

# Political Ideology as Theatre in Herodotus

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**H**erodotus wrote his histories so that those of the generations to come would not forget the *kleos*, the glory or fame, won by the participants in the Persian Wars. Speaking in the more strictly genealogical sense, the way he presented this *kleos* certainly borrowed something from the epic poem. However, I will argue in this paper that the way Herodotus framed ideological debates and contrasts in his *Histories* can be usefully compared to dramatic tragedy, both on the stage and in the cinema, in the latter case especially, to historical epics and action films (at least insofar as these are themselves moral dramas). I would like to suggest here that there is a theatrical and cinematographic logic to Herodotus' narrative, or, less anachronistically, that there is a Herodotean narrative logic to the sort of films I mention above. The main characters in the drama of the Persian Wars and in the events leading up to them can be seen as cast in the molds of tragic heroes and villains, the central theme in this drama being how the overweening pride of the mighty receives its just deserts. In this essay I will attempt to determine the role that political ideology played in Herodotus' history, examining the way he weaves political ideas into his dramatic (and, by metaphoric extension, cinematographic) presentation of the epic struggles of the Greeks and the barbarians.

My central claim is that Herodotus' *Histories* presents the political ideologies of the Eastern Mediterranean world of the fifth-century BC in the form of "theatre" (a theatre which, in our own day, is first and foremost filmic). The ideological presuppositions of the age were embedded in the dramatic interstices of Herodotus' sweeping historical narrative.

## **I. The Origins of a Typology of Constitutions:**

### **The Persian Debate**

Although not the first in the ancient world to lay out on paper a typology of régimes (Pindar does so in simplified form in his second Pythian Ode), Herodotus' debate among the seven Persian conspirators against the Magi represents the earliest written typology of régimes of any great detail. He tells us that this debate, despite the refusal of some Greeks to believe it, really happened (3.80; I will use book and paragraph references to the *Histories*). This has caused some to see it as utter fabrication, while others, like J.B. Bury, conclude that Herodotus was deceived by some early fifth-century publicist on the matter. (Bury, p.55) In addition, the debate is more Greek than Persian in tone, and more reflective of the intellectual speculations of the classical period, that of ca. 521, when it supposedly took place. (Austin, p.37) But even admitting all this to be true, the debate serves the useful purpose for Herodotus

of establishing a theoretical prologue for the political theatre to come. Like so much in the *Histories*, this dialogue is divided into three parts. The first speaker is Otanes, an advocate of democracy - the rule of the *demos*, or people. Otanes wastes no time in attacking monarchy, which he feels is neither "pleasant nor good," and which conforms to no "sound system of ethics," for it fails to make the ruler responsible to some external authority. (3.80) Even the best of men, when given supreme authority, are led astray by envy and pride as wealth and power give them the illusion that they are more than men: the very definition of *hybris*. The results are unrestrained savagery, the breakup of tradition, the violation of women and the suspension of the rule of law. By contrast, democracy promises equality under the law, moderate conduct and free debate. (3.80) Megabyzus spoke next, for the rule of the few, or oligarchy. He too opposes monarchy, but opposes democracy as well, for the people are a capricious lot, and he does not savour the idea of escaping the arbitrariness of a despot only to "be caught by the equally wanton brutality of the rabble." (3.81) The masses "rush blindly into politics like a river in flood": such a form of rule is better suited to foreigners. Instead, Megabyzus opts for the rule of the best, for only they will produce the best policy. (3.81)

Darius spoke last, rejecting the two other suggestions in favour of monarchy, the rule of the one. *Provided* this ruler is the best, he will control the people without opposition and more easily keep secret measures aimed at enemies and traitors. (3.82) Oligarchies are fertile grounds for quarrels amongst the leadership, leading the state back to monarchy when one of the oligarchs triumphs. Democracies witness the formations of cliques, personal feuds and the coming of a "people's champion," who wins the goodwill of the mob and ends internal strife, thus again returning the state to the rule of one man. After this argument in terms of a "natural" political evolution, Darius defends monarchy as the traditional form of government for the Persians and as the régime that gave them their empire and thus their national liberty. (3.82) Megabyzus comes across as little more than a puffed-up windbag, offering clichés in place of arguments against democracy. The reader is forced to ask him, who is to choose the best? Comparing this trio with the post-assassination triumvirate presented in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, we can see a hint of Lepidus in

