Skenè Texts DA • 4

What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

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SKENÈ. Texts and Studies (https://textsandstudies.skeneproject.it/index.php/TS)
Supplement to *SKENÈ. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*
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info@skeneproject.it
Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com
Distribuzione
Messaggerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)
Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN (pdf) 9-788846-7-6957-2
ISBN 9-788846-7-6958-9
ISSN 2421-4353

The ClaRE series collects publications about the receptions of Greek and Greek-related material in early modern English culture. The editions are expanded versions of the texts collected in the ClaRE Archive (https://clare.dlls.univr.it/), which presents three online databases of early modern English texts documenting Greek legacies, often via Latin mediations, as well as printed editions of Greek texts in England up to 1625 (GEMS, EMEC, CoLEEn). It also includes Latin and English grammars which show memories of Greek traditions (EMEGA). The series is part of the Research Project of National Interest PRIN2017XAA3ZF supported by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MUR).

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Part 2
Receiving, Adapting, Resisiting Models

6

"An Empire equall with thy mind": the 'Persian Plays' and the Reception of Herodotus in Renaissance England*

Francesco Dall'Olio

Abstract

The article explores the connection between the critical and literary reception of Herodotus in the Renaissance and the so-called 'Persian plays', a group of Elizabethan dramas staging classical subjects regarding ancient Persia. Through the analysis of three plays – Thomas Preston's tragedy *Cambises* (printed 1569), Richard Farrant's *The Warres of Cyrus* (printed 1594) and William Alexander's closet drama *Croesus* (1604) – the article considers how the authors revisited stories about the Persian empire derived from Herodotus or inspired by him, reflecting the changes in the knowledge and interpretation of his *Histories* from the 1560s to the first decade of the 17th century. It also explores how contemporary political issues were modelled on patterns derived from the *Histories*.

Keywords: Herodotus; Persian plays; *Cambises*; *The Warres of Cyrus*; *Croesus*

Introduction

With the term 'Persian plays' Jane Grogan identified a group of plays from Renaissance England, written between the early 1560s and the first decade of the 17th century, that stages subjects regarding the history of that part of Asia then known as 'Persia'. These plays are mainly about the great ancient empire of the Achaemenids, which, in the political and literary culture of the time, was considered a model of an 'ideal' empire in both its construction and organisation (see Grogan 2014, 7-11). This image was based on classical texts such as Herodotus' *Histories* and Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, from which the 'Persian plays' take much of their subject matter, and with which they entertain a relationship of "knowing . . . intertextual[ity]"

* This essay is part of the "Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama" Research Project of National Interest (PRIN2017XAA3ZF) supported by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MUR).

(Grogan 2014, 116).[1] The authors extensively reprise scenes, characters and sentences from classical authors, appropriating and rearticulating their ethical and political messages. Interestingly, this rearticulation appears to be connected with the changes in the history of their reception in terms of both their spread and their critical interpretation. This is the topic of this essay, which engages with the relationship between the reception of Herodotus in Elizabethan and Jacobean England and three of the most prominent examples of 'Persian plays': Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (1560-1561, printed 1569), Richard Farrant's *The Warres of Cyrus* (1587-1590, printed 1594)[2] and William Alexander's *Croesus* (1604). As will be seen, their varying presentation of the Persian material parallels the growing knowledge of the *Histories* in Renaissance England as well as their partial critical re-evaluation during the last part of the 16th and the first decade of the 17th century. At the same time, I will discuss Herodotus' deep influence on them with regard to both the choice of subjects and how they were adapted for the stage with in mind political questions relevant at the time, such as the distinction between good and bad kingship and the construction of an empire.

Cambises: Hidden Herodotus

Nowadays, Thomas Preston's tragedy is hardly considered an adaptation of Herodotus. Following Armstrong's seminal 1955 paper, the direct source of *Cambises* has generally been traced to the second book of Richard Taverner's *Garden of Wysedome* (1547), which in turn takes up the *Chronica* of the German historian Johannes Carion (first published in German in Basel in 1532, and then appearing in Latin translation in 1537). Cambyses appeared as a typical tyrant figure in a long literary tradition which included authors such as Seneca, Valerius Maximus, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate,[3] but also in Protestant readings that considered him

1 This also happens because, for the most part, those are plays written for performance in front of the cultured audience of either the court or the universities, who could appreciate the references to classical texts.

2 I refer to the chronology provided by EMED 2023.

3 For a discussion of these see Dall'Olio 2020, 113-14.

as the ungodly king who stopped the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem (cf. Hill 1992, 419-22). In Preston's time, no English edition of Herodotus had yet been published, nor did the English readership of the 1560s show any interest in him although manuscripts of the *Histories* and copies of both the *editio princeps* of the Greek text (Venice 1502) and Lorenzo Valla's Latin translation were available (see Dall'Olio 2020, 112). In fact, in a letter by Roger Ascham to his former classmate John Brandesby, dated 1542, Ascham claimed that in Cambridge "Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon . . . in ore et manibus omnium teruntur" ("Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon are often to be found . . . in the mouth and hands of all"; Ascham 1865, xxxvii; translation mine). However, it is significant that, of the three authors here named, the only one not to appear in any printed edition in England between the date of the letter and the composition of Preston's play is Herodotus.[4] This seeming lack of interest was firmly rooted in Herodotus' bad reputation in the early Renaissance. Following renowned ancient authors such as Plutarch, Herodotus was considered as a bad example of how to write history. He was held a liar who told tall tales of marvellous and impossible events. This reputation made Herodotus unsuitable for educational purposes, in contrast to both Thucydides, considered a master of rhetoric (see Pade 2006), and Xenophon, reputed an authority for the education of princes (see Humble 2017). By the 1560s, there were influential attempts to overturn this received view. Henri Estienne, in particular, prefaced his new 1566 edition of the Greek text of Herodotus with an *Apologia* where he strove to refute the traditional accusations of mendacity (see Earley 2016, 133-6). Preston's tragedy, however, predates this reassessment, and the debate did not penetrate England until much later.

