CHAPTER 13

Herodian

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The importance of character-portrayal in Herodian's history emerges from a significant swerve in the emphases of that work's proem. When Herodian's narrator justifies the appeal of his chosen period, he begins, in a Thucydidean vein, with reference to exciting events: 'successions of reigns, diverse fortunes in both civil and external wars, disturbances of peoples and captures of cities both in Roman territory and in many barbarian countries, earthquakes and plagues …' (1.1.4).[1] At the end, however, this list, unlike the parallel passage in Thucydides, settles its focus on individuals—'the surprising lives of tyrants and emperors'—and continues that focus for several subsequent sentences (1.1.5–6).

The emphases of a history's proem are not always matched by those of the narrative that follows it, but in this respect, at least, Herodian's history lives up to its billing. From Marcus Aurelius to Maximus and Balbinus, Herodian's narrator has much more to say about emperors than he does about seismic disturbances.[2]

He also, by and large, has more to say about emperors (or aspirant emperors) than he does about anyone else.[3] This may not surprise. A focus on the man, or men, at the top is hardly a novel approach to the writing of imperial history. All the same, Tacitus, in the course of doing for the Julio-Claudians what Herodian does for Commodus, the Severans, and the so-called Crisis of the Third Century, finds time for character studies of such men as Gaius Petronius Arbiter (*Annals* 16.18). The likely author of the *Satyrica* was never going to make a play for the imperial purple.

Herodian's narrative, by contrast, seldom delivers detailed depictions of individuals who are not, or do not want to be, emperor (the king of the Persians gets attention as well, at 6.2.5). The others are typically of people who hold extraordinary sway over an emperor instead. This influence, in Herodian, is often deployed to selfish ends, and typically turns out to be pernicious to the

1 Sidebottom 1998: 2776–2780.

2 Cf. Widmer 1967: 11.

3 On Herodian's social biases, see Sidebottom 1998: 2823.

princeps concerned. Examples would include Perennius (1.8.1–2) and Cleander (1.12.3–5) during the reign of Commodus, and Mamaea (6.1.5–8) during the ascendancy of her son Severus Alexander. There are scattered instances which fall outside these two categories, such as Caracalla's assassin Martialis (4.13.1), but the treatment even of this regicide is sketchy. Martialis interests the narrator insofar as he brings about the death of Caracalla. In general, people receive characterizing detail in Herodian only to explain their actions in relation to the emperor of the day.

How, then, does Herodian go about generating the imperial portraits with which he is so concerned? In some passages, Herodian's narrator seems to be using, in a more or less straightforward fashion, the metonymical techniques which the Introduction to this volume enumerates. *Praxis*, for example, is a key element in the characterization of Septimius Severus. His blackmail, betrayal, and destruction of his opponent Niger's generals and their children extorts from the narrator the comment that 'his false nature (*hupoulon autou ēthos*) was really made clear by the deeds (*ek tōn ergōn*)' (3.5.6). *Praxis* likewise contributes to the narrator's depiction of Maximinus. The dichotomy between his laudable deeds in battle and his despicable behaviour towards his subjects draws overt comment from the narrator: 'his achievement (*praxis*) would have won him a reputation, if he had not been so oppressive and frightening to his people and his subjects' (7.3.1).

Just as *praxis* can on occasion serve as a reliable index of character, so can membership of particular social groups. Before the narrator tackles the issue of Maximinus's *praxis*, he has already, in the character-sketch of the new emperor that opens book seven of the history, stated outright that Maximinus was the sort of person one would expect on the basis of his ethnicity and his birth. 'By nature (*phusei*), he was barbarous in his behaviour (*ēthos*), as in his lineage (*genos*). Having the bloodlust characteristic of his forefathers (*patrion*) and his country (*epikhōrion*), he put his mind to confirming his rule through savagery' (7.1.2). The link between Maximinus's behaviour and his origins (he was reported, as the narrator goes on to note, to have been a villager and a shepherd-boy in the Thracian mountains before joining the army) could not easily have been made more explicit.