Megabyzus, the two sharing the doom of becoming historical footnotes. Darius, although more incisive than Megabyzus in his criticism of democracy, is on soft ground in assuming that any given monarch will be *the* best (for he could also be, as Caligula later was, very bad). Eliminating this assumption, all he has to go on is tradition and a rather narrow political pragmatism. He is reflected in the cunning Octavius, for whom power is the only *telos* worth pursuing. Although not immediately obvious, Otanes has slipped a joker into the deck of the debates by awakening the reader to the very palpable benefits of democracy, free from unwarranted

assumptions. He is equivalent to Mark Anthony in Shakespeare's drama, desiring a balance between the naked pursuit of power and justice. Herodotus illustrates Otanes' point even more subtly in noting that Otanes later withdraws from the competition for the crown, saying that "I have no wish to rule - or to be ruled," claiming special status for his kith and kin, and allowing his descendants to be the only free family in Persia down to Herodotus' own day. (3.83) He became the only democratic citizen of an autocratic empire. As for Darius, he wins the throne by tricking the other conspirators, thanks to his clever horse and his even cleverer groom, erecting a statue to commemorate the event. (3.88-89) Despots win power by tricks and treachery, a lesson we learn time and time again in Herodotus.

This three-fold typology-- monarchy, oligarchy, democracy --went through countless variations in the ancient world. In the *Republic*, Plato expands it into five parts: an ideal state, or "polis," the rule of courage, or "timocracy", oligarchy, democracy and tyranny, ranking the régimes in the order listed. (de Romilly, p.88) He did not bother dividing the rule of the many into good and bad forms, as he did the rule of the few, for he could not envisage a "good" democracy. But later writers realized that the basis for the various divisions between forms of states were either structure (i.e. how many participated in government) or spirit (i.e. whether the public good was the end of the state). (de Romilly, p.90) Aristotle used such a distinction to construct his own six-fold model, with good and bad forms of the rule of the one, few and many: royalty and tyranny, aristocracy and oligarchy, and "*politeia*" and democracy. (Aristotle, *Politics* III.5) Of course, when applying this typology to his collection of 158 mostly Greek states, Aristotle ran into all sorts of problems, but "il serait vain de reprocher à Aristote une inexactitude qui vient de sa rigueur même." (de Romilly, p.98) These schemes were lists of ideal categories, and as often as not had to be even more finely divided when applied to the real world. Nevertheless, the various typologies of régimes of later antiquity had a common source in the simple three-fold one that was so self-evident to Herodotus, a typology that would give structure to most of his remarks concerning political ideology in the *Histories*.

## II. Hybris, Drama, and Politics

*Then shall bright Justice quench Excess, the child of Pride, Dreadful and furious, thinking to swallow up all things.* (An oracle given shortly before Salamis; 8.77)

Herodotus starts off by warning us that "human prosperity never abides long in the same place," creating a sense of dramatic foreboding that points to a structure of *hybris-nemesis* governing the rise and fall of the great. (1.5) As David Grene points out, Herodotus is really neither a historian nor a dramatist, but rather a historian who writes in the image of the theater. (Grene 1961, p.477) He goes on to outline this theory of *hybris-nemesis*, a law of causation where the insolence of the great (*hybris*)

is rewarded by some nonhuman agency with nemesis, a redressing of balance. (p.481). This redressing of balance can be seen in a great many crime films, where the "bad guys" get their just desserts either by being hunted down by the law (e.g. *White Heat* or *Bonnie and Clyde*) or wind up self-destructing (e.g. a Quentin Tarentino film) as payment for their amorality. In Herodotus, the major dramatic device is the triad of temptation, tempted leader and wise counselor: after a series of successes, the tempted leader considers one last, glorious act of aggression, which the wise counsellor advises against, but which he goes ahead with anyway, thus calling down divine retribution. (pp.482- 3) His insolence consists in his thinking that he is more than a man, and thus a "contravention of the natural law which would have man think human thoughts." (p.485)

