REVIEW DISCUSSION
It's a Woman's World

ZACCARINI, M. 2024. *Erodoto e le donne: la presenza femminile nelle* Storie. Rome: Carocci. €22.00. 9788829027453.

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As Matteo Zaccarini recognizes by his numerous citations, much work has been done since the 1980s on the subject of women in Herodotus. His book-length survey nevertheless presents a broad and stimulating panorama of the female population represented in the *Histories*, and provides fresh opportunities to evaluate Herodotus' attitudes towards women in the wider context of Greek thought and the prejudices revealed by sources of his time. The volume deals with a complex range of material and therefore has a rather centrifugal structure, only partially harnessed by its subdivision into titled chapters, subchapters and sub-subchapters. I will briefly (and no doubt inadequately) summarize the most essential point of each chapter, while registering felicitous insights as well as occasional disagreements along the way.

The 'Premise' lays out in succinct and clear fashion the foundations of Greek misogyny from mythical to Classical times – essentially from Hesiod to Aristotle. Chapter 1 ('Methodological Note') begins with the shrewd observation that in Antiquity the *Histories* may well have been consumed piece-meal but for modern readers it is inevitable to study the work as a whole, with attention to intratextual connections. An appendix of sorts to this chapter, about whether Herodotus' naming or not naming of individual women signals respect, indifference, condemnation or celebration usefully examines all the evidence but is inconclusive; it ends with an apparently unrelated observation, which some readers may find questionable, about Herodotus' disinterest in factual truth.

Chapter 2, 'The Origin of Wars: Abductions (?) of Women', focuses on the prologue and the Egyptian version of the story of Helen in Book 2, arguing for the archetypal ambiguity of the Trojan War as both a chosen and an inevitable event. The question mark in the title is worth noting. Here Zaccarini, after rightly emphasizing the importance of responsibility and revenge throughout the *Histories*, and the fundamental role of the Trojan War in both of these themes, interprets the famous gnomic Persian utterance in the prologue in an unexpected way. The Persians say that to go to war over a woman's abduction is a foolish thing to do. So far, so good: we may agree that the narrative of the *Histories* broadly supports the idea that many wars break out for inadequate reasons. What it does not support is the generalized corollary that 'in fact it is clear that if the women themselves did not want to be abducted, they wouldn't be' (1.4.2), which essentially means that all abducted women want to be abducted. From the point of view of the text, this is a false statement. Like the entire story of mythical abductions, it is evidently focalized through the Persians, not Herodotus. Zaccarini acknowledges this, but in the context of ancient discussions in Greek literature about Helen's culpability or innocence, he also appears to believe, with no evidence, that the Herodotus-narrator is here suggesting the possibility that Helen and other

abducted women in the prologue and, by extension, elsewhere in the *Histories* may not have been abducted at all, but ran off by choice (30, 44). Importantly, this position is reiterated in the conclusion of the book (222). I find it unconvincing, even though it is based on correct claims about the overarching importance of the Trojan War model throughout the *Histories* coupled with (in other historical cases) Herodotus' inclination to attribute agency to his female characters.

Chapter 3 ('Power, Honour and Justice') discusses a variety of Herodotean women both active and passive, frequently in contexts that involve revenge and deceit. The thematic threads of their stories intersect and run parallel to one another in a variety of ways. Candaules' wife goes in for the kill out of shame and the need to protect her honour. Like her, in a manner consistent with her culture but for different motives, Tomyris punishes a man who transgressed all boundaries. The particularly insightful section of this chapter on 'The Women Who Created and Destroyed Cyrus' brings Tomyris together with the king's two mothers, Mandane and Spako. Next, we are shown how Cyrus' daughter, Atossa, exercises her superpower in two different episodes, impacting the policies of her husband and the career of her son. In the first episode, she overcomes the limitations of her feminine status, sharing a victory with another subaltern, the slave-doctor Democedes, over the largely oblivious Great King. Many years later, merely by virtue of her parentage, she determines that Xerxes will succeed to the throne.

The Spartan royal families, whom Herodotus compares with Persian monarchs in other ways, are also pervasively affected by women's involvement, from the progenitrix Argia to the wives of Anaxandridas and the stolen brides of Ariston and Leotychides. The Spartan series is concluded by Gorgo who, like Atossa, appears twice in the *Histories*, as a daughter and as a wife. What makes her unique is that she is the only young child in the *Histories* who forewarns an adult. By the time she has grown up to give strategic advice to the entire commonwealth of the Spartans, Herodotus' narrative has made the transition from the Eastern to the Greek point of view. In Athens women contribute in one way or another to challenging their men's reputation for cleverness (Phye, Timo) or, like so many other female figures in the *Histories*, affect public policy even if purely as victims of traffic and abuse (the daughter of Megacles).