To an extent, these straightforward characterizing moves recur elsewhere in Herodian's history. For example, the narrator is keen to stress at several points the idea that different peoples have different ethnic characteristics. Barbarians as a whole are characteristically unstable (1.3.5), avaricious (1.6.9), and not readily to be trusted with extended missions (8.1.3). Egyptians are volatile (1.17.6), while Alexandrians are particularly frivolous (4.8.7). Pannonians have strong physiques, but dull wits (2.9.11). Syrians are erratic by nature (2.7.9),

but sharp-witted (3.11.8). These characteristics turn out to be important at various points in the action of the narrative. The Alexandrians are given reason to repent of their frivolity when Caracalla, who has felt the sharp edge of their tongues, enacts bloody reprisals against them (4.9.1–2). The strength and gullibility of the Pannonians make them ideal shock troops for the devious and deceptive Septimius Severus (2.9.11).

On the other hand, things are not always quite so simple. The *praxis* of Severus is not the whole story about how Herodian's narrator depicts his character. There is more to understanding Maximinus than just the fact that he is by birth a Thracian peasant with a talent for war and domestic oppression. These individual manoeuvres are plucked from longer sequences of characterizing material, which have to be analysed more comprehensively if the full complexity of Herodian's narratology is fairly to be apprehended.

Min-maxing Maximinus

The case of Maximinus is perhaps the easier to unpack, if only because his reign is shorter (in Herodian's text as in reality) than that of Septimius Severus. The narratology of his characterization is less complex than that which attends upon the career of Severus. Nonetheless, it is not quite as straightforward as one might expect.

Take, for example, the narratorial assessment of his character at the beginning of book seven. The linking of his bloodthirstiness to his lineage and ethnicity is clear enough in its effect.[4] But it is worth taking a moment to note the point in the narrative at which Herodian has chosen to place it. The question of *where* the narrator should principally engage in such characterizing activity once an individual appears in a text is always an interesting one. In historiography, it has the potential to be yet more so. At least one of Herodian's predecessors in the genre considered the matter important enough for detailed narratorial reflexion (Polybius, →).

Maximinus receives this narratorial assessment at the beginning of his *reign*, and not at the moment of his first introduction. When he first appears, towards the end of book six (6.8.1–3), the treatment which he receives is rather different. At that point, his Thracian origins and alleged former career as shepherd-boy are mentioned (6.8.1), but the narrator does not, as he will at the beginning of book seven, spell out what will later be seen as the logical consequences of

4 Zimmerman 1999: 255.

his upbringing for his behaviour. In book six, the narrator turns instead to an account of how he was drafted into the army, and, more particularly, the cavalry, 'on account of his size and strength'. The narrator then goes on to talk about his conscientious training of his recruits, and how they sought to emulate the example of his personal courage (6.8.2).

There are, of course, good practical reasons why a narrator might delay the full revelation of Maximinus's hereditary tendencies until the beginning of his actual reign. It might be argued that there is little point in expatiating upon an individual's bloodthirstiness before he has had the opportunity (beyond the circumstances of his accession) to do anything especially bloodthirsty. On the other hand, prolepsis of how destructive an individual's later career will prove to be at the very moment of their first introduction is not an impossible narrative choice, either.[5] What Herodian achieves through these two, somewhat separated assessments of Maximinus is an adroit piece of implied focalization. The facts (or, at least, the reports) of Maximinus's upbringing do not substantially change between 6.8.1 and 7.1.2.[6] However, Herodian's narrator, by the divergent disposition and treatment of those facts in the two different places, achieves on their second telling in book seven an effect very different from that which they had at the end of book six. At 6.8.1, the emphasis moves smoothly from Maximinus' pastoral beginnings through his tremendous size and strength to the good work that he has already done in the army of Severus Alexander. At this point, Herodian seems to be deliberately triggering the ideology, well-established in Roman military discourse, that links the rugged life of the rustic to the production of exceptionally talented soldiers.[7] Once Maximinus has his feet under the imperial table, in book seven, the more negative associations of such an origin, including a congenital predisposition to bloodshed, come to the fore. At the end of book six, the narratee gets the slant on Maximinus' life-history which helps to explain (even though the topic has not yet been overtly broached) why

5 Cf. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Coming of Arthur* 322–324: 'But Modred laid his ear beside the doors,/ And there half-heard; the same that afterward/ Struck for the throne, and striking found his doom.' Modred has at this point appeared previously only as 'young Modred' in a list at 243.