And yet, as I have argued elsewhere,[5] the story of Cambyses

4 Thucydides appeared in an English translation by Thomas Nicholls in 1550, albeit in an edition based on Pierre Saliat's French version rather than the Greek original. As for Xenophon, the *Oeconomicus* had already been translated by Gentian Hervet in 1532, and shortly afterwards William Barker would undertake the first English translation of the *Cyropaedia*, published in two separate printings in 1552 and 1567 (see Grogan 2014, 50-6).

5 Some of the following references may be found in Dall'Olio 2020, esp. 116-17, 122-3, 125.

contained in Preston's sources includes some elements from Herodotus' narrative, from minor details to the recovery of a story (Cambyses' incestuous marriage with his sister/cousin) unknown to Middle Age literary tradition. While this may come as a surprise, it bears quite a simple explanation. On the one hand, as we will see in greater detail shortly, the *Histories* were highly admired as a literary text in spite of Herodotus' discredit as an historian. On the other, Carion's *Chronica* advertised itself as a universal history reconstructed from the most authoritative sources on the subject, and, for Persian history, these included Herodotus. Thus, Carion drew from him in order to present a fully-fledged version of the life and acts of the Persian tyrant. Carion's version was then faithfully reproduced by Taverner, and Preston followed him closely. As a result, what the Elizabethans read was a story as close as possible to Herodotus.[6]

It was not just a matter of narrative choices. The recovery of Herodotus affected the way Carion, Taverner and eventually Preston interpreted the character's tyranny, in particular how they moved away from a purely ethical interpretation towards a more political one. This change is most evident in the three texts' retelling of an already well-known episode involving Cambyses and one of his satraps, Praxaspes. All medieval versions derived from Seneca's dialogue *De ira* (3.14.1-2):[7] Praxaspes invites the king to moderate himself with wine because "turpem esse . . . ebrietatem in rege" ("drunkenness is unbecoming of a king"), but Cambyses' only response is to pierce Praxaspes' son through his heart with an arrow to prove that drunkenness had not affected him. Seneca changed Herodotus' tale so as to turn it into a moral exemplum on the negative effects of wrath, focusing his attention on the private confrontation between the king and the advisor, as well as on the cruel and provocative gesture of the king as proof of the effects of fury. This moralistic dimension would be expanded in the Middle Ages, when Cambyses and Praxaspes sometimes even

6 Although it has been suggested that *Cambises* may have been staged possibly at court under the patronage of Robert Dudley (Bevington 1968, 158), there is no actual evidence of any performance.

7 The following quotations from the Latin text come from Seneca 1977, the translation is mine. For a more detailed comparison between Seneca's dialogue and Herodotus, see Giacchero 1980.

lose their names and nationality to become examples of universal character types, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, 3.2043-55. What was omitted in these texts was the political subtext of Herodotus' original scene. There, Cambyses asks Praxaspes what the Persians think of him, and the latter replies: ὦ δέσποτα, τὰ μὲν ἄλλα πάντα μεγάλως ἐπαινέαι, τῇ δὲ φιλοινίῃ σε φασὶ πλεόνως προσκεῖσθαι (Hdt. 3.34.2; "Lord, for everything else you receive great praise; they say, however, that you are too devoted to the love of wine").[8] Praxaspes' answer here is not the well-meaning but uncalled for intervention of a subordinate, and therefore it does not cause the king's anger. Rather, Cambyses is enraged because what Praxaspes says to him is in contrast with another answer his subjects gave him to the same question on a previous occasion: πρότερον γὰρ δὴ ἄρα . . . εἴρετο Καμβύσης κοῖός τις δοκέοι ἀνὴρ εἶναι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα τελέσαι Κῦρον- οἳ δὲ ἀμείβοντο ὡς εἴη ἀμείνων τοῦ πατρός (3.34.4; "Previously . . . Cambyses had asked what man he looked like in comparison with his father Cyrus. They replied that he was better than his father"). It is to punish this alleged disloyalty that Cambyses kills Praxaspes' son: an act of lucid political strategy aimed at intimidating the people.

This political subtext reappears in Carion's *Chronica*, where, as in Seneca, Praxaspes addresses Cambyses without being asked first, but using the same words as in Herodotus: "laudari eum a Persis plurimum, caeterum hoc ipsis displicere, quod ebrietatis vicio obnoxius esset" ("for many things he is praised by the Persians, but for the rest they are sorry, that he is too given to the vice of drunkenness", Carion 1537, 65*v*). The king then summons the Persians and asks them "num aliqua in re merito reprehendurus esset" ("if he was worthy of reproach in anything"). As in Herodotus, the Persians reply that he "virtutem etiam antecellere patrem Cyrum" ("surpassed in valour his father Cyrus"). This triggers Cambyses' decision to 'punish' Praxaspes. The contrast that Carion establishes between Praxaspes and the Persians brings to mind a scenario well known to Renaissance political culture: the honest advisor courageously gives truthful advice to his sovereign at the risk of

8 I quote the Greek text from Herodotus 2005; translation mine.

displeasing him, only to be rebuked and sometimes punished.[9] In turn, Cambyses' vindictive behaviour qualifies him as a tyrant in the way Renaissance culture understood tyrants: the ruler who refuses to listen to advice and rules in an autocratic manner, tolerating only the presence of people willing to please him.[10] The recovery of Herodotus' text thus proves instrumental in adapting the story to the Renaissance political scenario. Preston's reworking of the tale in Scene 5 of *Cambises*[11] emphasises this reading. At first, Praxaspes reprimands the king in private, telling him that drunkenness does not befit a king, as in Seneca (5.479-82). Touched to the core, the king asks two Persian dignitaries whether there are reasons why he should be reprimanded; at this point, Praxaspes criticises him publicly with Herodotus' words: "the Persians much doo praise your grace, but one thing discommend: / In that to Wine subject you be, wherein you doo offend" (5.493-4). The sequence of actions