Chapter 4 ('Gender Equality, Inversion and Assimilation') discusses female individuals or ethnic groups who challenge traditional Greek gender norms. Herodotus is more subtle than other sources in his othering of barbarians on the basis of how they differentiate between the male and female spheres, but he reports that some ethnicities practise various degrees of assimilation or equality (Sauromatians, Zauekes, Kaunians). They do so with the implicit approval of the narrator; the *isokratia* ('equal power') of the sexes of the Issedon *dikaiotatoi* ('most righteous') is the clearest case. Zaccarini notes how, in the context of the Greek mythographic tradition, the Amazons receive in the *Histories* a peculiar treatment that emphasizes not merely their competence in war, but also a marked superiority to their male Scythian partners in diplomacy, communication and resolve.

Outside of Herodotus, the flip side of the Greek cultural devaluation of women is contempt of effeminate men. Cross-dressing is normally a taboo, but in the *Histories* it is presented positively in two emergencies: practised by young Macedonian men to the detriment of boorish Persian ambassadors, and by

Laconian women for the purpose of rescuing their imprisoned Minyan husbands. According to Herodotus, Persians consider comparing males to women to be the greatest insult and one they seem to utter or perform more frequently than other peoples; the Egyptian Sesostris is on record for only one, but in a spectacular visual version. Among the Greeks, Telines had a reputation for effeminacy and softness. According to Zaccarini's interpretation, Herodotus is here implying that these were false rumours and that the remarkable deed Telines performed demonstrates that he was in fact a virile, strong and courageous man. I am more inclined to think that the *thōma* ('wonder') of the event lies precisely in its improbability: his unwarlike conquest of Syracuse may have had something to do with his being armed with the insignia of the goddesses.

The chapter ends with a full treatment of Artemisia of Halicarnassus, who shares with Telines the narrator's use of the word *thōma* and the feature of *andreiē*, which she possessed and he supposedly did not. Zaccarini's argument that *andreiē* (lit. 'manliness') was too common a term for 'courage' for Herodotus' audience to register surprise when hearing it applied to a woman is reductive and implausible: they would certainly have perceived the paradox. Zaccarini rightly points out, at any rate, that Herodotus' Artemisia mirrors thematically many other characters in the *Histories*, both female and male. Like Tomyris, she is a queen, a widow and the mother of an adult son; like Gorgo, she gives excellent advice; like Artabanos (and I would add Demaratos), she takes risks in contradicting a king. Women are/behave like men and men are/behave like women: one would have appreciated in this section an explanation of Herodotus' evidently deliberate choice to give us the atrocious back story of the emasculated Hermotimos, which he attaches to the mention of the eunuch's secondary role as Artemisia's fellow caretaker for Xerxes' children.

Chapter 5 ('Family, Sexuality and Social Classes') begins by considering normative gender roles and the instances in which both Herodotean women and men act in sometimes shocking ways in order to protect their families, their communities or themselves. Thus the queen Nitocris, who massacred a number of Egyptians responsible for the death of her brother and then sacrificed herself to avoid subsequent retaliations, finds an approximate parallel in the Persian governor Boges. Herodotus praises this man for killing his wife, children and slaves and then throwing himself on their funeral pyre to avoid capture by the Greeks. The wives of Sesostris and Intaphernes both saved some male relatives by sacrificing others. The Babylonians besieged by Darius strangled all their women except some in charge of preparing food, so that the provisions in the city would last longer. One of the two brothers who robbed Rhampsinitos' tomb, having been caught in a trap, asked the other to cut off and take away his head so that the surviving brother could escape without being identified. The female characters of this story are the pharaoh's daughter, a passive figure, and the mother of the thieves, determined to recuperate the body of the dead son. The last protector of family discussed in this section is Labda, who receives a visit from ten Bacchiad oligarchs charged with killing her infant son. But the men are bamboozled by the baby's smile and his mother rescues him, taking advantage of their hesitation and ensuing infighting. Again, given the gendered character of this episode, one would expect some comment on the fact that Labda hides her son in a chest. What

we get instead is a perhaps non-essential debate of whether Herodotus' attribution of compassion to the hitmen signals a reversal of gender roles (it does not). As Zaccarini concludes, the story is delightful but ambivalent: as predicted by an oracle, the rescued child will grow up to become a brutal tyrant in Corinth.

Herodotus' ethnographic sections contain a great deal of information about sexual and family customs among non-Greek people and subgroups: Egyptian swineherds are considered impure and therefore practise endogamy; among the Adyrmakhidai, virgins are first offered to the king; different types of polygamy are found among the Persians and some Thracians. Sexual promiscuity, inconceivable among women for the Greeks, is frequent and varied. Herodotus especially likes the communitarian society of the Agathyrsi. In the historical narrative, Persian concubines often play a significant, if anonymous, role. Among those mentioned by name, Nitetis by no fault of her own is at the centre of an exchange of humiliations that causes significant geopolitical turmoil. Wives and lovers are major players in intrigues in Orientalist descriptions of the Achaemenid court. Phaidymie, acting on her father's instruction, exposes the imposture of her magus husband. Particularly helpful is Zaccarini's analysis of the story of how the nameless wife of Masistes becomes the unfortunate victim, not only of Xerxes' erotic desires and the thoughtless behaviour of her own selfish daughter, Artaynte, but also of the cruel Queen Amestris' eagerness to avenge her honour. This episode, which famously recalls the story of the wife of Candaules at the beginning of the *Histories*, brings out three major 'macro-themes' of the work: human weakness, the value of norms (Xerxes' obsessive respect for them marks him as different from Candaules) and, to quote Zaccarini's somewhat involved phrase, 'the interaction of the mechanics concerning dignity and social status' (117). So, the concubine of Pharandates also obtains the protection of Pausanias by virtue of the religious norms of *xenia* ('hospitality') and her status as a suppliant.