6 Whittaker 1970: 150 n. 1 is not quite accurate when he claims that the 'same details [sc. "reported as a scandalous story at 7.1.22"] are related as facts' at 6.8.1. The parenthetical 'so it was said (*hōs elegeto*)' at 6.8.1 establishes at least the detail about Maximinus having been a shepherd-boy as a rumour, although it is true that this parenthesis is missing from Politian's Latin translation of the text.

7 Cato *De Re Rustica* proem 4; Cic. *Pro Rosc. Amer.* 50; App. *BC* 1.7.28, though it is true that this ideology links itself more readily to farmers than to shepherds. Cf., however, Livy 1.4.8–9.

people find him attractive as a potential replacement for Severus Alexander. After he takes over, the grass no longer looks quite so green.

Herodian's narrator uses several different techniques to bring out this shifting response to Maximinus. One of these is the change in nuance in the description of his past life at 7.1.2, as compared to the one at 6.8.1. In the earlier passage, the rumour goes that Maximinus was drafted (*katatageis*) into the army. No adverse comment is passed upon the army into which he was drafted. In the later passage, it is alleged that Maximinus offered himself up for service (*epidous … hauton*), and the army in which this happened is described as 'mean and provincial'. In book seven, therefore, the behaviour of the young Maximinus looks more calculating (even though his ultimate success in winning the purple is attributed to chance), and the humility of his origins, even after he has stopped being a Thracian shepherd, is brought into even sharper focus. Rumour has ceased to be Maximinus' friend, and he is sharply conscious of the fact: the gossip at 7.1.2 is explicitly adduced by the narrator as the grounds for the emperor's fears that the senate and his subjects will despise him ('for there was a story widely circulated …').[8]

Another of the narrator's techniques for evoking this shifting response is the treatment of Maximinus' physical stature. In contrast to Appian (→), who tends to be exercised primarily by the physical characteristics of non-Romans, Herodian has an interest in the characterizing possibilities of the physique and looks of the characters in his history which manifests even in his treatment of Roman citizens or their emperors. In particular, Herodian's narrator shows an acute awareness of the effect that an individual's physiognomy can have on his reception by other people. Throughout the narrative, guards are repeatedly selected on the basis of their towering physiques, in order to make an impression on their audiences (4.7.3, 5.4.8, 7.6.2—the Persians do this as well at 6.4.4). In a subtler case, Caracalla wins admiration while on campaign for physical strength that is unexpected in one of his small build (4.7.7), but finds only derision later on, as what appeal he has starts to fail, when his short stature and near-baldness get in the way of his attempts to emulate Achilles and Alexander (4.8.5, 4.9.3—Herodian, despite the richness of the ancient attestation to the contrary, seems to have believed that Alexander was a physically large man).[9]

Despite the apparent contrast in their statures, Herodian's strategy for figuring Maximinus's physique has affinities with the way in which he treats Caracalla's. When he first appears in book six, Maximinus's strength and size are

8 I am indebted to Evert van Emde Boas for this last point.

9 Sidebottom 1998: 2809.

characteristics that play to his advantage—they are mentioned in the run-up to the description of his sterling military career. At the beginning of book seven, where the picture has already darkened, they are mentioned again (7.1.2), but, lacking that original context of subsequent achievement, they only recapitulate how he ended up in the army in the first place—they are otherwise value-neutral. By 7.1.6 they very nearly become a liability. Maximinus's attempt to establish these personal qualities of his as a contrast to those of his predecessor Severus Alexander enables would-be (though unsuccessful) assailants accurately to predict his behaviour. Once he has become further embittered by plots against him, what was once a selling point is described as a part of what makes him repugnant: 'he was in any case a man of quite terrifying appearance and gigantic physique, such that he could not easily be likened either to any Greek athletes or to any of the most martial of the barbarians' (7.1.12).