9 The most famous examples in Renaissance English literature probably are the stories of Solon and Croesus (of whom I shall talk later in greater detail) and of Plato being sold into slavery by Dionysius the Elder, tyrant of Syracuse, because he dared to say that Dionysius' behaviour recalled that of a tyrant. This story, whose main source is Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Plato* (Laert. 3.18-21), was included in some of the most important works of early English Humanism such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Thomas Elyot's *The Governor* (1531); it also provided the subject matter for a subsequent dialogue by Elyot, *Of the Knowlage Which Maketh a Wise Man* (1533). In *Utopia*, the character of Raphael Hyhtlodaeus or Hythloday also makes an explicit comparison between what happened to Plato and something that happened to him once: while a guest at Cardinal John Morton's table, his criticism of the British custom of hanging thieves was severely attacked by the rest of the party, until the Cardinal himself approved it. Ironically, More would end up experiencing first-hand what it meant to be an honest councillor punished by a sovereign for speaking against him. This, in turn, made him another topical *exemplum* in later literature of honest counselling being rejected by a tyrant: in his first biography, written by More's son-in-law, William Roper (1556), the Emperor Charles V laments More's death and points out that More deserved a very different fate.

10 This aspect is made particularly evident in Taverner's text, where the courtiers do not reproach Cambyses "espyenge how thankefull and plausible a thinge flattery is" (Taverner 1547, xviiiv).

11 Reference is to the scene division in Preston 1975; the original text has no such division.

combines the 'Senecan' private rebuke with the 'Herodotean' public one when Praxaspes seeks the assent of his peers in an attempt to show the king the political need to correct his behaviour. It is an unsuccessful attempt. Not only do the Persians prefer to flatter the sovereign, but one of them goes as far as to reproach Praxaspes before his son's body for not keeping silent: "this had not been, but your tung must be walking: / To the King of correction, you must needs be talking" (5.559-60). Praxaspes' reply is curt and honest: "No correction . . . but councel for the best" (561).

This episode is the first instance of the main characteristic of Preston's play: his turning his subjects to silence (see Dall'Olio 2019, 59-61). Every subsequent scene focuses on various reactions to the tyrant's behaviour: Smirdis, the king's brother, leaves the court aware of the futility of advising him; Cambyses' sister/cousin insists on having the advice of her counsellors about the tyrant's obdurate decision of marrying her;[12] two peasants, Hob and Lob, condemn the ruler's behaviour publicly and Ambidexter the Vice threatens them with treason charges, an episode showing how Cambyses' nefarious rule influences the whole kingdom. While Carion and Taverner underline the Herodotean portrayal of Cambises as a bad ruler who refuses to take counsel and reduces his subjects into servitude, Preston expands it into an articulate description of the effects of tyranny on the political life of the country, with critical innuendos about Mary Tudor's recently ended reign and her persecution of Protestants.[13] Cambyses' refusal of advice and violation of the laws contradicts contemporary Humanist ideals of good rule and the just monarch as the guardian and protector of the laws established by the authority of the people.[14] Accordingly,

12 In Herodotus, Cambyses asks a council of Magi whether his union with his cousin can be considered legitimate; they, fearing for their lives, reply that the king can do whatever he wants (Hdt. 3.31.2-5). It may be that in this case the queen's request and Cambises' refusal of advice denote a partial inspiration from Herodotus.

13 For a more detailed description of *Cambises*' political subtext, see Hill 1992; Dall'Olio 2019.

14 See McDiarmid 2007 on the birth and development of those ideals in the circle of Protestant intellectuals in Cambridge. Thomas Preston studied in Cambridge and Thomas Smith, the author of the treatise *De Republica*

the tyrant was the ruler who "breaketh lawes alreadie made at his pleasure" and "maketh others without the aduise and consent of the people" (Smith 1583, 6). The revival, via Carion and Taverner, of the Herodotean description of Cambyses' tyranny, unjust towards and careless of the people, allowed Preston to adapt traditional stories about the Persian tyrant to his contemporary context. Thus, he prefigured the fortune of Herodotus as one of the main sources for the later Persian plays, showing the direction in which those plays would go in using characters, stories and concepts from the *Histories* to tackle contemporary political issues.

The Warres of Cyrus: Herodotean Xenophon

"Zenophon from whence we borrow write [*sic*], . . . / what we record of Panthea / . . . in sad and tragick tearmes", says the author of *The Warres of Cyrus* (traditionally identified as Richard Farrant, Master of the Children of the Royal Chapel) in the short 'choral' piece in the middle of the play (Farrant 1594, C3*r*).[15] The play thus officially declares its derivation from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, the educational text par excellence and the main source of Persia-related literary imagery for much of the sixteenth century. In terms of plot, the claim is accurate. Not only is the story of Panthea, Araspas and Abradates (recounted by Xenophon in books 4 to 7) dramatised in its entirety, but the context is the same war of Cyrus against Assyria recounted by Xenophon. Also, other characters are drawn from Xenophon, for instance Gobrias, the Persian satrap who offers his allegiance to Cyrus to be revenged upon the new Assyrian king for his own son's death (*Cyr.*4.6.1-11). The Xenophontean origin is thus hardly questionable. At the same time, the Persia staged in *The Warres* is not a perfect country ruled by a wise, well-educated ruler, as in the *Cyropaedia*, but rather a fabulous and distant kingdom famous for passionate and terrible tragedies. This has less to do

Anglorum quoted above (printed posthumously in 1583, but written around 1562-1565), was a member of that circle.

