

Queen Atossa: Adamantine Achaemenid Apron-Strings [Hdt. 2.1.1–2, Hdt. 3.66.2, 3.88.2, 3.133–134, Hdt.7.2.1–3, and 7.3.4]

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Claims that Herodotus reveals himself as a proto-biographer, let alone as a proto-feminist, are not yet widely accepted. To help advance these claims, I have selected one remarkable, non-Greek, barbarian woman—Queen Atossa of Persia, the daughter of Cyrus the Great, and the spouse of three Achaemenid kings—whose exploits during their reigns are recounted in his Histories. It is to Heraclitus—a near contemporary—to whom we attribute the maxim êthos anthropôï daimôn (ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων)—character is human destiny—and it is the truth of this maxim—implying effective human agency—that makes Herodotus’ creation of historical narrative possible. From his many vignettes, which, without advancing the narrative, Herodotus is able to color-in the character of some of the more notable individuals he identifies in his Histories. Although never the cradle to grave accounts typical of Plutarch centuries later, by leap-frogging through three of the nine books, we can assemble a partially continuous narrative, and thus gauge Atossa’s character. Arguably this lets us attribute both credit and moral responsibility. This implied causation demonstrates that Herodotus’ writings include not only proto-biography but in several instances—one of which is given here—proto-feminism.

Introduction

What Herodotus principally tells us about Atossa’s life is that as a daughter of Cyrus the Great she actively participates in rather than just witnesses the reigns of the first four Achaemenid kings—Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes—and plays a critical role during this long period of dynastic turbulence influencing both the succession and the direction and pace of Persian empire building during the late sixth and early fifth centuries.¹ Given that under the Achaemenid Empire polygamy is the conventional practice, and where for dynastic and diplomatic reasons Persian monarchs take multiple official wives for legitimate progeny and

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1. Herodotus frequently records the matrimonial practices of other cultures occasionally pointing out the differences between these and Hellenic serial monogamy with its double standard for male infidelity. This companionate marriage is in the same sense that Odysseus wishes for Nausicaa (*Od.* 6.201–202). Herodotus notes that the sixth-century Egyptian king, Amasis, refuses to send his daughter to Cambyses because he knows that she will be used only as one of many royal concubines and not honored as an official wife (Hdt. 3.1.2–5). From time to time, even royal concubines could be “assigned” to pleasure visiting dignitaries as a mark of their high esteem.

any number of concubines for pleasure and progeny, at first sight, the likelihood of an enduring companionate marriage appears to be remote. Generally, in his *Histories*, whether of noble birth or not, women are given virtually no role beyond the purely domestic. Nonetheless, one Herodotean scholar has noted fifty-three instances in the *Histories* where women or femininity play a decisive role in the outcome of a particular event.² Although this seldom seen or heard domestic restriction is particularly true for Athenian women, Herodotus shows that Spartan women are a surprising and noteworthy exception.³ This exception applies even more dramatically in the case for well-born women whose ethnicity and culture are distinctly other than Greek—non-Greek—or as Herodotus puts it, Barbarian. Xerxes' mother, Atossa, is such an exception.

The Last of the Asian Heraclids

In fact, Herodotus' *Histories* are book-ended with lurid, prurient tales of two remarkably strong-minded, non-Greek women—Candaules' queen Nyssia and Xerxes' queen Amestris—not that we should surmise that Herodotus is remotely suggesting either consort should serve as a suitable role model even for barbarian women to emulate.⁴ Although silent about the exercise of male sexuality, Herodotus lets both remarkable women vigorously defend not only their own dignity, but the dignity of the monarchy in general.⁵ However, both women elect

2. In an appendix to his article "La femme et le pouvoir chez Herodote" Alexandre Tourraix lists the passages from all nine books of the *Histories*: Hdt. 1.1–5, 1.7–14, 1.34, 1.60, 1.73–74, 1.84, 1.91, 1.93, 1.105, 1.107–120, 1.184, 1.185, 1.201; Hdt. 2.1, 2.35, 2.54.2.104, 2.111, 2.121, 2.151; Hdt. 3.1, 3.31–32, 3.50, 3.68–69, 3.84–88, 3.118–119, 3.124, 3.133–134, 3.150–159; Hdt. 4.1, 4.60, 4.145, 4.154–155; Hdt. 5.12–15, 5.20, 5.39–42, 5.92, 5.126; Hdt. 6.43, 6.51–52, 6.61, 6.107, 6.137–140; Hdt. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.5, 7.75, 7.61–62, 7.205; Hdt. 8.137, Hdt. 9.108–102, 9.122. Alexandre Tourraix, "La femme et le pouvoir chez Hérodote," *Dialogues d'histoire Ancienne [DHA]* 2 (1976): 385–386.

3. Arguably, both Gorgo and Artemisia are Spartan / Dorian exceptions to this largely Athenocentric observation. Although she is never named by Herodotus, Nyssia's first husband is the somewhat strange Lydian king, Candaules. In stark contrast, Amestris, who is named by Herodotus and indeed becomes Xerxes' queen, is a daughter of the Persian nobleman and kingmaker Otanes. For the woeful Nyssia story in full see book 1 (Hdt. 1.8.1–1.14.4), and for that of Amestris see book 9 (Hdt. 9.109.1–9.113.2).

4. Scholars have unearthed a number of names for Candaules' wife from other sources: including: Nyssia, Clytia, Habro, and Toudo. Likely facing such a cornucopia, or plethora of possible names, Herodotus elects not to privilege any particular one, David Ashiri, Alan Lloyd, and Aldo Corcella (Eds.) Oswyn Murray and Alfonso Moreno, *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 81.

5. See Josine Block, *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2002): 230–231.

to use what one scholar describes as “royal barbaric power.”⁶ The story of the late eighth-century Lydian king, Candaules; his queen, and a favored royal bodyguard, Gyges son of Daskylos, is quickly told (Hdt. 1.7.4–1.14.4).

Candaules son of Myrsos is so proud of his exceedingly beautiful wife, to the extent that he even wants to show her off completely naked to his bodyguard.⁷ Although assured that this viewing can take place without her knowledge, the bodyguard, Gyges, initially wants nothing to do with this impropriety and carefully explains why:⁸

“My Lord, what are you saying? Insanity! You order me to see your mistress naked? When a woman’s dress is removed so is her dignity. [4] People long ago recognized what principles are noble and good, and we should learn from them. Among them is this one: ‘Look only at what belongs to you.’ I do believe that she is the most beautiful of all women, and I beg you not to ask for what is against all decency” (Hdt. 1.8.3–4).⁹

Woefully lacking the courage of his convictions Gyges eventually decides that he must comply with his king’s wishes, and one evening Candaules conceals his bodyguard behind an open door in the royal bedchamber before withdrawing himself.¹⁰ Later, Gyges watches as the queen enters, prepares herself for bed, and undresses in front of him. He silently slips out of the bedchamber; alas not unseen, and so ends this compulsory introduction to voyeurism by his monarch.

6. For this phrase and its ambiguous if not confusing word order I am indebted to Vivienne Gray, “Herodotus and the Rhetoric of Otherness,” *The American Journal of Philology* 116, no. 2 (1995): 200.

7. Gyges may well be a bachelor and his sexual experience limited to amorous liaisons with accommodating widows and *pornai*. One speculation is that Candaules is a voyeur and assumes everyone else is, too. Evidently it is a short step from voyeurism to insisting that the vicarious observer becomes the observed performer.

8. All quotations from the *Histories* are from the Andrea Purvis translation presented in Robert Strassler (Ed.), *The Landmark Herodotus* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007).

9. Although speaking through a Barbarian, this is a rare instance of Herodotus revealing his own take on morally acceptable behavior. Far beyond covetousness, let alone a proto-feminist rejection of treating women as objects of sexual desire and twenty-three hundred years before Kant, Herodotus is firmly rejecting the notion of using any person as a means to an end. He also shows how the exercise of *royal barbaric power* can turn even an aristocrat into a slave.

10. Exploiting a very different variant of this story, Plato has Gyges as a simple shepherd. There is no reason to presume that Herodotus’ Gyges is a peasant, he is more probably an aristocrat, and such social status will make his future marriage to the widowed queen more plausible and less problematic; in any case—pauper or prince—he reluctantly obeys. Herodotus writes, “Since Gyges could not escape, he was won over” (Hdt. 1.10.1). He may not be executed if he declines, but he will lose favor and might be dismissed—instead of following his conscience and accepting any consequences, he complies, becoming less than upright and somewhat a slave.

The queen, although hopping mad about the lewd affront, realizes that this must be all her degenerate husband's doing, pretends not to notice.¹¹ The next day she summons Gyges and delivers her murderous ultimatum:

"Now, Gyges, there are two roads before you, and I shall let you choose which you want to take. Either kill Candaules and have me and the kingdom of the Lydians, or you yourself must die at once so that in the future you will never see things you should not see in your complete obedience to Candaules. [2] At any rate, either he should die, since he planned the deed, or you should, since you saw me naked, which violated all decency" (Hdt. 1.11.2–3).