A few preliminary examples come to mind. The daughter of Battus of Egypt, being too vengeful on the people of Barca, was eaten alive by worms, showing "how true it is that all excess in such things draws down upon men the anger of the gods." (4.205) This is made even more explicit in Book Seven, where Artabanus warns Xerxes, that most hubristic Persian,

. . . that amongst living creatures it is the great ones that God smites with his thunder, out of envy of their pride. The little ones do not vex him. It is always the great buildings and the tall trees which are struck by lightning. It is God's way to bring the lofty low. . . For God toler-ates pride in none but himself. Haste is the mother of failure - and for failure we always pay a heavy price. (7.10)

But the gods do not play favourites: if Fate decrees a course of events, no man may interfere. The pious Mycinerus has his life shortened precisely because he failed to fulfill a bleak oracle that Egypt was fated to suffer for a hundred and fifty years. (2.133) But it is to despots that hybris *especially* adheres.

For Herodotus, it is the *nomos* of the Orient to be ruled by autocrats, and, even though Oriental the character faults of despots are no more pronounced than the ordinary man's, they are given much greater opportunity for indulgence. (Waters, p.133) The story of Croesus of Lydia is a case in point. Hybris accumulates in the well of the Oriental despot, there being no escape valve except the final, disastrous failure, which all-too-often results in the death of the despot. But Croesus escapes this fate. He has an early taste of destiny when Adrastus, a man he had cleansed of bloodguilt, accidentally kills his son. (1.43) Later, he is told by an oracle that, if he attacked the Persians, he would destroy a great empire, yet he hybristically goes ahead and attacks Cyrus, only to lose *his own empire*. (1.53) But even in his insolent stage, Croesus could laugh at presumption, as when Alcmaeon (the founder of the Alcmaeonidae) wears baggy clothes so as to carry away as much gold as possible (Croesus had

previously rewarded him for his services by the grant of as much gold dust as he could carry on his person). (6.125) He adds forebodingly that a later issue of this family dreamt that she would give birth to a lion, and produced the most famed of Greek democrats, Pericles. (6.131)

Contrary to the Greek distaste for surrounding their rulers with an aura of sacredness, the Persians preferred to see their kings as chosen by the gods; Herodotus transmutes this split in assigning the Persian monarchy "the very quality of fate," being both "strangely protected or deluded by the gods." (Greene 1987, p.4) The archetype of the hybristic Persian king is Xerxes. Witness his performance at the Hellespont after a storm washes away his bridge of boats:

Xerxes was very angry when he learned of the disaster, and gave orders that the Hellespont should receive three hundred lashes and have a pair of fetters thrown into it. . . He. . . instructed the men with the whips to utter, as they wielded them, the barbarous and presumptuous words: 'You salt and bitter stream, your master lays this punishment upon you for injuring him, who never injured you. But Xerxes the King will cross you, with or without your permission. No man sacrifices to you, and you deserve the neglect by your acid and muddy waters.' (7.34-6)

The high drama here reminds one of lurid Biblical epics of the 1950s, often starring Victor Mature, like *The Robe*, or of Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* (except that Xerxes' speech might be a little too melodramatic even for Hollywood). But back to our story: the Great King is so insolent that he seeks no longer to challenge just human forces, but to challenge the very order of nature itself. Later, the villainous Magi, throwing aside all human law, buries alive nine boys and nine girls in an attempt to placate the gods. (7.114) Both incidents are manifestations of the disregard of law by the Oriental despot. But an even more striking case of such disregard comes in Book Eight, illustrating Hegel's notion that in the East all but one are slaves. On his return to Asia, a storm assaults Xerxes' ship, which is threatened with capsizing: he orders the Persian nobles to jump into the sea, thus lightening the vessel. They willingly comply. (8.118) There is perhaps a hint of Hollywood hyper-villainry here, of the Sherriff of Nottingham plotting against Errol Flynn, of Emperor Ming, or of James Bond's good friend, Blofeld.