15 'Choral' is here used in the early modern sense of a prologic voice "explaining the dramatic action" (Bigliazzi 2015, 116). On the chorus in this play, see Bigliazzi's chapter in this volume.

with Xenophon, and more with the description of the exotic and adventurous Eastern world that could be found in English romances such as Anthony Munday's *Zelauto* (1580) and William Warner's *Pan his Syrinx* (1584), as well as in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1590-1596).[16] The Herodotean derivation of this imagery goes back to the first Italian translation of the *Histories* by Matteo Maria Boiardo (1474-1491), where, as Dennis Looney (2016, 247-51) pointed out, Boiardo's handling of the text tended to emphasise the most fantastical and exotic aspects of Herodotus' description of Persia and Egypt. Not coincidentally, a similar presentation of the Eastern world would be found in Boiardo's later poem *Orlando Innamorato* (1495), and, subsequently, in Ludovico Ariosto's continuation, the celebrated *Orlando Furioso* (1532).[17] The following fortune of these two poems (especially the latter) in Renaissance Europe would cement Herodotus' status as a point of reference for the description of Persia and, in general, the East in Renaissance romances (Grogan 2014, 73-6). For a long time in the sixteenth century it turned out to be a sort of a lifeline for the reputation of the author. While the credit of Herodotus as an historian was widely questioned, nobody ever denied the literary quality of the *Histories* (Plutarch himself acknowledged it) and even the most ardent critic had no objection to reading him as a treasure-house of many pleasant tales. Herodotus thus came to be recognised across Europe as 'the' historian of the rise and fall of the fabulous Persian empire, and it is not surprising that his first English translation by a mysterious B.R. (usually identified with Barnabe Riche), printed in London in 1584, not only comprised just the first two books,[18] but was deeply influenced by Boiardo's 'romance-like' rendering of the

16 For a more detailed analysis, see Grogan 2014, 92-97 (on Spenser), 98-111 (on Munday and Warner). This combination is already recognised by Grogan: "*The Warres of Cyrus* manages to combine the didactic and political weight of Xenophon's text with the . . . tones and timbres of the Herodotean discourse" (2014, 122).

17 Dates refer to the definitive version of the texts.

18 However, judging from a passage in the prefatory letter to the readers, Riche seems to have planned a complete translation: "We have brought out of Greece into England two of the Muses, Clio and Euterpe . . . As these speede so the rest will follow" (Herodotus 1584, Aiii*v*).

text (cf. Looney 1996, 65-70).

This translation constitutes one of several proofs of Herodotus' rapid growth in popularity in Renaissance England between the 1570s and the 1590s. Stories derived from Herodotus were frequently staged in private, cultured venues such as the court or universities.[19] In c. 1568, a tragedy about Astiages, king of the Medes,[20] was performed at St John's College, Cambridge, and on 6th January 1575 the Children of Windsor performed before the Queen at Hampton Court a tragedy entitled *King Xerxes.* Farrant's play, also staged by a company of children connected to the court ("Played by the children of her Maiesties Chappell", according to the titlepage), fits into this tradition. At the same time, stories derived from Herodotus were included into anthologies of tales in prose such as William Painter's *Pallace of Pleasure* (whose first volume was printed in 1566). Amongst his tales are comprised, together with the aforementioned tale of Cyrus and Panthea derived from Xenophon, the Herodotean stories about Gyges and Candaules and Croesus and Solon. On the other hand, seven years later, the Greek text of the first book of the *Histories* would be printed in Oxford as part of a first 'wave' of printed Greek texts in England, along with other authors such as Homer, Demosthenes, Aristophanes and Hesiod.[21] According to Jane Grogan, this renewed interest was directly linked to the 'imperial' ambitions of the political elites of the time. Herodotus' more complex description of the rise of the Persian reign to the rank of empire reflected both the English aspirations to become an acknowledged international power and the risks involved in such

19 The following information on the lost plays is based on LPD 2023.

20 In the *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus' grandfather, Astiages, is a positive mentor figure, and his story has nothing tragic about it. It is therefore more likely that the play was based on Herodotus' text, where Astiages first tries to have Cyrus killed at his birth because he fears that he will dethrone him, and then punishes Arpagus, the satrap who fails to carry out the order, by feeding his son to him. This leads Arpagus to ally himself with Cyrus and help him dethrone Astiages. Such a plot would indeed be suited to become the subject of a tragedy.

21 The table provided by Kirsty Milne (Milne 2007, 686-7) shows a dramatic increase in the printing of Greek texts in England between 1590 and 1593.

an enterprise. Renaissance readers were aware that the *Histories* are organised according to a cycle of rises and falls that sees a 'barbarian' people rise to the height of power, become corrupted by a new luxurious lifestyle, and eventually fall as another people arises to take its place (cf. Corcella 1984, 113-49). Moreover, Herodotus' *Histories* are permeated by archaic Greek wisdom at whose core is the condemnation of *koros*, the desire for further riches never to be satisfied, leading men inevitably to their downfall, as shown by the very episode of Cyrus' death in Herodotus by the hand of Tomiris, Queen the Massagetae.[22] The revival of Herodotus' *Histories* was thus a double-edged sword for Renaissance England. On the one hand, they nurtured English imperial ambitions with their description of rich lands to be conquered; on the other, they provided a narrative highlighting how morally risky it was to adventure in that direction.