Herodotus is telling a story. Of course, just like his contemporary audience, we all know that reported direct speech—especially in another language, and certainly not in any fifth-century Greek dialect—has not been preserved over several centuries for any of the characters in his *Histories*, so we momentarily and willingly suspend our disbelief. There is no way Candaules' queen is going to let him get out of this one; and when faced with one of history's more obvious of Hobson's choices if not the classic definition and an example of an *aporia*, Gyges the king's bodyguard meekly asks the king's consort how best the assassination might unfold—to which she replies with savage, if poetic, justice:

"The attack will be made from the very place he revealed me naked, and the assault will be made upon him in his sleep" (Hdt. 1.11.5).

The queen even provides the dagger—doubtless a keen heirloom—Gyges kills Candaules exactly as directed, and now with bedchamber and throne vacated promptly claims the dowager queen and the kingdom.¹² Perturbed over this violent dynastic change, the Lydian people request the Delphic Oracle to pronounce final judgement.¹³ Candaules is, of course, a Heraclid, but Cyrus, a

11. You do not have to be a late nineteenth-century Austro-German psychiatrist to divine that Candaules' behavior—after whom the psychiatric disorder *candaulism* is named—is aberrant. The term was first coined by Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing in his book *Psychopathia sexualis: Eine klinisch-forensische Studie* first published in 1886. There must be more desirable ways to get your name into a Psychology handbook such as the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* (DSM-5).

12. There is no mention of regency; so perhaps at this time Nyssia is childless and her *faits accomplis* with Gyges diminish any potential claims to the Lydian throne by others. The Lydians use the mythical name Tylon for Heracles and his descendants; Tylonids are therefore synonymous with Heraclids. Candaules was the last Lydian king of this long dynasty of twenty-two descendants. Gyges is the first king of the Memnad, or Gygid, dynasty.

13. Gyges' kingship is confirmed, but with a weasel clause to the effect that Heraclid retribution will come to his fourth descendent. Of course, by the middle of the sixth century when Croesus—who turns out to be the last king of Lydia—reaches the throne, everyone

Persian and not a Heraclid at all, is the unwitting instrument of the Heraclids bringing retribution for the earlier regicide.¹⁴ No good deed should go unpunished.¹⁵

Never far from a Homeric and mythological link, this introduces a number of interpretive challenges as a number of Greek city-states also claim Heraclitan descent.¹⁶ The Heraclid kings of Lydia stem from the union of Heracles and Omphale, whereas the Heraclid kings of Sparta stem from the union of Heracles and Deianira. But in a strange role reversal at one time Omphale owns Heracles' body if not his soul, outright as a slave, but the slave-owner quickly becomes her own slave's mistress and even later his second spouse. Gyges is not the Lydian queen's slave at all, just one of husband's court appointees but likely a noble. Furthermore, Candaules' self-satisfaction is a similar pathology but much more severe than that demonstrated by Croesus with Solon.¹⁷ We might also note that possession of a *Playboy Centerfold* spouse is not among Solon's happiness criteria. Both Candaules and Croesus are saying, "Look at how lucky I am." From an Athenian viewpoint, where even the names of their wives and daughters remain unmentioned outside the home and the immediate family, Candaules' transgression is unbelievably vile. Nyssia may take great delight in being admired by her subjects, but not in that demeaning way; knowing how easily sex is commodified, she has no interest in being commodified herself. We can readily concede that she

has forgotten about this part of the Pythia's pronouncement. Croesus is defeated by the Persian king, Cyrus, in 547/546 (Hdt. 1.91.1). Cyrus had already defeated Croesus' brother-in-law, Astyages—the last king of the Medes—in 550 (Hdt. 1.130.1–3).

14. Actually, Candaules is the twenty-second in a continuous line of father-to-son Asian Heraclids (Hdt. 1.7.4). Perhaps the point is that after that number of generations only the primitive and least desirable aspects of Heracles' character endure—namely a weakness for and propensity to succumb to two of the basest of male urges—an unbridled appetite for sex and extreme violence. This brings us back to Heraclitus' maxim—character is destiny.

15. Not part of that oracle, but the argument can be made that the victories of Pausanias at Plataea and Leotychidas at Mycale are also the (Spartan) descendants of the Heraclids getting even with the ultimate successors to, or perhaps usurpers of Candaules' kingdom.

16. In terms of heritage, we should not forget the Thirteenth Labor of Heracles where, at their own father's insistence in one, seven, or perhaps fifty nights of prodigious hymen-snapping, the eighteen-year-old Heracles deflowers and impregnates forty-nine of King Thespius of Thespia's fifty daughters producing fifty-one offspring. The punishment for disobedience meted out to the one unnamed daughter, who refuses to go along with her father's selfish plan of producing sons with the hero, is forthwith to serve as a temple priestess and thereafter lead a life of strict chastity, Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), 379.

17. Recall that Croesus was displeased with, if not incapable of comprehending, either of Solon's judgements that immeasurable wealth does not necessarily translate into great happiness, and that good luck does not endure forever (Hdt. 1.32.8–9, and 1.33).

is provoked, while not conceding that her reactions are justified.¹⁸ Fifth-century Athenians might extol a youthful naked male body in athletic competition and in sculpture, but their women are covered from their shoulders to their ankles to the extent that the skimpy off-shoulder, slit-skirt tunics favored by young Spartan women are considered shamelessly indecent.¹⁹

Royal Barbaric Power

For Herodotus' audience, the Queen's reaction is understandable, albeit extreme. It is also in line with the precedent set by more than one Olympian goddess for similar transgressions.²⁰ However, the principal issue is not her behavior; it is Candaules'. He authors his own demise. In many respects Candaules is exhibiting a more extreme variant of Croesus' narcissistic and histrionic personality disorder. Does he wish to create envy in a loyal and trusted subject? Does he want to torment Gyges, his chief bodyguard, with an arousal where fulfillment is forbidden? In this instance the queen, in turn, has no hesitation in showing Gyges how these newly unleashed desires can be gratified with a kingdom thrown in to boot.²¹

In short, both kings are so grossly insecure to the extent that they crave being envied for their possessions and reinforce this with the wish to flaunt everything —“Look at what a lucky dog I am!” —“Look at with whom I enjoy ecstasy in my bedchamber, whenever I wish” —or—“Look at all these amphora, each filled to the top with gold” —“And, it is all mine, mine, mine!” The Amestris story from early in the fifth century, to be discussed later, similarly explores the unforgiving nature of an absolute monarchy in terms of the dignity of women in a polygamous, potentially carnally competitive and factious, royal household harboring barely governed ambitions and sexual desires. In her 1995 article, Vivienne Gray argues:²²

The tendency to read these two stories [involving Nyssia and Amestris] exclusively in terms of the otherness of women seems unjustified, however. The vengeful queen

18. This is much more than the “I’ve looked . . . with lust . . . and God forgives me for it” confession by then Democratic presidential candidate James Earl Carter, see the Robert Scheer interview in *Playboy Magazine* 23, no. 11 (1976): 63-86.

19. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1975), 83.

20. In one myth variant Athena blinds the seer Tiresias, and in another, Artemis turns Actaeon into a stag which is soon torn into pieces by his own hunting dogs.

21. Throwing either monarch on the psychoanalyst's couch is far beyond the scope of this study, let alone this author's interests—but both rulers display elements of the narcissistic and the attention seeking pathology of the histrionic. Neither trait is ever particularly endearing.

22. Gray, “Herodotus and Rhetoric,” 1995.

represents “other” for an audience used to nonactive women, but so does the king [Astyages] who serves up a dismembered child. The stories can also be read in terms of the rhetoric of the otherness of royal barbaric power, in which rulers demonstrate their otherness by coercing and oppressing their subjects to their despotic will. The role of women in the stories is better understood in this broader context, in which Herodotus constructs images of royal barbaric power—where queens are partners of kings, sharing in the “otherness” of barbaric royalty.

Gray’s important phrase here, or gallows pun, is *royal barbaric power*; indeed, she goes on to argue that “the Greeks constructed barbaric royal otherness to affirm their Greekness.”²³ Precisely why Herodotus should insert the Lydian link to Heracles and the Heraclids—one of the greatest of Greek heroes—is open to speculation. Part of the reasoning involves the structure of book 1 of the *Histories*. Herodotus draws a sharp line between myth and those events that can be affirmed. In the *Iliad*, Homer refers to the Lydians, who fought with the Trojans, as Maeones, with their capital city in the Hermus river valley.²⁴ Despite the gap of some five-hundred years Herodotus is able to show that there is an historical connection and that the chronologies of the various Anatolian kingdoms can be related in Homeric terms to those used in mainland Greece.²⁵

Herodotus’ audience will note that although strictly non-Greek, the Lydians, among others, will approach oracles across the Hellenic world for guidance.²⁶ The

23. Spoiling her contrast somewhat, Gray appears to forget that Astyages, the last king of the Median Empire, is not the only ancient monarch with revolting culinary practices (Hdt. 1.119.3–7). Atreus, the king of Mycenae, famously goes even one or two better and serves his estranged twin brother, Thyestes, an entrée containing the boiled flesh of two or three of his sons—their heads and hands saved for a taunting dessert. Aerope, Atreus’ adulterous spouse who also rather “liked” his twin and demonstrated this affection in the usual way, is the mother of Agamemnon and Menelaus—and everyone knows how their stories all ended up. Gray, “Herodotus and the Rhetoric of Otherness,” 1995, 201.