Croesus the despot is transformed into Croesus the wise advisor when "Apollo" saves him from Cyrus' fire, and he almost immediately dispenses such sage advice as the idea that no one should willingly choose war and that Cyrus should impose a "plunder tax" (for Zeus, supposedly) on the goods his men were looting from Sardis. (1.87-89) This wisdom is an echo of earlier advice given to Croesus himself by a wise counselor of his own, Solon the Athenian, who typifies the Greek ideal of self-control and

avoiding excess. Solon tells Croesus that the happiest man he had ever met was Tellos of Athens, for he had fine sons, lived to be a grandparent, had moderate wealth and died a glorious death. (1.30) Croesus, still infected with hybris, cannot accept this, but Solon reminds him to always "look at the end," for often "God gives a man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him." (1.37) Later, when his empire falls, Croesus admits his hybris and concedes that the divine retribution inflicted on him was just. (1.19) His transformation is a result of the fact that he survived nemesis and gained insight into the workings of fate.

This first confrontation of the hybristic Oriental potentate and the self-controlled Greek is echoed in the equally significant conflict between Greek constitutionalism and Oriental autocracy that is highlighted in the last half of the book. (Bury, p.44) The political ideology of the East wins an early victory in the Ionian revolt, supposedly the offspring of the hybristic schemes of Aristagoras and Histiaeus. The Ionians at first succeed and rid the Asian coast of Persian-installed tyrants in favour of democracies. (5.37) But their fleet suffers from indiscipline, and they meet with defeat at the battle of Lade. The heroes of Herodotus' drama, the Greek people, are shown in early defeat to make their later victories appear all the sweeter. In the drama presented in the *Histories*, this is the first act, the first blow struck by the Eastern despot against the Greeks (even though the impudent Athenians fanned the flames of Persian-Greek hatred by burning Sardis). Of course, the Persians inflict vengeance on Ionia, burning towns, enslaving young girls and castrating boys. (6.32)

But the Greeks, when faced with success, also succumb to hybris. After the victory at Marathon, Miltiades tries to sack Paros for selfishly personal reasons. Meanwhile, after Salamis and Plataea, Themistocles sails to Andros with the "powerful deities" Persuasion and Compulsion to extort money from the Andrians, only to encounter the equally powerful deities of Poverty and Inability. (8.111) These incidents serve as convenient reminders that the gods play no favourites in making the mighty low.

### **III. Eastern Despots**

The political law of the East is despotism. In the history of the oriental states touched on by Herodotus, this despotism time and time again destroys itself through its own insolence. Candaules thinks too much both of his own power and of his wife's beauty, only to be struck down by Gyges after the presumptuous suggestion that the latter should contrive to see his wife naked. (1.8-12) There seems to be a fatal flaw in the characters of most despots, if not in the very character of despotism itself. The art of tragedy requires the despot to perform barbarous acts and to be rewarded for them later, either in his own person or in the person of an ancestor, with *nemesis*. Cheops of Egypt sends his daughter to a whorehouse to earn money for one of his pyramids. (1.126) Astyages the Mede orders the son of one of his loyal servants, Harpargus, to

be killed, cut up and served to his father for supper for an imagined dereliction of duty. (1.119) Cyrus the Great himself, the Persian King most free from hybris, prefigures Xerxes' treatment of the Hellespont when he punishes the River Gyndes for drowning one of his sacred white horses. He spends the whole summer having his army cut it into 360 channels, making it so weak that even a woman could cross it without wetting her knees. (1.189) Such insolence is punished when Cyrus, flying in the face of Queen Tomyris, warning to leave her country without delay, perishes on campaign against the distant Massagetae. (1.213)

The accession of Cambyses brings with it no reduction in Persian hybris. The new King conquers Egypt and immediately plans campaigns against Ammon, Ethiopia and Carthage. (3.1, 3.17) The logic of empire drives him to the ends of the earth. In Ethiopia, Cambyses is infuriated by the remarks of one of the tribes there, and he rushes off into the desert with his infantry like a madman, without full provisions, only to have his men resort to eating pack animals and later each other. (3.25) This was too much for even the mad Cambyses, and he retreated back to Thebes.