Maximinus and Caracalla are not the only cases where Herodian's narrator plays this shifting light across the physical characteristics of his (temporary) protagonist. Elagabalus receives a similar treatment. In this case, the point at issue is not his stature, but his physical attractiveness. During the period while the young Elagabalus is being viewed by many as a strong candidate for the imperial purple, the narrator's take on his physical attractions has a very positive tone. 'He was in the prime of his youth and the most handsome of all the young men of his generation' (5.3.7). 'His handsome appearance attracted everyone's attention' (5.3.8). Once Elagabalus is actually in charge, and estranging informed opinion through his antics, the narrator mentions his physical beauty only to note how he has defaced it, 'spoiling his natural good looks through repellent make-up' (5.6.10). The nadir is reached when the narrator presents the emperor through the eyes of his disaffected and soon-to-be insurgent subjects at 5.8.1: 'they were disgusted seeing him dolled up more elaborately than would befit a woman of good sense, dressed up in an unmanly fashion with gold necklaces and delicate fabrics'.[10]

The description of metonymical characterizing features in Herodian's history is not, then, necessarily a static feature. It can readily have a dynamic quality, charting (in most cases) the decline of an emperor and the deterioration of his relationship with his people. Moreover, as the Introduction to this volume has demonstrated, what it describes as metonymical characterization is by no means the whole story.[11] The metaphorical mode can be equally important. This, too, is relevant to how Herodian's narrator distributes his assessments

10 On Elagabalus' dress, see Zimmerman 1999: 224.

11 See Introduction (→), §5.

of Maximinus. Maximinus' key propagandistic strategy, both as an aspirant to the title of Princeps and as its holder, lies in stressing the difference between himself and his predecessor Severus Alexander. This, according to the narrator, is the motivation behind the ostentatious (and almost fatal) display of his physical prowess at 7.1.6: he desires 'to prove that Alexander's dithering and cowardice with regard to martial deeds had rightly been condemned'. The narrator, too, is intent upon drawing a contrast between Severus Alexander and Maximinus, but it is not one which, on the whole, redounds to the latter's credit.

The contrast is, in fact, a structural one. Both books six and seven of Herodian's history open with an assessment of a reign. This is a feature which they share with each other, but not with any of the other books of the work, where the openings are typically more immediately concerned with the nitty-gritty of how emperors are establishing, or failing to establish, their political dominance. As a result, there is a strong incentive to read the two of them in relation to each other. Such a reading throws into even sharper relief the contrast between Septimus Alexander's fourteen years of peaceful, constitutional rule (6.1.1–4) and the swift descent into a reign of terror under Maximinus (7.1.1).[12] To make assurance double sure, the narrator employs phrases to describe these two reigns in relation to those that immediately preceded them which are almost exact mirror images of each other: 'the form of the principate, changed from a high-handed tyranny to a form of aristocratic government …' (6.1.2) in contrast to 'he tried to change from a mild and very benign autocracy to the savagery of tyranny' (7.1.1). The narrator's decision to open a book with the analysis of Maximinus and the character of his regime manages the classic metaphorical manoeuvre of setting up a structural *sunkrisis* with the book before it.

Maximinus is not, at first blush, a complicated character. It would be fair to say that savagery, *ōmotēs*, remains his abiding characteristic in Herodian's history.[13] Nonetheless, his depiction is not unchanging, nor does it exist *in vacuo*. Herodian's narrator establishes a web of correspondences which anchors the interpretation of his reign firmly within that of the larger text that surrounds it.

12 Opelt 1998: 2944.

13 Sidebottom 1998: 2811.

Se-verities

These considerations apply in a more urgent form to the analysis of that much more considerable figure, Septimius Severus. As befits the founder of the Severan dynasty, he is arguably the most important, and certainly the most complex, character in the whole of Herodian's history. The only other individual who might contest that claim would be Marcus Aurelius, with whom Severus enjoys an uneasy textual relationship.

The moment at 3.5.6 when Septimius Severus's *praxis* is said to have revealed his underlying character needs, like the narrator's comments on Maximinus, to be viewed within its original context within the larger work. The case of Septimius Severus illuminates what the Introduction to this volume has described as the role of 'cognitive primacy' in the narratological construction of character. Herodian's narrator makes his portrait of this emperor an especially complex and arresting one by establishing an initial impression of the man, which is then subjected to substantial modification as his narrative progresses.