24. The Lydian city of Sardis is not mentioned by Homer, their capital is given as Hyde, but it is in the Hermus valley, as is Sardis, in sight of snowy Mount Tmolus (*Il.* 2.976–979, 5.49–53. and 20.439).

25. Arguably it is this same *royal barbaric power* that the Trojan prince Paris exercises when he visits Menelaus’ palace in Sparta. He sees and desires Helen of Sparta—the most beautiful woman in the world—so he abducts her and also makes off with the bulk of Sparta’s treasury to boot. His sense of entitlement is boundless, but it is others who ultimately must pay for his personal carnal gratification.

26. Arguably Herodotus has two audiences. The first comprises his performance audiences, where he presents portions of his work to the public. Here reactions might engender expansions, deletions, or subtle revisions. Finally, there are the more well-heeled reading audiences who have both leisure and access to his written work. Lacunae not evident in Herodotus’ earlier oral presentations will be evident to these readers and some will ponder over his omissions. However, *ex silentio* arguments cut both ways—why write down a commonplace and bore your audience?

Greeks, whatever the squabbles and petty differences among themselves—and this is where Herodotus' embryonic Pan-Hellenism creeps in—share a value system, religion, and culture that is completely incongruous with that accepted as normal by the Persians. The Achaemenid kings are absolute monarchs—they can do whatever they like, to whomever they like or dislike, whenever they like with impunity; and, to a certain extent this absolute power extends to their spouses. Not only can this absolute power be used capriciously, it can be used without restraint irrespective of good or evil intent.²⁷ Consequently, temptation has no meaning, for Persian royalty it is solely a matter of appetite—sociopathy does not even enter into it.²⁸ Once again, we must bear in mind Herodotus' general rider to all his writings—that he refuses to vouch for the truth of any of it and does not feel obliged to believe any of it himself (Hdt. 2.123 and 7.152.3). Furthermore, we must separate *why* from *what*. Rejecting Herodotus' assessment about some particular motivation or objective is one thing, but a very different thing from questioning his narrative about events—*why* is always the tougher question of the two to address and often fraught with speculation or perhaps even insight.

Widowed Twice

Not quite bookended, but exceptional none-the-less, Atossa, Cyrus' daughter by Cassandane, is in all probability also a full sister to the Persian king Cambyses II—her first husband. Atossa is quoted directly twice in the *Histories* and is mentioned obliquely another five times in passages from the third and the seventh books. Nevertheless, by playing hop-sotch through three of the nine books we can piece together an almost complete narrative. She is born sometime around 550 and dies in about 475, during which period she becomes the queen to three kings and the mother of Darius' successor, Xerxes. Cyrus' open-mindedness on the one hand and the advanced trend practiced by the Persians in educating their children and youth is decisive.²⁹ One of the things that Herodotus does is show

27. We have to allow for some ambivalence here. Herodotus is often careful not to judge when it comes to customs. He famously lets Darius give a comparative example of the appropriate rites for disposal of the dead (Hdt. 3.38.2–4).

28. See Arther Ferrill's article "Herodotus on Tyranny" where in a similar vein to that taken by Vivienne Gray, Ferrill argues that in Herodotus' view (and certainly Plato's and Aristotle's) "an oriental monarch was a legitimate *basileus*, but the *hybris* of the Persian king made him a *tyrannos*" Arther Ferrill, "Herodotus on Tyranny," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 27, H. 3 (3rd Qtr. 1978): 392.

29. Whether actually true or not, Herodotus goes out of his way to show that after their military defeats Cyrus does not put to death either the last king of the Medes (Astyages) or the last king of the Lydians (Croesus). We infer that they are permitted to live out their days under tight surveillance, but under considerable luxury (Hdt. 1.130.3

that although Atossa has this absolute *royal barbaric power* she never uses it for downright evil or personal retribution. Elsewhere—again, showing rather than just telling—Herodotus demonstrates that neither the Athenian leadership nor the Spartan dyarchy have this absolute power, not that some individuals do not seek it, or at least wish for it, from time to time. For Herodotus any particular individual, regardless of personal merit, is quite simply either Greek or non-Greek.

Rightly dismissed by Gray, notions of *otherness* are often not helpful and need not be pursued further here—Greek or non-Greek is enough without introducing the now pejorative term *Barbarian*. Part of Herodotus' purpose is to uncritically show rather than judge or evaluate differences—difference is enough—and this includes differences among Persian, Spartan, and by inference Athenian women. But to begin at the beginning, we know that Cyrus the Great—sometimes identified as Cyrus II—is born at the very end of the seventh century and rules largely successfully from about 560 until his battlefield death in 530. Herodotus leads his audience through the recent history of this part of Asia showing how Cyrus creates the enormous Achaemenid Empire.³⁰

When Cyrus died, the kingship was inherited by Cambyses. He was the son of Cyrus by Cassandane daughter of Pharnaspes. Cassandane had died before Cyrus, and he had grieved for her with great sorrow and ordered all of his subjects to grieve for her, too. [2] As the son of this woman and Cyrus, Cambyses considered the Ionians and Aeolians as his slaves whom he had inherited from his father, and when he made his expedition to Egypt, he took with him these Hellenes who were now under his rule, along with the rest of his subjects (Hdt. 2.1.1–2).

Herodotus' readers will recall that Croesus, the last Lydian king, conquered the mainland Anatolian Aeolians and Ionians (Hdt. 1.26.2), but made a treaty with the Ionian Islanders (Hdt. 1.27.5). Herodotus calls all these peoples Hellenes, reinforcing the notion that they have not and will not be assimilated into the Persian Empire—you do not assimilate slaves, you work them to death.³¹ Cambyses is no fool; by taking all the young Ionian men of military age with him to Egypt, they cannot foment trouble at home in his absence, the numbers and quality of

and 1.90.2). Since under *royal barbaric power* Cyrus could easily use their cured hides to cover his footstools or make decorative wall hangings, their acquiescence is assured.

30. Cyrus is killed battling the Massegetai having ruled for twenty-nine years (Hdt. 1.214.3). Herodotus tells us that Cyrus dreamt that one of his generals, Darius, the eldest son of Hystaspes from a cadet line of the Achaemenids, was plotting to overthrow him (Hdt. 1.209–210). But the Persian monarchy is always unstable; Xerxes, Cyrus' grandson, rules for less than twenty years before his assassination in 466.

31. Herodotus' readers will learn that even at Thermopylae Xerxes' regimental commanders use whips to encourage their allied levee troops to engage with the Spartan defenders (Hdt. 7.223.3).

garrison troops Cambyses must leave behind is minimized, and they also serve a dual function as useful hostages.

Although the Achaemenids practise polygamy, this does not prevent the Persian rulers from having favorites among their wives if not among their concubines, although sons of the latter would be out of the line of succession. But fierce rivalry and jealousy among legitimate male offspring always engenders the threat of a disputed succession. Elsewhere, Herodotus indicates that the Persians do not practice strict primogeniture.³² This discretion avoids the shadow of a demonstrably inept male heir-apparent casting gloom among the courtiers, but introduces instability with the very real prospect of civil war. Strict primogeniture only paints a large target on the back of the first-in-line of succession and a road-map to the throne.

The Perils of Male-Preference Primogeniture

Evidently in Persia, but not in fifth-century mainland Greece, a brother marrying a full sister is not an odious anathema. Polygamous endogamy—in Cambyses' case to strengthen his claim to the throne—marrying the daughters of the late king—necessitates degrees of consanguinity that most cultures would abhor.³³ But it is also possible that early signs of Cambyses' insanity are evident³⁴ Doubtless Cambyses is unstable—to use a polite term—he arranges the murder of his younger brother Smerdis, also known as Bardiya—a particularly crude way of tightening any line of succession (Hdt 3.30.1–3). He also murders one of his sisters, one who is also an official wife (Hdt. 3.32.3–4). Again, limiting the line of succession, he marries two of Cyrus' three daughters. That they are his full sisters does not worry him at all. Herodotus recounts an incident leading up to these irregular marriages:

32. Following Persian custom, before a king goes into battle, Cyrus appoints [selects?] his son, Cambyses, by his favorite wife, Cassandane, to be his heir (Hdt. 1.208).

33. Herodotus sometimes makes no distinction between Persians and Medes, although strictly Astyages is the last Median king, whereas Cyrus, born in Persis, is a Persian king. Herodotus uses both terms indiscriminately—Persians later include Medes, Lydians, and Carians and so on, but the term for formally offering fealty to the Achaemenid monarchy remains *medizing*. Medes are Medes. There is also a hint that the interregnum following Cambyses' death is the Medes attempting to put one of their own—one of the priestly Magoi—on the now unified throne (Persia, Media, Babylon, and Lydia including the Ionian and Dorian settlements on the Anatolian coast). The Magians (Magus / Magoi) were a Median tribe (or caste) who traditionally performed a number of religious duties within the Persian Empire.