Herodotus' fortune also exerted a strong influence on the contemporary perceptions of other ancient texts on the subject, and above of all on the *Cyropaedia*, which underwent a sort of critical 'devaluation' (Grogan 2007, 70-1). The more nuanced Herodotean portrayal of Persia gave relevance to already-existing 'sceptical' readings of Xenophon's work by authors such as Machiavelli (Newell 1988, 118-21; Grogan 2014, 60-4), and led some readers to implicitly propose that Herodotus could be a better choice than Xenophon for teaching purposes. Such a tendency can be found in Riche's preface to his translation, where he quotes a well-known example (derived from Cicero: see Humble 2020, 38-44) of the educational utility of history: "Scipio Africanus . . . seeking to ensue the example of Cyrus which was fayned by Xenophon, he atchieued . . . fame of wisedome and valure" (Herodotus 1584, A2*v*). The lesson itself would be nothing exceptional, but it is interesting how Riche exploits it to further the reading of the *Histories*, which presents in fact a description of Cyrus as a cunning, unscrupulous, manipulative politician, very different from Xenophon's moderate and pious king. It could be argued that Riche is subtly suggesting a greater 'usefulness' of Herodotus over Xenophon, a higher capacity of the *Histories* to provide its readers

22 This episode in the Middle Ages had become a classic example of tyranny punished, and in the new cultural temperament of this decade it achieved a new fortune also in English culture (see Grogan 2007, 71n26).

with an exemplary tale on how to be a king and rise in power. It is also significant that, seven years later, Xenophon was not included amongst the authors whose texts were for the first time printed in the original Greek in England, unlike Herodotus' first book containing Cyrus' life and deeds. Herodotus' Cyrus had seemingly replaced Xenophon's as a better portrayal of the 'ideal' king in Renaissance England, to the point that a play such as *The Warres of Cyrus*, whose narrative is officially derived from Xenophon, in fact would be more aptly defined as a rewriting of the same in Herodotus' light.

The way Farrant handles the afore-mentioned character of Gobrias is already indicative of this. His decision to side with Cyrus against the Assyrian king Antiochus[23] and his motivation for doing so may derive from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, but what follows does not. In the original text, Cyrus peacefully accepts Gobrias' help and refuses the rich reception prepared for him, thus giving further proof of his moderation. In the play, this sequence of events is replaced by an original plot about the rescue of Alexandria, Gobrias' daughter (a character invented by Farrant), from the Assyrian camp thanks to the sacrifice of Libanio, Alexandria's page, who cross-dresses and takes his mistress' place. The spectacle and tragic pathos of a story of fidelity replaces the Xenophontean 'educational' material. In addition, Farrant adds other subplots absent in Xenophon, whose narrative patterns recall the exotic description of Persia in the Herodotean-like romance tradition and further distance his play from the *Cyropaedia*. Such is the case with the turncoat Ctesiphon, an Assyrian soldier who first offers Antiochus to win Cyrus' trust and then kill him before switching sides, revealing the plot to Cyrus and offering him to kill Antiochus instead. Such is also the case with Antiochus' vassal and friend, Dinon, who falls in love with the page Libanio he believes to be a woman. The latter episode deserves particular attention insofar as it is conceived of as a mirror story of the Panthea and Araspas one derived from Xenophon: as the Persian vassal, the Assyrian one also falls in love with a woman whom he must guard as a hostage. The resemblance is even emphasised by

23 An absent character in Farrant's classic sources: in both Xenophon and Herodotus, the name of the Assyrian king against whom Cyrus fights for the conquest of Babylon is not specified.

Farrant's choice of having Dinon's attempt to seduce Libanio follow Araspas' attempt to have Panthea enchanted by a Magician. In both cases, the episodes have violent endings: Panthea denounces Araspas to Cyrus and Libanio kills Dinon in his sleep. This sequence of events emphasises the equivalence between Araspas and Dinon as examples of the terrifying force of erotic passion, and more generally demonstrates the equivalence between Persians and Assyrians, which is one of the most distinctly 'Herodotean' features of the play. The vassals of Cyrus and Antiochus are shown by Farrant to be interchangeable, afflicted with the same vices and endowed with the same virtues, with no trace of the moral and civil superiority of the Persians. Antiochus himself, although repeatedly described as a lustful tyrant, never behaves as such when on stage. On the contrary, in everything he does he seems faithfully to mirror the 'good king' Cyrus. If Cyrus decides to entrust Panthea to Araspas instead of guarding her himself (B2*r*-B3*r*), Antiochus chooses to entrust the pseudo-Alexandria (in fact the cross-dressed Libanio) to his faithful Dinon (C4*r*). As Cyrus welcomes the treacherous Ctesiphon in his camp (C2*r*-*v*), Antiochus too gladly receives Araspas into his own camp, believing his claims to be a fugitive from the Persians (F3*r*; in fact Araspas has been sent to spy on him). Finally, like Cyrus, Antiochus also enjoys a sincere friendship with his vassals and bitterly mourns Dinon's death (E1*r*). The repetition of these scenic patterns highlights the equivalence of the two monarchs, with no clear evidence of a moral superiority of Cyrus over Antiochus. As a result, the war between Persians and Assyrians is emptied of any moral dimension.[24] Such an interpretation of Persia is perfectly understandable in the light of Herodotus' *Histories*, where neither people is truly morally superior, and in this respect, it should be noted that the play has an interesting opening. Entering the scene, Cyrus proudly congratulates his followers on their victory over "the banded power of Asia, / Whose number ouerspread the Assyrian fields / And in their passage dranke maine rivers drie" (Farrant 1594,

24 In this, *The Warres* reveals an unsuspected similarity to Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. In that play, too, there is no instance of the moral 'superiority' or 'inferiority' of the titular 'tyrant' over his adversaries: cf. Dall'Olio 2022, 233-4, 249-50.