Septimius first enters Herodian's narrative at 2.9.2. The point at which he appears is significant. Herodian's narrator is not always as overt in the deployment of structural *sunkrisis* as he is in the case of Severus Alexander and Maximinus. In the case of Septimius Severus, the point to note is that the narrative immediately prior to his introduction has been concerning itself with Niger, who, according to the narrator, has been 'idly imagining things and getting carried away by hopes that lacked authentication' (2.9.1). When Septimius takes the stage, the narratee is alerted to his likely importance in the forthcoming action by several means: 'Severus, a man of Libyan stock, was in control of the whole of Pannonia, which was under a unified command—a man fiery and efficient in the disposition of affairs, accustomed to a tough, hard life, readily resistant to physical hardships, swift to make decisions and to act upon them' (2.9.2). Quite apart from the opening insistence upon Septimius' current position of authority, the fact that the narrator bothers to furnish him with an ethnic (*anēr to men genos Libus*) suggests his probable importance in what is to come. Herodian's narrator does not supply ethnics for nobodies. What follows the ethnic is notable for the striking contrast which it presents with the behaviour of Niger. Niger vacillates; Septimius Severus acts.

He also receives some borrowed lustre through intertextuality. Herodian's narrative, from the first, constructs itself in relation to that of Thucydides. So much is clear from the opening sentence of book one (1.1.1), where the narrator's preoccupation with those who prefer speciously attractive utterance to the rigours of accurate historiography recalls the themes of Thucydides 1.22. In the case of Septimius Severus, the vocabulary which Herodian's narrator

deploys to characterize the future emperor's speed in decision-making and implementation evokes what Thucydides' Corinthians say about the Athenians, 'swift to have ideas and to bring about in practice what they decide' (Th. 1.70.2). Such expressions may simply be part of the stock of post-Thucydidean Greek historiography, of course, but one recollects, perhaps, that the Corinthians in the Thucydidean narrative are also setting up a *sunkrisis*, between the dynamic Athenians and the dawdling Spartans. It may be that Herodian's narrator is sharpening the narratee's sense for his own account of hesitation against dynamism by alluding to a paradigmatic case from the historiographical tradition (though one, unlike Herodian's, where the dawdlers will ultimately prove triumphant).

Septimius Severus lives up to this initial billing by immediately executing a plan to seize command of the empire (2.9.3). Once again, some fancy footwork by Herodian's narrator helps with the effect in this passage. Septimius seems to have claimed in his own autobiographical writings that a series of prophetic dreams convinced him that he was destined for greatness (2.9.3).[14] Herodian's narrator dutifully records this claim, and notes that these dreams were responsible for spurring Septimius on, but only does so after his initial assessment of the future emperor's character *and* the description of how he swung into action 'on learning that the Roman empire was up in the air'. Thus, Herodian's narrator, by delaying the revelation that Septimius has been having these dreams in favour of an account which initially presents the execution of his plan as a reaction to breaking news, reinforces by apparent *praxis* his description of Septimius as the sort of man who makes decisions and acts upon them in a flash.

The first stages of Septimius's plan involve a great deal of talking. In Herodian, as in other Greek authors, the characterizing possibilities of speech apply not just to what characters actually say, but also to how often, or how seldom, the narrator grants them the opportunity to say it. Elagabalus, for example, is presented as a feckless adolescent, and never delivers an extended *oratio recta* speech during the whole course of his reign—the closest he gets is writing a letter to the senate (5.6.2), and saying that a marriage of the sun and the moon is very appropriate (5.6.5). Pertinax, by contrast, for whom the narrator has a great deal of respect, is so eloquent that he very nearly talks his assassins out of killing him: 'by trying to say some such things he was on the verge of talking some of them around' (2.5.8). Caracalla, whose identity will prove disturbingly fluid and who is addicted to playing different parts in turn, delivers a speech after his assassination of his brother Geta which the narrator characterizes as

14 *FRHist* 100 F1; Sidebottom 2007: 55.

hinting at things obliquely and aimed at making what has happened deducible rather than simply explaining it (4.4.6).