34. Herodotus reports that this insanity might be the royal disease (epilepsy) and elsewhere an addiction to strong drink (the Spartan king Cleomenes comes to mind) is suggested (Hdt. 3.33.1 and 3.34.2–3).

Before this time, it was not the custom of Persians to live with their sisters. But Cambyses had happened to fall in love with one of his sisters [Atossa] and wanted to marry her. Since what he wanted was unconventional, he summoned the officials called the royal judges and asked if there was any law that would sanction a man's marrying his own sister. [3] The royal judges are men selected from all Persians to serve in this capacity until they die or are found guilty of some injustice. They judge lawsuits and are the interpreters of ancestral ordinances and institutions, and every question is referred to them for judgement. [4] So they responded to Cambyses' question with an answer that was both just and safe: they said that they had discovered no law that would sanction marriage between a man and his sister, but they had found another law stating that the king of the Persians was permitted to do whatever he wanted. [5] Thus they did not break the law because of their fear of Cambyses, but in order that they would not destroy themselves by protecting the law, they discovered another one that supported the king in his desire to marry his sister (Hdt 3.31.2–5).

As is often the case, Herodotus notes cultural differences—in this case tolerated degrees of consanguinity—without judgement, while insisting that the law must never appear to be capricious as that is no law at all. But perhaps his courtiers are not entirely appalled that Cambyses insists on marrying Atossa. At least the consort to Cyrus' heir will be entirely sane. Herodotus is making the point that under an absolute monarchy perversity easily overshadows and becomes the nature of *royal barbaric power*—royal judges, the individuals the common people should trust the most, are as corruptible as slaves—on command they find weasel clauses in the law to make Cambyses above the law and give him *carte blanche*.³⁵ In Athens, as in Sparta, the law is not so easily manipulated by those in power.

In another digression, and a brutal reminder of how fragile Atossa's influence in court might be, Herodotus recounts two lurid versions of the tale of Cambyses murder of Atossa's sister—Roxanne—who also happens to be pregnant by him.³⁶ One is given by the Hellenes and the other by the Egyptian, where the murder took place.

The Hellenes say that Cambyses had pitted a lion cub against a puppy, and that this wife of his viewed the fight with him. When it appeared that the puppy had begun to lose the fight, another puppy, its brother, broke its chain and went to its brother's side and the two of them together then prevailed over the lion cub. [2] Cambyses

35. Atossa, the second youngest daughter, may well have been only teenaged when first married and in her mid-twenties when first widowed; and finding herself quickly remarried to the impostor, widowed again, and then finally married to Darius. A royal bedroom pawn, she likely never had any choices in the matter.

36. Herodotus does not give her name. Possibly there was no consensus among his sources, but this is yet another reminder of the usual status of women in fifth-century Persia—to be used either for pleasure or progeny, and then put aside, nameless.

enjoyed watching this fight, but his wife sat beside him in tears. Noticing this, Cambyses asked why she was crying, and she replied that it made her weep to see the puppy defending its brother, as she recalled Smerdis and realized he would not be able to defend Cambyses in the future. [3] The Hellenes say that Cambyses slew her because of this remark (Hdt. 3.32.1–3).

But the Egyptians say that this woman [Roxanne] was sitting next to him at the dinner table, she took a head of lettuce and stripped it of its outer leaves, and then asked her husband whether the lettuce was better stripped of its leaves or thick and full. When he answered “thick and full,” she said, [4] “But you have stripped the house of Cyrus bare, just like this lettuce.” Cambyses flew into a rage at this remark and leapt upon her. She was pregnant at the time; she miscarried and then died (Hdt. 3.32.3–4).

That the tales are different should surprise no one: Hellas is a long sea voyage away and remote from vengeance, whereas Cambyses is already occupying Egypt. The tales are difficult to interpret beyond criticizing the mindless winnowing of the clan—taking siblings as deadly rivals rather than powerful supporters—but that he dies childless seems hardly punishment enough. Either way, his wives and concubines will feel particularly insecure and the youngest of Cyrus’ daughters—Artystone—relieved that she is too young for duty in anyone’s marriage bed or game of thrones. Dependent solely upon gender, Cambyses’ siblings and close Achaemenid relatives are either bedded or beheaded. Herodotus is showing what despots never learn—respect and loyalty are won, not commanded. Ultimately Cambyses’ prime duty as hereditary ruler is to secure the succession in his line, and in this he fails miserably.

Because Atossa has learned how to write and read herself, she plays a decisive role in educating and training her own children, as well as those of other Persian aristocrats—important abilities beyond the traditional skills of horsemanship, mounted-archery, and always telling the truth.³⁷

Cambyses son of Cyrus [the Great] died after reigning a total of seven years and five months. He had sired no children at all male or female (Hdt. 3.66.2).

So much for his amorous attentions to his multiple wives and many concubines—responsibility for the shortcoming in progeny is pretty obvious.³⁸

37. Herodotus highlights the primary and secondary education curriculum of Persian male youth (Hdt. 1.126.2). Likely making all Persian latrine walls much less informative or entertaining, the three R’s are conspicuously absent. Close readers will note that Cambyses asserts that “his custom was to punish liars with death” (Hdt. 3.27.3).

38. Elsewhere he comments that in Persia the wives visit their husbands in strict rotation (Hdt. 3.69.6). He does not tell us when, once rendered pregnant, they can leave his serving line, nor when after childbirth they must return to this royal bedchamber merry-go-round.

Herodotus then describes a short interregnum where an impostor—who claims to be Cambyses II's brother, Smerdis (Bardiya)—rules for seven months. He tells of how officials quiz two of the real Smerdis' wives, Phaidymie and Atossa, and it turns out that the impostor is Smerdis the Magus (sometimes known as Gaumata)—whose ears had been lopped off earlier by Cyrus the Great as punishment for some grave but unspecified offence. The whole episode has that whiff of steamy palace intrigue and wilful collusion.³⁹ Herodotus suggests that Cambyses' former wives, including Atossa and Otanes' daughter, Phaidymie risk their lives in helping the Persian aristocracy to unmask the Median genealogical impostor (Hdt. 3.68.1–3.69.6).⁴⁰

Daring Darius

It is at this time, as early as 521 or as late as 518, that Darius, son of Hystaspes, joins six other conspirators who plot to depose if not kill the impostor (Hdt. 3.70.1–3).⁴¹ Smerdis the Magus is eventually stabbed to death in his palace by Darius with the assistance of several other conspirators. Herodotus then embarks on a long digression about a supposed Persian debate among the conspirators on what form of government to adopt (Hdt. 3.80.2–3.83.3). Darius favors an absolute monarchy and eventually secures the kingship through trickery and a rigged equestrian competition among the other surviving conspirators (Hdt. 3.84.1–3.87). If nothing else, Herodotus is pointing out that a hereditary monarchy is by no means immune from jiggery-pokery—doubtless an essential facet of *royal barbaric*

39. A salacious story perhaps for the more prurient in his audience, especially one where the spouse solicits regicide in lieu of committing mariticide; nevertheless, here and elsewhere Herodotus shows his fascination in the endogamous, and indeed the exogamous, matrimonial practices of other cultures. Smerdis / Bardiya was either a full or a half-brother to Cambyses; but Cambyses certainly married his sister/half-sister, Atossa; and, according to Herodotus he ordered Bardiya's murder by Prexaspes (Hdt. 3.30.3).

40. Cyrus had at least three daughters by Cassandane, who is the daughter of Pharnaspes and is also an Achaemenid; the second youngest daughter, probably named Roxanne, is murdered by Cambyses in a drunken rage or perhaps during an epileptic fit (Hdt. 3.32).

41. Herodotus, who like many fifth-century Greeks is fascinated by genealogy, lets Xerxes give us Darius' genealogy, during an incident when he denounces his uncle saying, "If I fail to punish the Athenians, may I be disowned as the son of Darius son of Hystaspes, the son of Arsames son of Ariaramnes, the son of Teispes son of Cyrus, the son of Cambyses son of Teispes, the son of Achaemenes (Hdt. 7.11.2). That Herodotus, or his sources, get the line slightly wrong is neither here nor there—the origin and destiny of much genealogical data is often to be enhanced with an element of fudge—Darius is indeed an Achaemenid, but from a cadet line. He is not a direct descendant of Cyrus the Great.

power—when it comes to establishing the lawful line of succession.⁴² Herodotus writes, “And so Darius son of Hystaspes was appointed king” (Hdt. 3.88.1). But Darius still has to secure the succession and he does this through a series of multiple aristocratic and royal marriages. What these aristocratic young women, including Atossa, really think of being royal bedchamber pawns in the rightful Persian succession game of thrones Herodotus does not say. To secure his reign Darius makes a travesty of the rules of both male-preference primogeniture and the expected behavior of stallions (Hdt. 3.85.1–3.87).