We learn much later that Cambyses, in total disregard for the rule of law, had a corrupt judge flayed and his skin spread over the seat of the chair to be used by the judges. (5.25) Cambyses' arbitrariness and lack of self-restraint are evidenced once again in his order to kill Croesus, which his underlings refuse to carry out and which Cambyses later rescinds (3.36). Such qualities are found again in his sacrilegious treatment of tombs and idols in Egypt. (3.37) But the last straw comes when he whips the priests at the temple of Apis and attempts to kill the sacred calf, only to wound it in the thigh. (3.29) His end is clearly the work of nemesis, for he accidentally inflicts a wound on himself in the very place where he wounded the sacred bull of Apis. (3.64) The wheel of Cambyses' life has turned full circle as he receives his just deserts.

Persian monarchy receives something of a reprieve from hybris when Darius becomes king. We see him acting justly in punishing the murderer of Polycrates of Samos. (3.128) Also, his generals perform great deeds, such as the clever ruse of Zopyros in the siege of Babylon. (3.157) But the burning of Sardis unhinges him, and he tells one of his servants to repeat the words "Master, remember the Athenians" three times every time he sits down to supper. (5.105) This hunger for revenge compels Darius to invade Greece, only to suffer defeat at the hands of Athens at Marathon.

The last Persian despot described by Herodotus in his *Histories* provides the best example of how a king, unchecked by outside authority, can drown in the pool of his own pride. Xerxes decides, like his father Darius, that revenge against the Greeks is the order of the day. "I will bridge the Hellespont and march an army through Europe into Greece, and punish the Athenians for the outrage they committed upon my father

and upon us. . . the innocent and the guilty alike shall bear the yoke of servitude." (7.8-9) The equally hybristic Mardonius encourages the king by mocking the Greeks for the violence of their petty wars and for their inability to settle local issues. (7.9) The first of Xerxes' three wise advisors, Artabanus, warns him of the strength of even the Athenians alone, which causes Xerxes to brand him a coward. (7.10,11) The gods play false with Xerxes and convince him, through a series of dreams, to invade Greece. Even Artabanus becomes convinced, although he sees "danger in insatiable desire" (as witnessed by the fate of Cyrus' efforts against the Massagetae, and Cambyses' foolishness in Ethiopia). (7.18) Xerxes assembles his legions and heads for Greece. Like the master criminal in *film noir*, he meets his doom when he becomes convinced, after some earlier successes, that he is invincible and that he can commit crime after crime without retribution (e.g. Cagney in *White Heat*).

On his way there, Herodotus reminds us of the epic quality of these events and of the size of the Persian hosts in recounting the rivers and streams they drank dry. (7.21) He also reminds us of the divine retribution in store for Xerxes' hybris in building the canal at Mount Athos for "mere ostentation," wanting to show his power and "to leave something to be remembered by." (7.24) The arbitrariness and ruthlessness of despots is never out of the reader's mind (e.g., in the incident of Pythius the Lydian's generous gift of a large sum of money to Xerxes). Pythius presumes upon his friendship with Xerxes to excuse one of his sons from service with the Persian army, but the angry Xerxes rejects the request of his "slave," whose duty it was to make available his whole family to his master: the king orders Pythius' favourite son cut in two and has the army march between the pieces. (7.39) Again, like the *film noir* gang leader, the Eastern despot deals ruthlessly with perceived disloyalties amongst his henchmen.

At the junction of Europe and Asia, the Hellespont, Xerxes asks the second of his trio of wise counselors, the Spartan ex-king Demaratus, whether the Greeks will oppose him. Demaratos, knowing something of the ways of despots, asks Xerxes in turn whether he would like a true answer or just an agreeable one. (7.102) Answering that he wants a true answer, Demaratus tells Xerxes that:

. . . poverty is my country's inheritance from of old, but valour she won for herself by wisdom and the strength of law. By her valour Greece now keeps both poverty and bondage at bay. . . [as for the Spartans,] they will not under any circumstances accept terms from you which would mean slavery for Greece; secondly, they will fight you even if the rest of Greece submits. (7.102)

Xerxes, showing how little he understands freedom, finds it incredible that free men will try to stand up to a superior force without the whip or the fear of an absolute monarch. (7.103) After Thermopylae, Demaratus tells the Persian king that there are



eight thousand more Spartans where the three hundred who died in the pass came from, equally good fighters, and offers Xerxes further sage advice on how best to conquer the Peloponnese: take Cythera as a base by sea and fight a guerilla war in the countryside. (7.234-5) Of course, the impetuous Xerxes ignores this strategically sound suggestion.