A1*r*). In these lines, two different references, one from Xenophon and one from Herodotus, are merged together. In Xenophon Cyrus fights against a coalition of armies from various parts of Asia, but that this army drains a river is a detail taken from Book 7 of Herodotus, where it constitutes a leitmotif to describe the size of Xerxes' army about to invade Greece (Hdt. 7.21, 43, 58, 109, 127, 187, 196). This particular confluence makes the war undertaken by Cyrus ambivalent. On the one hand, the reference to Xerxes identifies Assyria as a declining empire: an impression further increased by the description of the spoils of war taken from the Assyrians, consisting of enormous riches. On the other hand, this casts a shadow over Cyrus and the Persians, which the story of Araspas and his love for Panthea (herself a spoil of war) will confirm. The victors, it is suggested, who are now in possession of the riches of the vanquished, risk in turn being corrupted by them, possibly ending up taking over the role of the Assyrians as the people eventually to be defeated and substituted by a new power. Significantly, therefore, Farrant omits another important narrative detail from Xenophon, where Cyrus, while waging the war, is still a vassal of his uncle Cyaxares, king of the Medes. Farrant's play suggests instead that, at the time of the expedition, Cyrus is king of the Persians, as in the story of his expedition against Babylon in Hdt.1.188-91, where, however, such an enterprise represents the apex of his power prior to his war against the Massagetes. Thus, Herodotus' view of history as a succession of empires destined to fall after achieving greatness transpires through Xenophon's idealised portrait, changing it from within.

Cyrus himself, despite being 'officially' represented as a model ruler, is an ambiguous character in the play. While he appears as a well-balanced man, in full control of his passions and aware of his limitations (as shown by his refusal to see Panthea for fear of the dangers of erotic passion, as in Xenophon), every move he makes looks like a cynical attempt to exploit every advantage the situation offers him. Perhaps the highest demonstration of his cynicism occurs in the episode involving the 'convert' Ctesiphon. When the latter offers Cyrus to kill Antiochus, Cyrus' approval in fact hides his intent to have him killed: Ctesiphon is sent back to the Assyrian camp with a letter to the king denouncing his own treachery, because "a villain shall not triumph in the murder of him whom I

account an honourable conquest of my self" (Farrant 1594, E4*r*). If it is perhaps an exaggeration to say that Cyrus here shows himself to be "self-serving, uncaring and hypocritical" (Grogan 2014, 123), since Ctesiphon is technically twice a traitor, nevertheless it cannot go unnoticed that the reason Cyrus 'sells' him to Antiochus is not nobility of spirit, but a desire for glory. Cyrus' true virtue, in the play, seems to reside in his ability to 'govern' men by rising above their faults and exploiting them, in a manner not unlike that of 'Machiavellian'[25] characters such as Tamburlaine or Richard III, as well as Cyrus himself in Herodotus. Behind the apparent exaltation of Cyrus and Persia as proper 'imperial' models, *The Warres of Cyrus* thus offers a highly ambiguous description of this very ideal, rewriting Xenophon's narrative in the light of Herodotus to pinpoint how the pursuit of an imperial power undermines the moral integrity of those who pursue it. In doing so, Farrant not only shows how far Renaissance England had progressed in the knowledge of Herodotus, but also that, thirty years after Preston's *Cambises*, playwrights still used concepts and ideas from the *Histories* to discuss political and moral issues pertinent to their times: a tendency that will reach its peak ten years later with William Alexander's *Croesus*.

Croesus: Herodotean Monarchy

In the first decade of the seventeenth century, the process of critical reappraisal of Herodotus begun in the 1560s, reached a first important result. In 1598, Lancelot Voisin de La Popelinière, in his treatise *L'histoire des histoires*, for the first time officially recognised Herodotus as "a foundational figure" (Earley 2016, 141) in the development of historiography, as the first author to try to condense human history within a single universal narrative showing recognisable patterns. Contextually, he also reprised and developed the interpretation of Herodotus as a "secular continuator of the writings of the Old Testament" (138) proposed years earlier by Protestant writers such as David Chythraeus, whose religious

25 It is no coincidence that Ctesifon goes so far as to define Cyrus "politique" (C4*v*): an ambiguous term, usually associated with Machiavelli's ideology in Elizabethan literature (cf. Bawcutt 1971).

perspective La Popelinière replaced with a more secular evaluation of historiography as a literary genre. Herodotus' scandalous 'otherness' from the canons of Western historiography was then justified from a historical and cultural perspective as the result of his connection with a non-European literary tradition. A few years later, in 1601-1602, Isaac Casaubon, Henri Estienne's son-in-law, during a course of private lessons in his home, further developed this interpretation of the historian by highlighting his proximity in style and in the topics he dealt with to ancient Near Eastern literary and cultural traditions (see Earley 2016, 139-40).

It is likely that the status of Herodotus' description of the Eastern world as the model for romances played no small part in this process. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the interpretation of Herodotus as an Oriental author represents a consequence of his popular perception as the narrator of the wondrous kingdoms of the East. Nevertheless, it is also indicative of a changed critical consideration of the *Histories*, which would have important consequences for Herodotus' perception in Western culture. Firstly, it marked the definitive end of charges of mendacity. While Herodotus would continue to be regarded as an unreliable author, the accusation of having deliberately lied would turn into one of naivety and 'primitivism'. Secondly, as the first author of a universal history, and thus the first to investigate how the various states and empires of the world came into being, developed and declined according to set patterns, Herodotus would in turn become a model for those who, from the seventeenth century onwards, would attempt to write a universal history. Finally, this justified the use of his text for educational purposes, giving official sanction to a trend that was already underway in some literary quarters, as in the 'Persian plays', but now it received a new impetus from Herodotus' 'consecration' as a continuer of the Bible and the writer of a history of rises and falls of empires readable in moralistic terms.