Darius married eminent Persian women, among whom the first were Atossa and Artystone, both daughters of Cyrus. Atossa had earlier been the wife of her brother Cambyses and then had been left to the Magus, while Artystone was a virgin. [3] In addition, Darius married the daughter of Smerdis son of Cyrus, whose name was Parmys, and also [Phaidymie] the daughter of Otanes who had revealed the identity of the Magus (Hdt. 3.88.2–3).⁴³

Atossa, Queen of Persia

Darius—following Cambyses’ and Smerdis’ example—marries the two surviving daughters of the late Cyrus, Atossa now widowed twice and the unmarried Artystone; a decision which later turns out to be critical.⁴⁴ His polygamous selections—or at least judicial sequestering of all available royal brides, plus those of the more prominent Persian aristocrats—whether the marriages are fully consummated or not is immaterial—deny any other claimants, at one stroke or another, the opportunity to enhance their positions in any perceived line of succession by pursuing similar royal unions themselves.

In another digression, illustrative of *royal barbaric power*, Herodotus tells of how when the king’s Egyptian physicians cannot heal his foot—injured in a hunting spill—the king engages a Greek physician Democedes of Croton, who although handsomely rewarded is subsequently appalled to learn that the king intends to impale the Egyptian physicians for their earlier failure and successfully

42. Here Herodotus inserts a variant of his usual credibility disclaimer (Hdt. 3.80.1). But in the quotation, he has Darius compare the best examples in theory of: democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy (Hdt. 3.82.1).

43. While Darius marries the daughter of a co-conspirator Otanes, Otanes in turn marries one of Darius’ sisters [unnamed]. It is their daughter, Amestris, who will marry her first cousin Xerxes. Otanes a Persian nobleman was the brother of Cassandane, Cyrus’ favorite official wife.

44. Darius is already married and may already have children by the [unnamed] daughter of one of his fellow conspirators, Gobryas (Hdt. 7.2.2). Xerxes is only the first-born male child by Atossa who by Herodotus’ account was Darius’ favorite, but not necessarily his second spouse. Born in 519 he succeeds to the Achaemenid throne in 486.

appeals for clemency (Hdt. 3.129.1–3.132.2).⁴⁵ Such are the perils of late sixth- and early fifth-century quackery. Shortly thereafter, Democedes also becomes court physician to Atossa. It is perhaps from his unconcealed but totally unexplained animosity toward mainland Greece that she suggests that Darius invades the mainland (Hdt. 3.133–134.3).⁴⁶ Perhaps he is clairvoyant and realizes that Atossa has ambitions rather than illusions of grandeur for her spouse, and Democedes is simply telling her something that she wants to hear?

Atossa then went to bed with Darius, and as she was lying with him, she presented this proposal to him: “Sire, although you possess such great power, you are doing nothing to acquire either new nations or additional power for Persia. [2] It is reasonable to expect that a man who is young and the master of great wealth will display his power openly so that the Persians will know that they are being ruled by a real man. There are actually two reasons why you should do this: not only so that the Persians will realize that their leader is a man, but also to keep them so occupied in war that they have no leisure to conspire against you. [3] For now is the time, while you are young, that you can achieve something, since, as the body grows, so does the mind, but as it ages, the mind ages with it, too, and thus loses its edge” (Hdt. 3.134.1–3).

Atossa is belittling Darius’ reign. He has already completed conquest of Egypt—something Cambyses failed to complete—and expanded southeastward through to the Indus valley. He has also embarked on a building program greatly expanding the principal Persian capital cities and royal centers.⁴⁷ The chronology is not given by Herodotus, but evidently plans for the punitive Scythian expedition to avenge perceived wrongs are formed early during Darius’ reign. By inference, the Scythians have a history of crossing the Black Sea to raid Persian settlements in Anatolia and a destructive strike, as opposed to a prolonged occupation necessitating garrison troops, is deemed an effective deterrent against ongoing troubles.

Of course, in telling Darius all this, she was following Democedes’ instructions. Darius responded, “My wife, I intend to do exactly as you have said, for I have already formed a plan to build a bridge from this continent to the other and to

45. *Royal barbaric power* is a wonderful tool provided it remains an effective deterrent; the paradox, of course, is that if it has to be used, then ironically it is demonstrably ineffective and is just sadistic revenge at best or a crude deterrent (*pour encourager les autres*).

46. Herodotus never quite explains precisely why or from where a peripatetic citizen of Croton, a Dorian colony in southern Italy, gets this animosity toward Hellas nor why he wants Darius’ Persian forces to enter Europe.

47. Pasargadae founded by Cyrus remains the coronation city; Persepolis (Pārsa) founded by Darius is the ceremonial capital, Ecbatana is the summer capital, Susa is the spring capital, and Babylon the principal center for over seven months of the year.

conduct a military campaign against the Scythians. This will in fact be carried out within a short time.” [5] Atossa then said, “Let the Scythians wait a while; they will still be there whenever you want to attack them. In my opinion, you should lead an army first against Hellas. For I have heard accounts of that land and have set my heart on obtaining Laconian [Spartan] women to wait on me as my servants, and I would also like to have Argive, Athenian, and Corinthian women, too. Moreover, you have a man who is perfectly suited to act as your guide, and to inform you of every detail about Hellas—the same man who healed your foot” (Hdt. 3.134.4–5).

Hers is not a great military argument, neither the Scythians nor the Greeks are going anywhere. Atossa’s stated preference for Spartan women as her personal attendants immediately also expands her husband’s military objectives which we initially take to be limited to punitive raids on Eretria and Athens alone with no mention of venturing into the Peloponnese. Arguably she ranks Spartan women above all other slaves from captive territories. From where she receives this knowledge, Herodotus does not say; not that Democedes would have no opinion at all.⁴⁸ We can only surmise that she finds that women from less sheltered social environments are more independent of thought and more interesting to have around her. Literate and accomplished herself she is no fool and likely does not suffer them willingly. Although she has to accept the monarchy’s polygamous culture—multiple official wives and any number of concubines—she has no wish to surround herself with either doe-eyed, or illiterate matrons with no life-experience beyond the bedchamber, birthing chamber, or the nursery.⁴⁹ Atossa will take her pick of the youthful female captives, whereas the others—plain or comely—can be added to the palace’s cortège of concubines, work in the nearby Kissian bitumen pits, or be sold off to brothel-keepers across the empire (Hdt. 6.119.2–4).⁵⁰ In this instance Atossa does not get her own way.⁵¹ Although Darius

48. Atossa may also be aware of Greek mythology and believe that since Helen of Troy [of Sparta] by all accounts was the most beautiful woman in the world, her contemporary Spartan descendants are likely more than just comely.

49. The author comments on the scale of Persian polygamy—“many legitimate wives, but . . . still more concubines”—without judgement (Hdt. 1.135). A nuanced discussion of what might be called the Persian monarchy’s sexual mores are beyond the scope of this study—suffice it to say that Herodotus’ serially monogamous Hellenic male audiences—well, nominally, provided all those regular liaisons with *pornai* (πόρνοι), *pallake* (παλλακή), or *hetaira* (ἑταίρα) do not count—would regard the notion of multiple official wives, any number of concubines, with scores of resulting offspring intriguing if nothing else. Athens had an extensive sex-trade with a wide range of available services from base release to sophisticated hedonism. Marilyn Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 118-126.

50. Sarah Pomeroy, comparing the education of young Spartan children, comments that Spartan girls are married at eighteen—a substantially later age than their Athenian counterparts—they would also have time in an all-female milieu to learn reading and writing as well as other aspects of *mousike* (μουσική)—an archaic and classical Greek

sends Democedes along with a number of Persian spies to find out more about mainland Greece and her peoples these ventures largely come to naught (Hdt. 3.134.6–3.138.4).

The Feint before Marathon

However, Darius' younger brother and uncle of Xerxes, Artabanos, who believes that making war against the semi-nomadic Scythians is a hopeless challenge, fails to persuade him to abandon the Black Sea venture (Hdt. 4.83.1–2). Darius' march from Susa to the Bosphorus is not without incident and another display of *royal barbaric power* when one of his subjects, Oiobazos, requests that not all three of his sons should serve simultaneously on the same campaign (Hdt. 4.84.1–2). At this stage in his narrative Herodotus makes no further reference of any kind to Atossa for almost two decades. We do not know her reaction to either Darius' largely unsuccessful Scythian raid, nor to his leaving the Persian general Megabazos with an army of 80,000 men on the European side of the Straits to subdue Thrace and Macedon (Hdt. 4.143.1–3). She must have been aware of the Greek raid on Sardis in 498—a raid that is certain to inspire Persian retribution against the Ionian colonies and their mainland backers from Athens and Eretria. She must wait, doubtless impatiently, while the Ionian revolt is put down. She will await news with interest and disappointment of the failed attempt in the summer of 492 by the Persian general Mardonios, when the wreck of his supporting naval fleet by unexpected storms in the northern Aegean obliges him to return to Persia (Hdt. 6.43.4–6.44.3, and 6.45.2). Abandoning the notion of a land-based attack on Eretria and Athens Mardonios is relieved of command and in 490 Darius appoints two generals, Datis, a Mede, and Artphrenes, a nephew, to lead the next expedition—a seaborne operation with his army and navy island hopping across the northern Aegean (Hdt. 6.94.2).

Marathon and the Aftermath

Darius does not accompany his army, but awaits news of their successes in Susa. All starts well enough, sailing past Samos and Ikaros, attacking Naxos while leaving Delos untouched, and then landing near Eretria (Hdt. 6.95–6.100).

performance art incorporating: music, dance, and poetry, not to mention horsemanship. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, 1975, 24.