Septimius Severus is at the far end of this scale. He gives multiple *oratio recta* speeches (e.g. 2.10.2–9, 2.13.5–9), as well as others which the narrator merely summarizes (2.14.3). In particular, he is very good at telling people what they want to hear. This is not, admittedly, much of a challenge in his initial dealings with his (strong but unsubtle) Pannonian troops (2.9.11). His speech to the Roman garrison, however, shows in abundance his talent for rhetoric that plays into the *Zeitgeist*: the adjectives which he uses to describe the deceased Pertinax during that oration ('respected (*semnon*) … honourable (*khrēston*)') recall the ones used of his unfortunate predecessor before and immediately after his assassination.[15] This talent reaches its apogee when, later in the same book, his routine works on (some) senators as well: 'by speaking thus he won over most of the senators to good-will and belief in what he had promised, but there were some of the more senior men and those who knew his ways (*ton tropon*) who commented in private that he was a man of many wiles (*polutropos*) and skilled in the art of contrivances … This was later, in fact, proved to be true.' (2.14.4)

Once again, the vocabulary which Herodian deploys in this passage is studied. Septimius Severus has been presenting himself as an emulator of Marcus Aurelius and Pertinax (2.14.3). His senatorial critics, by contrast, link him to the primal example of the *polutropon andra*, Odysseus (Hom. *Od*. 1.1). The evocation is particularly apt at this point in the narrative, since Septimius has just executed a stratagem to ensure that potential enemies of his are unarmed (Hdn. 2.13.10).[16] Odysseus, too, was not a fan of allowing his foes access to weaponry (Hom. *Od*. 19.4–13, 22.25).

It is against this background that the narrator's insistence on what Septimius Severus' *praxis* reveals about his underlying character at 3.5.6 needs to be viewed. While *praxis* can (and does) serve as a touchstone for character in the case of other important players within the history, it is especially important in the case of Septimius. *Praxis* allows the individual (internal or external to the text) who is trying to understand Septimius to keep an eye on an otherwise uniquely elusive ball. One notes that Herodian's narrator, who is not usually keen to disrupt the orderly onward march of his narrative with prolepsis, steps in to validate the opinion of Septimius' critics within the Senate by reference to what he is going to do later: 'this was later, in fact, proved to be true'. Herodian's

15 2.13.6, recalling 2.5.8 in the case of *semnon* (focalized through the soon-to-be assassins), and 2.6.2 in the case of *khrēston* (focalized through the senators).

16 Opelt 1998: 2931–2932.

narrator, unlike those of some other historiographers given to such foreboding prolepsis, does not specify at this point in the narrative exactly which elements of the emperor's later career will validate this verdict. Contrast, for example, Thucydides on Alcibiades (6.15.3). However, the behaviour that provokes the narrator's comment about the revelation of underlying character at 3.5.6 would be a reasonable candidate. Septimius not only holds the threat of injury to their hostage children over the heads of Niger's generals, but (according to Herodian)[17] kills both the generals and the children when his objectives have been reached.

Once again, there are ironies in this situation which only become apparent when the larger dynamics of the narrative are considered. Septimius Severus's own rhetoric constantly seeks to align him with Pertinax and Marcus Aurelius, but this hostage-taking is, in fact, a practice which he has taken over from the now-despised Commodus (3.2.4). In this earlier passage, the narrator even notes Septimius' foresight in planning this move (3.2.3). Septimius is ruthless and deceptive, but these unpleasant traits are undeniably accompanied by the more unambiguously admirable one of foresight, his possession of which has already been endorsed by the narrator's description of him at 2.15.1 (*anēr promēthēs*). This trait, in turn, plays into the on-going *sunkrisis* between him and Niger. Niger believes himself to be foresighted, but is not (3.1.7, where the parenthetical 'so he thought' (*hōs ōieto*) reveals the narrator's scepticism).

Septimius's career is a triumph of rhetoric, as well as of determined action. Herodian's depiction of him leaves little doubt of this. However, the relationship between what Septimius says and what actually happens is more complex in Herodian's text than a simple case of the latter falsifying the former. A particular irony of Septimius's characterization is that things which he asserts disingenuously sometimes come back to bite him in the sequel.