Xerxes was blessed with a third wise advisor, Queen Artemisia of Cyprus. Before the battle of Salamis, she suggests a Fabian policy, avoiding a direct confrontation at sea and allowing the Greeks more time to squabble amongst themselves. (8.68) But Xerxes' actions are by now under the control of a tragic *nemesis*, and he is tricked into rashly rushing into battle by Themistocles. After the naval defeat, Artemesia offers Xerxes another piece of sage counsel, which he takes this time: to leave Mardonius behind with a large force to subdue Greece. If he succeeded, it would be Xerxes' work being performed by his slaves; while if it failed, he would be far away, safe and sound. (8.102) The expedition fails at Plataea, although in this case *nemesis* must make due with punishing the servant Mardonius instead of the master Xerxes.

The greatest sacrilege (of the many inflicted on the Hellenes by Persia) was the attempt to sack the temple at Delphi, when thunderbolts (one imagines from Zeus) slice off rocks from Mount Parnassus, which tumble down and cause chaos in the Persian army. (8.37) In the epilogue on the fate of the Persians after Plataea, Herodotus notes (with glee?) how the besiegers of Potidaea are drown in an unexpected tide after having desecrated a shrine to *Poseidon*. (8.129) The poetic justice imposed on the army finds a pathetic counterpart after the campaign in Xerxes' unbridled lust for the wife of his brother Masistes, Artaynte. His own wife discovers this, and she manipulates an old custom to get control of Artaynte. She then has her breasts, nose, ears and lips cut off and thrown to the dogs, and her tongue torn out, so that she might act as a mute witness to the brutality and capriciousness of even the wives of despots. (9.112) The curtain closes on the story of Xerxes, a victim of his own overweening pride.

#### **IV. The Greek Spirit**

Herodotus makes of the Persian Wars a great epic, one of the struggle between barbarism and civilization, projecting this back into events long after they occurred. (Austin, p.35) Following Herodotus' own typology of régimes, we first turn to tyrants for evidence of a distinct Greek spirit in the *Histories*. As T. R. Glover points out, tyrants played an important role in sixth century Greece. They came to power with the new urban life promoted by external trade, coinage and the breakup of a clan-based society. They won their positions by putting down the resulting party faction and internal strife. (pp.201- 2) For Herodotus, the worst of the lot seems to be Periander of Corinth, who sells boys to Alyattes of Lydia to be used as eunuchs (3.48), has his

guards strip all the high-born women of the city at the temple of Hera, and followed the advice of his fellow-tyrant Thrasybulus of Miletus in cutting down all the tallest ears of wheat (the best men in Corinth) in order to secure his own tyranny. (5.92) But the central element in Greek tyranny is not so much brutality as arbitrariness, mixed with a certain divine mirth: we see Cleisthenes of Sicyon changing the names of some of the tribes under his dominion to "pig-men" and "dog-men." (5.68) Further, we discover his comic restraint in the story of his daughter's suitors, where, after Hippocleides makes a fool of himself with an overly silly dance on the supper table, he remarks "Son of Tisander, . . . you've danced away your marriage." (6.129) Hybris for the Greek tyrant is mixed with a degree of humility.

Regarding Peisistratus and his family, Herodotus notes their invidious role as émigrés at the court of Darius, urging him to invade Greece. (6.94) Cleomenes of Sparta clears them out of Athens, only to later regret his decision to hand over power to the Athenian demos. (5.64-5) But despite their opposition to democracy, Herodotus gives credit where credit is due, noting that Peisistratus himself "governed the country in an orderly and excellent manner, without changing the laws or disturbing the existing magistracies." (1.59) And he salutes his clever ruse in getting the handsome Phye to dress in armour, pose as Athena and ride a chariot into Athens uttering words in Peisistratus' favour, thereby duping the Athenians into taking him back. (1.60) A good piece of political street theatre never fails to amuse the *demos*.