51. Pomeroy comments, "Like male landowners, Spartan women could drive or ride out to survey their property as men did. Driving horses or riding them endowed Spartan women with an autonomy that was unique for women in the Greek world," Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, 1975, 21.

The city is besieged, falling when betrayed from within and then looted and burned and the surviving citizens and dependents enslaved (Hdt. 6.101.1–3).⁵² The destruction is such that Eretria, which will join the Delian League, takes decades to recover. The Persians now sail toward Attica landing their infantry and cavalry at Marathon just north of Athens expecting to easily sack that city as at Eretria, perhaps again aided by treachery from within the walls (Hdt. 6.102).⁵³ The Athenians send messengers to Sparta requesting help—help which will arrive too late (Hdt. 6.105.1 and Hdt. 6.106.3). The Athenian strategy, with Plataean help, is to march north and stop the Persians advancing further south. After days of unnerving standoff, the Athenian hoplites go on the offensive, even running the last stadia before engaging the Persian infantry. The Persian forces suffer heavy casualties and are driven back to their boats. They sail toward Athens but do not land partly because the vainly expected treachery from within in support of Hippias never occurs.

The venture is not a complete disaster. The Sardis raid of 498 is partly avenged; Naxos is captured, Eretria is totally destroyed and its people enslaved, but falls short of the planned conquest of Athens.⁵⁴ They sail for home (Hdt. 6.119.1). Following the failure to carry all their objectives during the late summer of 490, Darius, is even more determined to make war on mainland Greece but has other more pressing matters to attend to first (Hdt. 7.1.1). Herodotus does not tell us how those in Susa react to news of the defeat; news which would not be long in coming—less than a fortnight.⁵⁵ There is no evidence that on their return to Susa

52. Unlike the Ionian raid on Sardis some eight years earlier, the marauding Persian troops know the elementary rules of pillage and remember to loot first and burn later (Hdt. 5.99.1–5.101.3).

53. The former Peisistratid tyrant, who has been living in Persia, eagerly accompanies the Persian invasion force. Although expelled from Athens several decades earlier, the ageing Hippias persuades his Persian hosts that other aristocratic Athenian families anxiously support his return to power and will arrange surrender of the city soon after troops land in Attica and Persian warships appear in Phaleron bay.

54. No mention is ever made of the Persian's mounted archers (cavalry)—one suggestion is that they had already embarked for Phaleron—another that they were simply caught off-guard by the early morning Athenian advance. Miltiades is credited with the decision to attack and the charge over the last stadia (Hdt. 6.112.2–3). Another possibility is that Miltiades—from a horse-breeding family—surmised that the Persian horses might well be colicky and would need several weeks to acclimatize and settle after disembarking from their transport ships.

55. Herodotus gives a description of the 2,700 km long Royal Road and the mounted courier system operating between Susa and Sardis (Hdt. 5.52.1–5.53 and 8.98). To this must be added the distance from Ephesus to Sardis, another 100 km or so. The sailing distance from Phaleron to Ephesus is about 240 nautical miles and under good conditions fifth-century ships can make five to six knots or about 125 nautical miles per 24-hour day if they choose to travel at night, too. So, for an important dispatch, with luck over wind

that Darius punishes either of the two generals, Datis and Artphrenes, for not sacking Athens and for returning only with prisoners from Eretria (Hdt. 6.110).

We might note that Atossa does not get her desired bevy of vivacious Athenian, Corinthian, and Spartan young women to serve as her personal attendants. Herodotus does not record Atossa's reaction to this setback in Europe, except that Darius intends to try again soon.⁵⁶

While Darius was still making arrangements for these expeditions against Egypt and Athens, his sons began a fierce dispute over which of them should hold supreme power, since according to Persian custom, the King always appointed his successor before marching out to war. [2] Darius had had three sons [Artobazanes, Ariabignes, and Arsamenes] by an earlier wife [unnamed], the daughter of Gobryas; and after becoming King he had four others [Xerxes, Achaimenes, Masistes, and Hystaspes] by Atossa, daughter of Cyrus. Artobazanes was the eldest of the three he had sired earlier, and Xerxes the eldest of those born later. [3] These two sons, since they did not share the same mother, now entered into a hostile rivalry with each other. Artobazanes asserted that he was the eldest of all Darius' offspring, and that it was the custom among all peoples for the eldest to hold the power, while Xerxes countered that he should rule, since he was the son of Atossa, who was the daughter of Cyrus, the King who had won freedom for the Persians (Hdt. 7.2.1–3).

For Herodotus, this link to Cyrus the Great is important, and if we follow Heraclitus' maxim about destiny, the grandson of Persia's first Achaemenid king Xerxes has inherited the necessary agency, autonomy, and authority to rule effectively. This selection also attempts to repair the rightful line of Cyrus' succession through a daughter by the king's favorite spouse.

Darius' Queen and the heir Apparent

It is at this time that Demaratos, the deposed and exiled Spartan dyarch, takes up permanent residence in Susa as an advisor to the Persian king's household.⁵⁷ When the succession dispute erupts, Demaratos provides Xerxes with arguments from Spartan tradition to strengthen his claim (Hdt. 7.3.2–3).

and weather, the journey by sea from Attica to Ephesus would take about two days and the journey from Ephesus to Susa by post-horse another seven or eight.

56. In Aeschylus' tragedy the *Persians* we learn of Atossa's grief and despair following the Persian losses at Salamis. But if there were other contemporary dramas about Persian reactions to their shortcomings at Marathon, or Athenian glee—and it would be astonishing if there were none—they have been lost.

57. The chronology is inexact, but in 491, well before the battle of Marathon, the Eurypontid Spartan king is deposed by Cleomenes I—not without good cause, although probably fraudulently—exiled and his life threatened Demaratos escapes to Asia and is made welcome in Darius' court (Hdt. 6.70.2–3).

Xerxes followed Demaratos' advice, and Darius realizing that his argument was just, appointed him King. But I suppose that even without this advice, Xerxes would have become King, since it was Atossa who really held all the power (Hdt. 7.3.4).

Atossa—now to be the mother of a king as well—must have been delighted with Demaratos' advice, and advice that is taken. Herodotus makes his claim about Atossa's power behind the throne without providing any supporting evidence—he gives it as a bald statement of fact. Undeniably Atossa is Darius' favorite spouse, but perhaps, as their Spartan guest the exiled dyarch suggests, it is her genealogy that is the trump card Xerxes should play—better the genes you know than those you do not. Atossa's genealogical attributes severally as: a daughter of, a wife of, and a mother of give her neither any notable identity nor agency—but the dynastic relationships position her well and ensure a measure of tradition and continuity, albeit in patriarchal terms. But having that special *je ne sais quoi* such as to be selected as Darius' favorite wife confers both unique identity and real agency. This alone meets Heraclitus' maxim—character is destiny. And for Darius in particular, this goes a considerable way toward meeting Solon's criteria for happiness. For Atossa, as Cyrus' daughter, she vicariously wants first her spouse and later her own son to emulate her father, earning “the Great” as an enduring and endearing epithet and appendage to their names.⁵⁸ Richard Stoneman expands on this claim, perhaps citing Xenophon from the fourth century, arguing that Xerxes remains in awe of powerful women.⁵⁹

Having appointed Xerxes as King of the Persians [his successor], Darius then directed his thoughts to war. But after this appointment and the revolt of the Egyptians in the following year, Darius was fated to die in the midst of his preparations and was thus deprived of the opportunity to punish the Egyptians and Athenians. He had reigned a total of thirty-six years, and at his death the kingship was assumed by his son Xerxes (Hdt. 7.4.1).⁶⁰

However, Atossa is probably painfully aware that her father's successors to the Achaemenid throne do not exercise the same restraint with regard to *royal barbaric power* that Cyrus consistently shows. Herodotus does not recount whether Atossa or the Achaemenid Empire go into extended mourning on Darius' death,

58. Darius I of Persia is sometimes referred to as Darius the Great.

59. Richard Stoneman argues that Xerxes is dominated by strong women, Richard Stoneman, *Xerxes: A Persian Life* (London: Yale UP), 9, 30, and 123.

60. Herodotus, through his Persian sources, gives us the chronological sequence and lengths of reign, but he is rarely able to provide any direct synchronicities to other events in the Eastern Mediterranean. Using other evidence and perhaps working backward, modern scholars have been able to derive appropriate Julian calendar dates for the events described in his *Histories*. Darius rules from about 521 until his natural death in 486, aged in his mid-sixties, four years after the battle of Marathon.

but we know that Cyrus orders all his subjects to grieve when Cassandane dies, so a period of state mourning for Darius is likely (Hdt. 2.1.1).⁶¹

The Dowager Queen

Herodotus tells us that despite his mother's wishes her son, Xerxes, has no immediate desire to march on Hellas; he wants to subdue Egypt first, a tactic to which his courtiers agree (Hdt. 7.5.1–7.6.5).⁶² Recall that Atossa criticizes her husband for not expanding the empire given to him by Cyrus, and the same criticisms applies to her son (Hdt. 3.134.1–3). It is not until the spring of 480, six years later, ten years after Marathon, and following four years of preparation that Xerxes, with massive naval support, moves his huge allied army on specially constructed floating bridges across the Dardanelles from Asia into Europe.⁶³ Always keeping in close touch with his naval support and supply transports, the Persian army and their allies are deployed on the European side of the Straits.