Septimius' handling of Albinus is a case in point. Septimius sends a letter asking Albinus to attend to the good of the empire. 'He [sc. 'Septimius'], being an old man beset by gout, whose children were still very young, stood in need of a man of good birth who was still in the prime of life' (2.15.4). Albinus's noble birth (*andros eugenous*), on which the narrator has already lingered when introducing him ('a patrician-born member of the Senate', 2.15.1) comes in for special attention. This is no surprise in Herodian's text, where the characters are often portrayed as setting great store by noble blood or the lack thereof: the supporters of Gordian I anticipate that he will meet with a warm reception from the senate and the people of Rome because of his good birth (*andra*

17 Contrast Whittaker 1969: 286 n. 1.

eu gegonota, 7.5.2), and the narrator gives this as a reason why the people like Maximus and Balbinus (8.8.1). (How useful a striking lineage *actually* is in accurately assessing whether an individual will make a good emperor is a more vexed question: the narrator notes at 1.15.7 that his lineage was one of the reasons why the Roman people felt so let down by the gladiatorial antics of Commodus, and this disparity between blood and performance is also highlighted by Septimius's *apologia* for him at 2.10.3.) As so often with Septimius Severus, the rhetoric is careful to hit the right buttons.

The letter achieves its immediate goal, which is to trick Albinus into giving his support to Severus and so prevent him from making his own play for the Principate (2.15.3). In due course, however, the claims which Septimius, with studied self-deprecation, makes in it turn out to be inconveniently true. Albinus's birth, for example, does indeed stand him in good stead—it makes him so popular that 'the nobles preferred to have him as emperor, because he traced his lineage back to a long line of ancestors' (3.5.2). Septimius ultimately has to solve the problem by destroying him.

The point about age plays out in a rather more interesting way. Near the beginning of Septimius' career, where we see more of him as the master-manipulator, his age and gout appear as his rhetorical tools. He exploits both of them shamelessly—and effectively—but the narratee does not see any evidence of them actually inconveniencing him. Septimius Severus, like Pratchett's Granny Weatherwax, is only old when it suits him. Like Elagabalus' looks, or Maximinus' strength, these characteristics do not retain a stable 'metonymic' meaning in the text. What starts out as an advantage ends up being otherwise. Septimius Severus is not as badly struck by this device of Herodian's narrator as Elagabalus or Maximinus. After all, in terms of retaining power and keeping the empire on a more-or-less even keel, his reign is a conspicuous success, which is not a claim that could be made for either of the others. Septimius' succession, however, is a less happy matter, and it is in relation to that that his age and health cease to be a convenient tool and eventually become an active problem. Once the narrative reaches his expedition to Britannia in 208 CE, they are a legitimate, and not merely a rhetorical obstacle, though one which serves to highlight his strength of spirit: 'by now he was an old man and suffering from gout, but in matters of the spirit he was stronger than any young man' (3.14.2). Once the expedition is actually underway, age and ill health begin to undermine his control of Caracalla, who will turn out to be the weak point in the old man's legacy: 'a more prolonged sickness took hold of Severus, who was now an old man … he tried to send out Antoninus to settle the military matters, but Antoninus was lukewarm with regard to the campaigns against the barbarians' (3.15.1). The former advantage is at last a hindrance. Illness and age then recur

in the narrator's references to Septimius ('his [sc. Caracalla's] father, subject to a long drawn-out illness … the old man', 3.15.2) until his death, which is not long-delayed.