Herodotus' favourite tyrant would seem to be Polycrates of Samos, the builder of great wonders (3.60), who sought dominion over the islands of the Aegean only to be betrayed by a Persian governor. (3.122, 3.125) But even Polycrates was overcome by hybris, and, in the story of the ring in the belly of the fish, we see the inexorability of fate. All in all, the rule of the one in Greece suffers from the same fault as in the East: the excessive hybris of the one in charge (with the mitigating fact that Greek tyrants were more cognizant of law and tradition and had considerably less military power at their command, thus less temptation to empire.

As for oligarchy, its prime exemplar in the *Histories* is Sparta, using the term somewhat loosely. Herodotus tells us that Lycurgus put the government of Sparta on a sound basis, and he spends several pages outlining the powers and privileges of the Spartan kings, thus emphasizing Spartan constitutionalism. (1.65, 6.56-9) It is true that the Argives preferred foreign domination to Spartan leadership. (7.226) It is also true that the Spartans sought to install Hippias as tyrant at Athens only to be stopped by their Corinthian allies, who have to remind them that "there is nothing wickeder or bloodier in the world than despotism." (5.91-2) But the relatives of king Cleomenes, refusing to put up with his "lunatic behaviour," punish him in a manner unthinkable with a Persian despot by putting him in the stocks. (6.75) The Spartans put his madness down to strong drink and accept a new monarch. (6.84)

We see the essence of the Greek spirit in Demaratus's description of the Spartans during Xerxes' march to Greece:

They are free -- yes -- but not entirely free; for they have a master, and that master is Law, which they fear much more than your subjects fear you. Whatever this master commands, they do; and his command never varies: it is never to retreat in battle, however great the odds, but always to stand firm, and to conquer or die. (7.104)

This sounds like one those florid speeches that the heroes of Hollywood historical epics were wont to pronounce just before the carnage of battle began. But more concretely, it foreshadows the *nemesis* of the Persian hosts at Plataea. Thermopylae gave Xerxes a taste of Spartan efficiency in war, but he did not learn the appropriate lesson.

Like Plato's timocracy, the brilliance of the Spartan régime is the production of valour, a valour seen clearly at Thermopylae and Plataea. It is typified in the reply the Spartan soldier gives to the man who remarks that when the Persian shoot their arrows, they blot out the sun: "This is pleasant news that the stranger from Trachis brings us: if the Persians hide the sun, we shall have our battle in the shade." (7.226) We see their grim humour when Herodotus tells us that they threw Xerxes' ambassadors down a well, advising them to look for earth and water (the traditional tokens of submission to Persia). (7.133) Their love of freedom is evident in the reply of the Spartan youths to Xerxes' bodyguards' asking them why they would not bow down before the Great King: "It was not, they said, the custom in Sparta to worship a mere man like themselves, and it was not for that purpose that they had come to Persia." (7.136) The Spartans typify the Greek hatred of despotism, and the equally Greek idea of "better death than dishonour." They remind one of the "stiff upper lip" courage and sense of duty assigned by British film-makers to their soldiers, sailors and airmen in war movies of the 1940s and 1950s: Richard Burton leading the Desert Rats, or Jack Hawkins captaining a corvette over the cruel sea, all in all a subtle but effective use of drama as national propaganda.

The last régime to be dealt with is Athenian democracy. Much of the *Histories* can be interpreted as a paean to Athens and to popular rule: Herodotus tells us that under the Pesisratids, Athens had been great, but, "her liberty won, she grew greater still." (5.66) Perhaps the most important statement of Athenian political ideology comes a few pages later:

Thus Athens went from strength to strength, and proved, if proof were needed, how noble a thing freedom is, not in one respect only, but in all; for while they were oppressed under a despotic government, they had no

better success in war than any of their neighbours, yet, once the yoke was flung off, they proved the finest fighters in the world. This clearly shows that, so long as they were held down by authority, they deliberately shirked their duty in the field, as slaves shirk working for their masters; but when freedom was won, then every man amongst them was interested in his own cause. (5.78)