Xerxes, who is the supreme commander, moves northward out of the Chersonese through Thrace and into Macedon encountering no resistance. He moves into Thessaly to find the Thessalians only too quick to medize and anxious to assist Xerxes' conquest of Phocis en route to occupying the surrendering Boeotian cities including Thebes. Whatever the long-term strategy, the Greeks decide to halt this advance and engage the invaders on land at Thermopylae and at sea off Artemision. The small Spartan holding force is annihilated, the supporting naval engagement indecisive, and the Greek fleet, largely intact,

61. Surprisingly Herodotus does not describe Achaemenid funerary practices which are significantly different from those practiced in Hellas and Egypt; but from other sources we know that the royal remains are embalmed and interred in large mausoleum structures such as the remains of Cyrus' tomb at Pasargadae. Aeschylus' tragedy the *Persians* is set in Susa with scenes in front of Darius' rock-cut tomb in Naqsh-e Rostan near Persepolis—alas the playwright is no geographer as Susa is over five hundred kilometers away from Persepolis: Not that an Athenian audience would notice let alone care.

62. The most influential of Xerxes' courtiers, bar his mother Atossa, appears to be Mardonios who is the son of Darius' sister (Hdt. 7.5.1–2). Actually, the relationship is a bit more complicated. Mardonios is the son of Gobryas, the Persian aristocrat who was one of the seven conspirators who deposed the impostor. To cement their alliance Darius marries Gobryas' daughter, and Gobryas marries Darius' sister. Furthermore, Mardonios marries Darius' daughter Artozostra and so Darius is simultaneously Mardonios' uncle, father-in-law, and half-brother-in-law.

63. Over thirty years previously during his campaigns in Scythia his father had used similar cable and floating boat (pontoon) bridge construction to provide temporary crossings over both the Bosphorus near Byzantium (Istanbul) and the Ister (now known as the Danube—second only to the Volga, the longest river in Europe).

withdraws southward to Salamis. Doubtless those in Susa are kept informed.⁶⁴ Xerxes' forces divide but fail to sack the temples at Delphi (Hdt 8.34–8.39), and they advance through Attica to discover that the Athenians have already abandoned their city (Hdt. 8.41.2 and 8.51.2).⁶⁵ The Spartans with their allies arrive from the Peloponnese to help construct a four-mile-long fortified wall across the isthmus near Corinth (Hdt. 8.40.2 and 8.71–8.74).

Salamis and Beyond

Xerxes' challenge is simple—the campaign season is almost over, so he cannot wait around for the fragile Alliance to break-up in self-interest. He wants to attack the Alliance either from the east at the isthmus or northward right up the Eurotas valley from the Laconic Gulf, but he cannot do this without naval support and he dare not risk dividing his navy. He decides to attack the combined Greek fleet where it presently lies in the narrow strait between the mainland and the Island of Salamis. This fateful decision is exactly the one that the Athenian commander, Themistocles, hopes Xerxes will make. Despite much wavering the Greek fleet remains at Salamis under the overall command of Eurybiades, a Spartan (Hdt. 8.42.2).⁶⁶ Herodotus describes how the battle at sea commences as dawn is breaking (Hdt. 8.83.1). Xerxes even arranges to watch the battle from a high vantage point on the mainland where he is able to put questions to his advisors about what he is seeing (Hdt. 8.90.4). Herodotus describes the carnage:

In this struggle the commander Ariabignes, the son of Darius and the brother of Xerxes, lost his life, as did many other notable men of the Persians, the Medes, and their other allies; but few of the Hellenes died, for they knew how to swim, so those whose ships were destroyed and who were not killed in hand-to-hand combat swam safely to Salamis. [2] Many barbarians, however, drowned in the sea, as they did not know how to swim. Most of their ships were destroyed when the ships in the lead turned to flee, because those deployed behind them were trying to sail past so as to perform some spectacular feat before the King, and they collided with the leading ships from their own side who were in flight (Hdt. 8.89.1–2).

64. Remember, important dispatches might take as little as ten days (see note #19).

65. Herodotus does not say when the Athenians start to evacuate their city and the surrounding countryside, only that the non-combatants are transported to Troizen, Aegina, and Salamis (Hdt. 8.40–8.41). After a short siege the few Athenians who had declined to leave the city are butchered and the whole Acropolis set on fire (Hdt. 8.53.2).

66. One of the more compelling aspects of Themistocles argument is that with Attica occupied and Athens burned, the Athenians really could take their 200 triremes, load up their transport ships, and with their families sail off to Siris—a long-established Athenian colony in southern Italy—and start afresh.

Herodotus does not tell us about Atossa's reaction to the naval disaster off Salamis, nor that of Amestris, but the playwright Aeschylus, who likely witnesses if not participates in the battle, features Atossa in his topical tragedy, the *Persians*, where she certainly appears as a high-maintenance dowager queen.⁶⁷ With winter approaching, Xerxes returns home to Susa leaving the pick of his army at 300,000 strong on the European side of the Straits under the overall command of Mardonios (Hdt. 8.97 and 8.113). He withdraws from the ruins of Athens to winter in Thessaly (Hdt. 8.113.1–3).

The Persian fleet comprising some 300 ships winters off Samos, mainly to ensure that the Ionians do revolt again (Hdt. 8.130.1–4). Remember Xerxes usually places his own Persian and Mede marines aboard almost every one of his allies' warships to ensure the individual sailing master's loyalty and obedience to—Mardontes and Artayntes—his senior commanders. The overall commander of the Greek army and navy is the Spartan king Leotychidas (8.131.2). Mardonios opens the 479-campaign season by reoccupying a deserted Athens (Hdt. 9.3.1–2). However, learning that units of the Peloponnese Alliance are advancing toward Eleusis to join their Athenian allies, the Persian commander withdraws his troops to Theban territory north of the Asopos River (Hdt. 9.15.2–3).

The Art of Looking Good when Defeated

Next, Herodotus describes in considerably more detail than he applied to earlier engagements how the battle at Plataea develops and ends with the battlefield death of Mardonios (9.20–9.76). Despite the Persians' mutilation of king Leonidas' corpse a year earlier, Pausanias, the Spartan commander, is appalled at the suggestion that Mardonios' corpse be impaled (Hdt. 9.78–9.79). We can almost hear him exclaim, "We are not the barbarians, nor do we exercise royal barbaric power." In any case, amid all manner of rumor, Mardonios' corpse mysteriously disappears forever the day after the battle (Hdt. 9.84–9.85).

At about the same time as Mardonios' allied army is decisively defeated at Plataea with huge losses what should be another naval battle looms in the Aegean Sea at Mycale on the Anatolian coast (Hdt. 9.90). Urged by the Samians the Greek fleet commanded by the Spartan king Leotychidas leave Delos and sail for Samos (Hdt. 9.96.1). The Persians, deciding not engage in a sea battle, sail for the mainland where they beach their ships and surround them with a defensive

67. Less than a decade after the battle off Salamis in Aeschylus' tragedy the *Persians* (Πέρσσαι, *Persai*) first performed in 472, shortly after her death, Atossa plays a major role. This tragedy set in Susa near the tomb of Darius features: Atossa the queen-mother, her son Xerxes, a Messenger, a Chorus of Persian Elders, and the Ghost of Darius. The Ghost accuses their son of hubris saying to Atossa, "Zeus is the chastener of overboastful minds, a grievous corrector" (Aesch., *Pers.* 828–829). Aeschylus almost certainly fought at Marathon and also may have fought at Salamis.

palisade (Hdt 9.96.3).⁶⁸ Hoping that the Ionian levees will desert, change sides, or only fight feebly Leotychidas beaches his fleet and in a reversal of roles at Thermopylae, he divides his forces sending his Spartans into the hills to come down behind the Persians (Hdt. 9.102–9.104).⁶⁹ The Persian forces are routed with heavy losses and en route to Susa the surviving Persian commanders' squabble over blame; Maisistes accuses Artayntes of being "worse than a woman in the way he led the troops" (Hdt 9.107.1). But then a humiliating defeat is always an orphan. In this instance, Xerxes, whose selections for naval military commanders always display more than a touch of nepotism has two major disasters to stomach. We do not know what his wife or his mother have to say, but he will surely remember the considered advice of his uncle Artabanos in 484 well prior to the second Hellenic campaign—if his generals win it only makes him look good—if his generals fail then he remains blameless and his prowess untarnished (Hdt. 7.10–7.11). It is unlikely that Atossa even heard, let alone remembers her father's words to Artembares long ago about "soft places tending to produce soft men." In other words, the game, in this case the proposed conquest, is not worth the candle, and by no stretch of the imagination could anyone argue that the venture would be self-financing. But the "soft men" epithet has come down to us through Herodotus and more than one advisor to the Persian king has told Xerxes that the land of the Hellenes is not rich (Hdt. 9.121.3).⁷⁰ Earlier Atossa has argued for expanding the empire, but barren kingdoms do not make a handsome return on the costs of garrison troops to secure the territory.