Septimius dies in a state of sorrow, but the narrator furnishes him with a handsome death-notice, which stresses his military distinction (3.15.2–3). The positive impact of this necrology comes not just from the fact that it accentuates the positive in his reign (much about soldiering and nothing about deception) but also from the fact that he receives a death-notice at all. With regard to exits, as to entrances, Herodian's narrator does not dispense characterizing material in an entirely predictable fashion. His decisions in each case can say a great deal about his attitude to the individual concerned. Whereas Tacitus's narrator (again, a useful *comparandum* when examining different ways to do imperial history) dutifully supplies necrologies for Galba (*Histories* 1.49), Otho (2.50), and Vitellius (3.86) alike, Herodian's is much less consistent in his practice. In many cases his death-notices are paltry. Macrinus does not get one at all, beyond the comment that his judgment and his fortune had failed (5.4.12); Septimius's son Caracalla receives only a summary of how long he reigned (4.13.8) and so does Elagabalus, albeit with a dry allusion to the fact that he led the 'life described above' (5.8.10). In fact, the only necrologies delivered by the narrator in Herodian's *History* that can compete in bulk and loquacity with Septimius Severus' are those of Commodus (1.17.12) and Severus Alexander (6.9.8)—Marcus Aurelius, interestingly, receives one that is focalized through his grieving subjects rather than simply through Herodian's narrator (1.4.8). The death-notices for Commodus and Severus Alexander both appear at the very ends of books, where one may suspect that the incentive to provide a strong moment of closure at an important structural break helps to explain the narrator's decision to expatiate. Septimius' life alone receives this posthumous treatment before the final paragraph of a book, although it is fair to add that book three, too, has very little left to go once he departs from it. In death, as in life, he is exceptional.

Praxis, then, does reveal character in the case of Septimius Severus, but due consideration of how Herodian handles his whole career reveals that this is only a part of a greater whole. For Septimius, *praxis* does not simply serve as a corrective to what the emperor has to say—though there is certainly an element of that. Where Septimius is concerned, speech is itself a form of *praxis*. And, as with Maximinus, one needs to pay attention to the web of allusions that link and contrast him with many other characters, both within and (in the case of Odysseus) without the text of the history to make full sense of what Herodian is doing with him as a character.

Conclusion

Maximinus and Septimius Severus are both characters who receive an ample amount of coverage in Herodian's history. How far, then, can the techniques which we have seen Herodian deploying to characterize them be generalized to what he does in the remainder of his oeuvre?

Synoptic contemplation of Herodian's work suggests that, from the various modes of characterization which are detailed in the Introduction to this volume, the metaphorical turn is especially important. Cassius Dio, Polybius, and Appian certainly deploy the metaphorical turn as well, but, in Herodian, the drive to compare and contrast takes centre-stage. It is tempting to relate this prevalence to Herodian's entirely imperial narrative: Polybius, of course, never had to depict emperors at Rome; Appian presumably would have done so, but in portions of his text that are now lost; Cassius Dio did, but his extant imperial narrative is quite fragmentary.

Herodian, by contrast, is all about the emperors. The urge to compare, contrast, and categorize emperors or would-be emperors of Rome against each other is insistently manifested not just by Herodian's narrator, but also by most of the characters within the text. Septimius Severus is far from the only one who tries to stress his own affinities with a popular predecessor; Maximinus has company in attempting to point up the contrasts between himself and a rival. Pertinax (2.4.2) and Macrinus (5.2.4, with significant reservations from the narrator) both model themselves on Marcus Aurelius. The Roman troops object strongly to the contrast which they detect between the dissolute habits of Macrinus and the disciplined lifestyle of Caracalla (5.2.5).

These comparisons have a way of leading back to Marcus Aurelius, and it is surely right to see him as serving as Herodian's touchstone for the successes and (more often) the inadequacies of his various successors.[18] Comparison and contrast with the Augustus of Tacitus's *Annals* (who likewise expires close to the beginning of the text, and likewise exerts a vast posthumous influence) are suggestive in this instance. Where it is easy to see Tacitus' Augustus as a deeply ambiguous figure, held in much more straightforward esteem by the characters of the text than by the narrator, in Herodian dissenting voices are few and far between (although Caracalla's ingenious attempt to use the precedent of Marcus to justify his own fratricide at 4.5.6 comes close).

Sunkrisis, then, is at the heart of Herodian's narrative strategy—as, arguably, it was in the self-depiction of the emperors he portrays. It would be wrong,

18 Whittaker 1969: lxxii; Sidebottom 1998: 2804–2805.

however, to conclude from this that what he does with characterizing tropes is therefore uniformly unsubtle. The cases of Maximinus and Septimius Severus demonstrate that there is more dynamism and flux to Herodian's characterization than one might assume. Ethnicity, lineage, physique, and clothing can all bear semantic freight in Herodian, but the cargo may not be the same at the end of an individual's career as it was at the beginning.