When the Athenians refuse to take back the Peisistradid tyrant Hippias, the Persian governor of Asia, Artaphernes, is angered, one of the root causes of the invasion of Greece by the Persians. (5.96) At Marathon, Miltiades warns of the dire consequences of the return of Hippias, and, when the Athenian hoplites charge the Persian line unsupported by cavalry or archers, we are well aware that the fate of Athens itself hangs in the balance. (6.109, 6.122)

Herodotus makes it quite clear that he believes that it was the Athenians, "after God," who won freedom for Greece. "Not even the terrifying warnings of the oracle at Delphi could persuade them to abandon Greece; they stood firm and had the courage to meet the invader." (7.139) So convinced of the justice of their cause that they ignore the possibility of divine retribution, Herodotus' Athenians unite Greece for all-too-brief an instant against Darius and Xerxes. When the Spartans begin to suspect them of switching sides to the Persians, the Athenian representative reminds the Spartans that their love of freedom would force them to fight to the last Athenian and to make no peace with Xerxes. (8.143-4) Critics have noted that Herodotus' Athenians use stock arguments from funeral orations made at Athens later in the fifth century (Bury, p.63), and that such an expedient appeal to national patriotism against the forces of barbarism proved quite useful during the Athenian Empire (Austin 34-5). But the careful reader can hardly doubt the sincerity of Herodotus' fondness for the young democracy of Athens, despite his awareness of the ill effects of the city's later hegemony over the Aegean. To be effective, all propaganda must contain a strong element of truth.

## **V. Political Ideology as Theatre**

Patrons of the theatre, in times both ancient and modern, show a great affection for the intervention of Fate and/or the Gods into historical drama. Herodotus supplies this intervention on many occasions; for example, when Pan meets the messenger Pheidippides as he runs to warn Athens's allies of the coming of the Persian host (6.104), or, near the end of the *Histories*, when Herodotus wonders whether the gods have a direct hand in events, given the dramatic irony of the battles of Plataea and Mycale taking place on the same day. (9.100) And part of this presentation of political ideology as theatre is not a little boasting on the Athenian's part, as when they announce before Plataea that they had defeated forty-six nations all by themselves at

Marathon and thus deserved a privileged place in the line of battle. (9.27) But there is also irony witnessed by the Greek actors, as when Pausanias discovers a treasure trove of gold and silver in the tent of the dead Persian general Mardonius, musing on the folly of the Persians who came to Greece to rob the Hellenes of their poverty. (9.82) Greek hybris is excessive on few occasions in Herodotus, and when it is, it is suitably punished.

The work as a whole is ideally suited to be the screenplay for a Cecil B. DeMille epic film. As Xerxes' army marches to Greece, we see such nice cinematographic touches as the golden pomegranates on the spears of the Persian Immortals (a name that a Hollywood screenwriter could not have improved on) (7.41), the splendid review of the Persian and allied troops on the banks of the Dardanelles (perhaps with the sound of trumpets announcing the arrival of each contingent?) (7.61-98), and the touching scene of Xerxes' weeping when he reflects that his whole army would be dead in a hundred years. (7.46) The last third of the *Histories* reads uncannily like a dramatic presentation of history on celluloid. This similarity to a Hollywood historical epic (keeping in mind the incredibly anachronistic quality of this comparison, but also keeping in mind how much film drama itself owes to theater) is witnessed again in the death of the hybridic Mardonius aboard his white charger (what other colour could it have been?) (9.63), and in the dramatic conclusion to the book, using a technique straight out of film: the flashback. After reading of the many defeats of the Persians by the Greeks, the reader is naturally curious about which factor Herodotus credits Greek success. Instead of telling us straight out the reasons for this success, he describes the grisly death of the Persian governor Artayctes by crucifixion, and the story of his ancestor Artembares, who suggests in the wake of Cyrus' conquest of Asia that the Persians move to a more hospitable region. Cyrus, the father of the Persian empire, rejects the suggestion. "Soft countries," he tells Artembares, "breed soft men. It is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruits and fine soldiers too." (9.122) One can almost imagine a fade to black, a stark "FIN" appearing on the screen as we leave the (modern) theater, pondering the words of the shade of Cyrus.

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