Royal Barbaric Power Revisited

Although Atossa eschews resort to *royal barbaric power*, the same cannot be said of her daughter-in-law, Xerxes' queen, Amestris, who allegedly in her old age desperate to purchase a longer life tries to buy-off the grim reaper by sacrificing children in lieu of herself.⁷¹ But in book 9 Herodotus chooses to close his *Histories* much as he opens them in book 1 with another tale of non-Greek barbarity, this time orchestrated by Xerxes' wife Amestris (Hdt. 9.108–9.113). Like Nyssia's story, this one—hardly a love story—is quickly told and takes place in

68. The Homeric overtones from books 19 and 20 of the *Iliad* will delight Herodotus' audiences who know that the roles are reversed and that the barbarian defenders do not have an Achilles, let alone a Poseidon, to help save their ships.

69. The two Persian admirals, Artayntes and Ithamitras, escape whereas the two generals, Mardontes and Tigranes, are killed in the fighting at Mycale.

70. Recall that this must be after 550 when Cyrus defeats Astyages, the last Lydian king, which is about the time that Atossa is born.

71. In a loathsome display of her absolute power Amestris orders fourteen aristocratic children be buried alive as an offering to the Persian god of the underworld (Hdt. 7.114.2). Evidently over the years she has learned little from her mother-in-law.

the Persian capital, Susa, where Xerxes has been residing since his return following the unexpected naval humiliation off Salamis.

Xerxes, until now monogamous in terms of official wives, falls in love, or more likely in lust, with his sister-in-law, but she has no interest in becoming his mistress.⁷² Foiled, Xerxes arranges the marriage of the crown prince, Darius, his eldest son by Amestris, to his niece, Artaynte, the daughter of Masistes and this unnamed woman. Artaynte has no reservations whatsoever about surreptitiously becoming her uncle's latest mistress. Meanwhile Amestris embroiders her husband a spectacular new robe, which delights him—it also delights his new mistress who inveigles Xerxes into promising to give her whatever she wishes. Alas, it is the new royal robe, and he cannot talk her out of it. Overjoyed beyond discretion, Artaynte lets everyone see her sashaying around the palace wearing it—alas, everyone includes Amestris. According to Herodotus, Xerxes is anxious to keep this dalliance entirely clandestine because of “his fear of Amestris” (Hdt. 9.109.3). Fear of what she might say to him? Or fear of what she might do with her own exercise of *royal barbaric power*—Nyssia's keen filleting knife comes to mind? Or is this just another instance of Xerxes' respect for strong women passed down from his mother?

Outraged, Amestris blames the woman's mother and plots her revenge. A feast is held on the king's birthday, and custom dictates that the king distributes rather than receives gifts. Amestris demands Masistes' wife as a gift—Xerxes knows what this is all about but is imprisoned by precedent. He seeks to avert certain disaster by ordering his brother to put his wife aside. Masistes, who is delighted with his present wife and has sons and daughters by her, simply refuses. Nor is Masistes interested in acquiring a royal niece as a wife.⁷³ While this exchange is taking place, Amestris orders Xerxes' bodyguards to mutilate Masistes' wife—cutting off her breasts and cutting out her nose, ears, lips, and tongue. Masistes returns home too late to intervene, but decides to return with his children and entourage to Bactria where, as their popular satrap, he will find safety.⁷⁴ But Xerxes, fearing that his brother might lead a revolt against him, sends

72. Forever unnamed, she is married to Xerxes' full brother, Masistes; although Xerxes is emperor and king of kings, brute force or even royal demand is no substitute for the joyful carnal enthusiasm he seeks—an enthusiasm which quite unlike obedience cannot be commanded. Arguably from tales about the Trojan prince Paris, he knows that taking someone not yours to take seldom proves to be a good idea.

73. Although the Persian nobility practise polygamy, there is no reason to suppose that Masistes does not already have multiple official wives and any number of concubines. It appears from Herodotus' narrative that these customs do not preclude companionate marriage and that Demosthenes' fourth-century dictum about different women for separate roles does not always apply.

74. The Achaemenid Persian Empire was vast. Bactria is an enormous region in Central Asia roughly corresponding to much of modern Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

an army in pursuit with orders to wipe out everyone in their party en route (Hdt. 9.113.2). Such is the reach of royal barbaric power.

The Dowager Queen Endures

What Atossa, the dowager empress and Amestris' mother-in-law, really thinks about all this, Herodotus does not say. Evidently Amestris, although she is Xerxes' sole official wife—a rare instance of royal Persian monogamy—does not share the companionate union with Xerxes which Atossa shared with Darius and which Cassandane shared with Cyrus. As the favorite among a number of Darius' official wives Atossa is aware of countless and endless palace intrigues and jockeying for preferment, and knows from experience that infatuation and lust quickly burn out.⁷⁵

Perhaps it is she who steers her son toward monogamy. At least under the general rules of male preference primogeniture strict if serial monogamy simplifies the legitimate line of succession. And she sees that Artaynte's illusions of personal grandeur and her tasteless put-down and humiliation of her aunt and empress only degrades the prestige and majesty of the Achaemenid dynasty. To all this, Artaynte is blind: she has been around the Susa palace long enough to see sex commodified. Yet, without a thought toward the certain destiny of discarded official wives and out-of-favor mistresses, she enthusiastically commodifies herself. Pleasure always does.

Remember, Herodotus makes the claim, without detailing any specifics, that Atossa is the real power behind the Achaemenid throne for decades (Hdt 7.3.4). Perhaps such knowledge is a commonplace—why document what everybody knows? We can readily and favorably contrast her behavior as the Persian queen-consort with that of Candaules' queen (Nyssia) and of Amestris. This interpretation is consistent with the notion that for Herodotus, Cyrus was an almost ideal and magisterial monarch and from that illustrious peak the Achaemenid dynasty progress is all down-hill. The Persians have become accustomed to ease and luxury and are now soft—hence Xerxes' womanish behavior insult at Salamis (Hdt 8.88.3). Cyrus would have wept.⁷⁶

75. The ease with which Xerxes switches his amorous or perhaps just plain lecherous desires from this unnamed sister-in-law—who treats his lewd advances with the contempt they deserve—to her daughter—proves that beyond physical attraction, he is selfishly susceptible to the lure of the forbidden. If all he wants is variety in his recreational fornication, he already has many concubines to which he can make non-royal aristocratic and foreign additions at will.

76. Cyrus reproves the Persians arguing that “soft places tend to produce soft men” Hdt. 9.122.2–3. Josef Wiesehöfer claims that here Herodotus anticipates the verdicts of Xenophon and Isocrates a century later; see Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1996): 81.

Conclusions—Power Braking, Power Steering, or Both

If Heraclitus' maxim is right and "character is destiny" then Atossa shows how the majesty of the Achaemenid dynasty is enhanced without ever resorting to the capricious exercise of *royal barbaric power*. The greatest test of all is to have absolute power and yet refrain from using it—something the few who hold it can ever resist. Should we argue that Herodotus is also a proto-feminist, he is certainly reminding his Athenian, or perhaps his Periclean, audience that the consorts of those in power can make meaningful contributions to policy and good governance beyond the abysmally low horizon set by the Athenian aristocrat Isagoras for his spouse (Hdt. 5.70.1).⁷⁷

All of which, through Herodotus, goes to show that a determined yet privileged and principled individual who is born a non-Greek does not always have to behave in a cruel and barbaric fashion at all; but that being born Greek offers no immunity to such moral lapses. The major difference between fictional characters and biographical depictions of historical characters is that as readers we demand that the fictional ones behave consistently and that their actions always make some sort of sense. Real life imposes no such rational restriction on individuals, and yet we are stunned when those we might want to admire behave with unbelievable stupidity. The time-worn naval dockyard epithet, "You incredible bloody fool!" comes to mind. Novelists can get into the minds of their heroines and heroes—something historians and biographers can only pretend to do. Furthermore, we should not let Gray persuade us that the Achaemenids have a monopoly on the exercise of *royal barbaric power*. Herodotus is living through a time of great change; Pan-Hellenism has not yet taken root, but some of the hallmarks of what it means to be Greek, rather than what it means to be other-than-Greek, are starting to become evident. Just recognizing the worst lapses from Hellenic cultural and religious norms is a start. Herodotus' depiction of Atossa in his *Histories* is remarkable if only that he is writing from a pre-feminist perspective yet he offers admiration and recognition—she is accomplished and praiseworthy, not barbaric. Even if wary of Athenian audience hostility, he is not intimidated. He gives credit where he believes it is due. Despite the dominant hareem culture in fifth-century Achaemenid Persia, Atossa demonstrates her own agency, authority, and autonomy. From which stems the modest claim that despite writing from a wholly pre-feminist perspective Herodotus breaks patriarchal rank sufficiently to reveal himself as a proto-feminist.

77. Aspasia of Miletus was Pericles' companion during the last fifteen years of his thirty plus years of leadership in Athens. A near contemporary of Herodotus, Pericles (495–429) a statesman and general comes from a wealthy aristocratic Athenian family.

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