In the same decade in which this new interpretation of Herodotus became established on the continent, on the English stage the Herodotean story of Croesus (already the subject of a long literary tradition)[26] became the topic of the first of the four closet dramas

26 For an interpretation of Croesus' story "as a key articulation of the

of William Alexander's *Monarchicke Tragedies* (printed in 1607, but preceded in 1603-1604 by the single publication of the first two plays, *Darius* and *Croesus*).[27] This ambitious literary project by one of the most eminent courtiers and poets of the time had the intention of providing a general view of universal history and its dynamics for educational reasons. To this end, Alexander built into the tetralogy the traditional religious-historical pattern of *translatio imperii*, which interpreted ancient history as a succession of four great ancient empires (Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome).[28] The four dramas stage a pivotal moment in the course of such empires through the vicissitudes of four tyrant figures, i.e. rulers who mismanaged power,[29] whose behaviour announces the decay and eventual fall of the four empires. They provided Alexander with negative examples through which he could admonish the current ruler, James I. The position of *Croesus* as the first play of the cycle gives a particular prominence to Alexander's reworking of the events described in Book 1 of the *Histories*, as the expression of the political, ethical and poetic principles underlining the entire cycle.[30] Alexander thus repeats what Preston did sixty years earlier with *Cambises*: he turns the tale of the rise and fall of a bad Herodotean king into an exemplary story about the relationship between the sovereign and

principle of imperial self-sufficiency", see Grogan 2014, 6-8. Croesus also appeared as a recurrent figure of punished pride in anthological volumes such as the aforementioned *Pallace of Pleasure* as well as in poetical works such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. He is also mentioned at the beginning of *The Warres of Cyrus* as an example of a rich but coward king, unworthy of his role as commander: see Farrant 1594, A14*r-v*.

27 In terms of composition, *Croesus* is the second play, but in the 1607 edition it is presented as the first one following a chronological order.

28 The inspiration was provided by Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the biblical Book of Daniel (Dan 2.36-45), which ended with the promise of a universal kingdom that would never fall: cf. Hill 1992, 419-23.

29 For a more in-depth analysis of the political theme of tyranny in the tetralogy, see Chapters 3 and 4 of Cadman 2016; for a definition of what constitutes 'tyranny' in the plays, see Lovascio 2016.

30 What I offer in the following pages is only a brief survey of the relationship of Alexander's tragedy with its source; see Janice Valls-Russell's chapter in this same volume, for a more detailed analysis of Alexander's adaptation of Herodotus.

his subjects, as well as a potent illustration of sovereign power. This time, however, the historian's narrative is well known by Alexander, and this allows him to fully recapture and manipulate that narrative so as to make it conversant with his own time. Alexander's drama also represents possibly the highest example of a Persian play using Herodotean Persia as a landscape against which stories of the fall of powerful rulers are set to allow reflection on relevant political issues of the time. In a way, we could consider *Croesus* as the most productive moment of Herodotus' reception in English Renaissance literature.

The first two acts of the play focus on the confrontation between Solon and Croesus, whose moral message on the fickleness of Fortune is transformed by Alexander into an opportunity for a political discussion on the relationship between ruler and state. This theme is already at the heart of Solon's soliloquy, which constitutes the entire Act 1, at whose core stands the character's proud assertion of having renounced absolute power: "I might (a tyrant) still have rul'd in state, / But my cleare minde could no such clouds conceive" (Alexander 1870, 206). This renouncement substantiates the philosopher's confident affirmation that he is able to control his own desires and remain steady in his choice of wisdom instead of pursuing personal gain.[31] This makes him quite different from both Croesus – obsessed with a sense of possession of riches – and the court, which is mainly composed of flatterers. This point is demonstrated by Solon's later confrontation with the courtier Aesope, who, in reprimanding the philosopher for speaking out of turn to the king,[32] states that it is not the business of the courtier, or of the subjects, to criticise a ruler for his actions. As divinely chosen to rule the state, kings enjoy a perfect divine nature, which cannot be questioned: "I think they should excelle . . . / All men in wit, who unto men give lawes; . . . / No doubt great Iove . . . / Doth give to them supernaturall grace" (220-1). Solon retorts that, instead, "Of all men else great monarchs have

31 Solon's philosophy recalls the contemporary Neo-stoicism of authors such as Justus Lipsius: see Cadman 2016, 133.

32 Reference is to the previous scene (2.1), when Solon, as in Herodotus, refused Croesus' claim to be the happiest man on Earth, remarking that "none can be througly blest before the end" (215). The answer irritates Croesus, who affirms that Solon "knowes not what belongs to kings" (217).

most need / To square their actions, and to weigh their words, / And with advice in all things to proceed" (222). The traditional moral of Herodotus' account is thus accompanied by a new affirmation of the Renaissance political principle of the "necessity for unpopular but reasonable advice" (Cadman 2016, 131), as Preston had shown with the story of Cambyses and Praxaspes. It also carries the shadow of a contemporary political debate. Solon's reaffirmation of the need for the king to ask his subjects for advice recalls what George Buchanan (the sovereign's tutor) had written years earlier in the dialogue *De Iure Regni Apud Scotos* (printed 1577) about the need for the people not to grant absolute power to the king: "communicato cum rege consilio communiter statuendum arbitror quod ad omnium salutem communiter faciat" ("I believe that, after consultation with the king in council, a decision should be taken in common in matters which affect the common good of all", *De Iure* 32).[33] By contrast, Aesope's assertion of the divinely ordained superiority of sovereigns recalls the absolutist conception of the king's power presented by James himself in *The Trew Lawes of Free Monarchy* (1598): "the kings were the authors and makers of the Lawes . . . it lies in the power of no Parliament, to make any kinde of Lawe, without his Scepter" (James I 1616, 201-2). The contrast between Solon and Croesus thus becomes that between two different political philosophies: the Athenian sage as the good king capable of moderating his personal instincts and putting himself at the service of the law (of the state as well as of the universe), and the ruler of Lydia, with his greed for riches, his inability to listen to good advisors[34] and his obstinacy in wanting to control his own fortune as a tyrant.

