit the qualities credited to him in 3.36.6, violence and the ability to sway people. See also Cleon's reputed responsibility for the Scione decree whereby Scione had to be destroyed and all the male inhabitants slain. (Thuc. V. 32.1 and J. B. Bury, History of Greece, p. 451).

Diodorus Siculus XII. 55.8. In the words of A. W. Gomme, Comm. Vol. I, p. 44: 'His (Ephoros) work is all lost but for short quotations in other writers; but for the 5th century and for Greece proper it was the basis for the compilation of Diodorus. Diodorus seems to have followed him closely.' And G. L. Barber in O.C.D. on Ephoros says: 'He consulted numerous authorities, correcting Herodotus by Ctesias, ... colouring Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War under the influence of 4th century pamphleteers'. Diodorus' account is therefore not dependent on Thucydides only. See also Gomme p. 52.

Plutarchus Per. XXXIII. 6-7, Nic. II. 2-4, and III. Gomme Comm. Vol. I, p. 74: 'Plutarch is of great value to the historian of the period from 478 B.C. to the end of the century: because for the pentekontaetia our other information is so scrappy, and because he preserves something of what Thucydides purposely omitted, the biographical detail, the political lampoons, and mockery of the comic poets'.

Aristophanes Eq. 40ff., 983 and Vesp. 242-244. Surely Aristophanes' evidence cannot be lightly rejected on the basis that he had a personal grudge against Cleon. A comedy that gives vent to a personal grudge is restricted to one person's, here Aristophanes', estimate of the character parodied, Cleon in this case, and it could only meet with success if divorced from reality. If, however, Aristophanes had taken a characteristic of Cleon and exploited this in his comedy, there is reason to believe that the comedy would have been successful because of striking a sentiment common to the poet and audience. Is it not the art of comedy to select the typical and to make fun of this typical quality which is comically presented in an exaggerated, but recognizable form? See also Andrewes Phoenix XVI, p. 80: 'Aristophanes' Cleon is recognizably a caricature of the same man we find in Thucydides', and on p. 81: 'But a successful comedy cannot be created out of nothing, and the real Kleon must have provided Aristophanes with usable materials'.

Thuc. VI. 35.2.

For the distinction of political speech-making and rhetorical art refer to J. H. Finley's review of Bender's Begriff des Staatsmannes bei Thukydides in A.J.P. 61 (1940) p. 249. He points out that Bender has failed to notice any connection between Thucydides' ideal of political oratory (ἐξουσία τὰ ποιεῖν θυσία Thuc. II. 60.5) and the more realistic analysis of personal and political motives which became widespread with the sophist movement.
have sufficed in the description of Cleon’s particular ability to persuade—an ability not too common and certainly an ability which added to Cleon’s success in carrying his proposals in the Assembly.

Both words are superlatives, but this again is a common custom in Thucydides.13

Merely to show, therefore, that these words are unfavourable, cannot in my opinion be used as support for an argument that Thucydides is here using “smear words”, and thus twisting facts (even though it be unwittingly) to present Cleon in a less favourable light. Furthermore, it is again no exceptional practice of Thucydides to use unfavourable epithets. In I. 95. 1 he says of Pausanias: ἤδη δὲ βιαίου ὄντος αὐτοῦ οὐ τε ἄλλος Ἑλλήνης ἠχθέντο; in VIII. 73. 3 we read of Hyperbolus:

και ὡς ἀκραβόλον τὸ τινά τῶν Ἀθηναίων, μοχθηρόν ἀνθρωπον, ἀστραξαμένον οὐ διὰ δυνάμεως καὶ ἀξιώματος φόβον, ἀλλὰ διὰ πονηρίαν καὶ αἰσχύνης τῆς πόλεως.

Thucydides gives an evaluation of Cleon, when he introduces him, according to a practice consistent with his introductions elsewhere in his work, as has been shown by the examples quoted under type (d) above. It is not, therefore, a thing he seldom does. This was recognized by Pearson: ‘Thucydides does pass judgement, and in his willingness to do so distinguishes himself from later historians, who substituted moralizing for critical expression of opinion’.14 This judgement which Thucydides passes—not always verified by events he relates15—is an aid to his readers to gain an insight in those events and/or forces that determine the history of his time. Thucydides is writing an interpretative history. The judgement of the type we have in Cleon’s introduction and the motives Thucydides expresses, classified above as remarks of the type (c), i.e. psychological remarks, are aspects of what may be described as Thucydides’ πραγματική ἱστορία. They partly determine the conception of pragmatic historiography as later formulated by Polybios.

Thucydides, in other words, aimed at presenting facts in such a manner that they might be useful for the education of statesmen.16

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13 See I. 127.3; I. 139.4; V. 16.1; VI. 35.2; VIII. 68.1.
15 Ibid. p. 56 where Pearson points out that Thucydides’ judgement is at times based on private acquaintance with an individual or at times on deductions from the events.
16 C. P. T. Naude, Ammianus Marcellinus in die Lig van die Antieke Geskiedskrywing, diss. Leiden 1956, p. 8 and 9: ‘Met Thukydides se nadruk op nut en lering neem die antieke geskiedskrywing ’n karakter aan wat dit op ’n belangrike wyse van die moderne onderskei. Dit word nl. in sy kern pragmaties.’ This term πραγματικάς probably first occurs in Polybios and he thereby means the relating of actions, in particular political actions of nations, cities and rulers. (Pol. 9.1.4 τὸν δὲ πολιτικόν; ὅ περὶ τὰς πράξεις τῶν ἠθικῶν καὶ πόλεων καὶ δυναστῶν.) But this history strives after an insight in those factors that determine the course of events, especially as seen in causes which are ultimately found in the motives and the actions of people, indeed of those that have a leading rôle. (Polyb. 2.56.16 αὐτῶς ἐν παντὶ τῷ τέλος τῆς διαλέκτους ύπὲρ τοῦτον οὖν ἐν τοῖς τελεμένοις ἄλλ’ ἐν ταῖς αἰτίαις καὶ προορισμένοις τῶν προτετάντων καὶ τοῖς τούτων διαφόροις). See also Polyb. 3.6.6-7, where he distinguishes between ἀφρό and αἰτίαι καὶ προφάσεις. See further M. Gelzer: Die Pragmatische Geschichtsschreibung des Polybios, in Festschrift für Carl Weickert, Berlin 1955, 87-91.
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