This difference becomes apparent in 4.2, when Croesus ignores Sandanis' urge not to go to war against the Persians. In the first part of the scene, the courtier exhorts Croesus not to indulge in his grief over the death of his son Atys because he thus risks clouding his own judgement: "Where passions domineere, they [kings] govern blindly" (Alexander 1870, 259) – a line that recalls Solon's praise

33 Text and translation from Buchanan 2004.

34 This was another serious political problem in the early days of James' reign, when he was often accused of overspending in favour of his favourites: see Cadman 2016, 132-3.

of his own ability not to be carried away by passions. Eventually the ruler recovers from his grief only to decide to tempt fate and embark on a war whose futility Sandanis emphasises in ways that echo exactly what the character says in Hdt.1.71.2-4: the Persians are a barbaric, warlike people, who know neither luxury nor wealth, and over whom, therefore, there is no merit in winning, while the Lydians would lose everything in the event of defeat. Here as before, Croesus proves himself incapable of listening to correct advice because he is unable to control his own emotions. Only in his final soliloquy (5.2), will he admit the foolishness of his actions and wish he had understood earlier the Solonian wisdom to accept one's fate and restrict one's desires: "O! had this precious with enrich'd my minde . . . / I had disdain'd new dangers to embrace / . . . Had liv'd with pleasure, and had dy'd in peace" (298). Here as in Preston's play forty years earlier, the tyrant is identified with the immoderate, wilful sovereign who elects his own desire as the supreme law, shutting himself off from any dialogue, and eventually condemning himself to human and political failure. At the same time, Alexander also shows that such a behaviour is only conducive to the enslavement of his subjects, as the drama's ending makes it clear through the Chorus' lament about the Lydians' fate of subjugation. The two different political perspectives of *Cambises* and *The Warres* are thus combined: if Preston criticised the tyrant, and Farrant described the risks of pursuing an empire, *Croesus* ends with an explicit condemnation of unrestricted human ambition, which transforms a king into a tyrant and jeopardises any imperial policies.

The message is reiterated in Alexander's ambiguous presentation of Cyrus in 5.1, in many respects similar to Farrant's. On the one hand, the Persian king shows good qualities: veneration towards the gods, recognition of the power of fortune, a very good relationship with his advisor Harpagus. On the other, Cyrus decides to burn Croesus at the stake so that his "name give terror to all those, / Who give against his soveraignty repine" (287). Significantly, Alexander does not stage what follows, which constitutes the core of the Herodotean tale and the reason for its literary fortune. When Croesus, tied to the pyre, calls out to Solon, Cyrus asks him the meaning of his words. Croesus repeats what once Solon told him about man's happiness. Impressed by the story, Cyrus forgives

Croesus, orders his release from the pyre and takes him as his advisor. In Alexander's play, all this is recounted by a messenger who glosses over the sovereign's virtue and focuses on the suffering of the Lydian people, who have been defeated and submitted by the Persians. In this way, Alexander, like Farrant in *The Warres*, denies the ethical superiority of Cyrus over Croesus or of the Persians over the Lydians, while evoking the Herodotean pattern of a barbarian people's rise to become an empire and their subsequent fall. It is worth noting that, on Alexander's part, this constituted yet another criticism of James. In those same years, the sovereign, a great reader of Xenophon, was trying to restore the fortunes of the *Cyropaedia* as an educational text, ordering a new translation and using it as a model for his own *Basilikon Doron* (1599; cf. Grogan 2014, 43-6). The rejection of this 'official' perspective and the choice to stick to Herodotus further demonstrate how political the reworking of the story of Croesus is, as well as another form of advice: even a seemingly ideal king, Alexander suggests, cannot hope to rule the state well if he rules it for himself only. Only by trying to follow Solon's wisdom, by stifling one's own desires and submitting to the laws of nature as well as those of the state, can a ruler truly hope to enjoy his fortune to the end.

Conclusion

The 'Persian plays' as we know them could not exist without Herodotus. Even before the *Histories* arrived in England, their influence was traceable in the literary tradition of the story of Cambyses on which Thomas Preston based his tragedy, paving the way for a more clearly Herodotean approach to Persia shown by plays written after the first two books were translated in the mid-1580s. From Herodotus the authors of the Persian plays derived not only the stories and the imagery, but also concepts and ideas that influenced the way they looked at contemporary political issues. It is through Herodotus that the tyranny of Cambyses and Croesus is identified as a form of government where the will of the king prevails over established laws. It is also through Herodotus that the imperial rise of Persia is shown to respond to a cycle of rises and

falls of empires with the drawback, for those involved, of falling into moral decay. In that sense, the three plays, despite their formal and stylistic differences, display an extraordinary thematic unity that testifies to the deep influence of Herodotus.

This process reflects both the increasing knowledge of Herodotus in Elizabethan England and his gradual revaluation. In the 1560s, with *Cambises*, Thomas Preston relied on a literary tradition also based on the *Histories*. However, at that point Herodotus was relatively unknown in England, while being a heavily criticised author. Forty years later, William Alexander would stage the Herodotean tale about Croesus through precise references to Herodotus' narrative. He used the story of the Lydian king to present the thematic principles which would then be incorporated into his historical tetralogy, trusting in his audience's knowledge of the *Histories*. He also relied upon a more appreciative view of Herodotus' different way of understanding history. Between Preston and Alexander, Richard Farrant's *The Warres of Cyrus* revisits Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* in the wake of the new afterlife of Herodotus on English soil during the 1580s. Farrant conveys a Herodotean-like sense of Persia in order to highlight the ethical ambiguities and political risks of the Xenophontean imperial model. He relied on his audience's familiarity, if not with Herodotus himself, at least with the literary descriptions of Persia inspired by his work. Together, the three plays witness that the recovery of the historian's work both influenced English Renaissance playwriting about Persia and helped furthering political discussion about of compelling political topics at the time, suggesting that there is more to say about Herodotus' place in England than had until then met the scholar's eyes.

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