The chapter ends with two other socio-economic classes of women. In Herodotus' account, prostitution may be an empowering profession leading to independence, wealth, even fame, as in the case of the Lydian women, all of whom practise the trade until they have accumulated enough for a dowry, and the famous Rhodopis, whose pride and love of celebrity Zaccarini rightly emphasizes. In other cases, however, prostitution is imposed by men and represents a form of oppression, whether instrumental (the daughters of Cheops and Rhampsinitus) or institutional. Zaccarini surprisingly includes in the latter type the bride-mart of the Babylonians, which Herodotus praises as a clever and equitable method for arranging stable marriages for all women. By contrast, when discussing Babylonian ritual prostitution, Zaccarini characterizes Herodotus' description as 'brutally casual', while apparently missing the indignation with which the narrator commiserates with the women of all social classes subjected to this humiliating ordeal.

From prostitution we come to baking, with a discussion of Croesus' memorialized baker, the wife of the Macedonian king of Lebaia who prepares bread for the three Temenid brothers and Melissa's metaphorical cold oven where Periander puts his loaves. The associative thread that links these three instances is not entirely clear: Zaccarini interprets bread-baking as an overall symbol of power, an interesting suggestion that requires further exploration. Especially intriguing is the meaning of the necrophilia of Periander (is he, or is the 'oven', the

baker?), which also comes up in the following chapter on violence against women, but receives no interpretation.

'Violence against Women and Women's Violence' is a topic that has already appeared several times in this book, but Chapter 6 collects especially egregious or hitherto untreated cases. War violence against women (and men) receives no explicit sanction on Herodotus' part, but the violation of women is a defining characteristic of the monarch/tyrant drawing opprobrium: Candaules objectifies his wife, as Darius admires the multitasking Paeonian girl as a promise of future domestic help. In one tradition the Egyptian king Mycerinos, moved by *eros*, imposes incest on his daughter and drives her to suicide. Two other pharaohs abuse women out of frustration: Pheron, who sets on fire every woman who does not pass the urine chastity test, and Amasis, who blames his wife for his own impotence and almost kills her. Cambyses and Periander are of course serial perpetrators of violence against women.

The counterparts of victimized women are women who commit acts of violence. Like the Egyptian Nitocris (discussed in Chapter 5), Pheretime of Cyrene seeks retribution for the death of a family member. The important difference is that the theme of honour (τιμή; see above, Chapter 3) is predominant here (Φερε-τίμη, τιμωρῆσαι) and the sanguinary cruelty of this queen's vengeance against both the men and women of Barke earns her an equally ghastly god-willed death and the narrator's condemnation. There are two instances of mass violence (Zaccarini uses the expression 'mente collettiva') in the *Histories*. Athenian soldiers sent to Aegina to recuperate certain sacred statues are driven mad and massacre each other; the Athenian women, for their part, kill the sole survivor by stabbing him with their brooches. In an analogous example involving both sexes, the men of Athens stone the counsellor Lykidas, who had proposed to negotiate with the Persians, and the women do the same to his wife and children.

In Herodotus' analepsis about Pelasgian ancient history, the men are serially involved in more calculated collective crimes, at least according to the Athenians (Zaccarini does not discuss the other, more Pelasgian-friendly version which Herodotus attributes to Hecataeus). When they inhabited Attica, they repeatedly engaged in hubris against the Athenian women; after they were driven out and had settled in Lesbos, they organized a plot to abduct Athenian women during a festival. Since the children from these unions were raised in the Athenian culture and language and started to become dominant as they grew up, the Pelasgian men killed them all as well as their mothers. What became proverbial as 'Lemnian crimes' is then represented by this action, coupled with the earlier and more famous massacre of Lemnian men by their wives. In a somewhat analogous story, the Athenians who colonize Miletus marry Carian women after killing their previous families. A variant of this plot about intra-familial violence appears in Herodotus' narrative of the Scythians, who, upon returning from Asia, confront and ultimately defeat the sons born of their wives and household slaves during their protracted absence.

In the 'Conclusion', Zaccarini notes that although many scholars before him have recognized and analysed the fundamental importance of women in the *Histories* – particularly Alexandre Tourraix, Carolyn Dewald and Donald Lateiner – no one, including himself, would describe Herodotus as a promoter of gender equality.

Zaccarini does, however, rightly emphasize the extent to which Herodotean women, both Greek and non-Greek, often display agency. That said, he reiterates what I believe to be a mistaken interpretation of the prologue suggesting that the initial abduction stories already open the possibility of women being willing participants in what is clearly presented as abuse (see my comments on Chapter 2 above). Regarding the active roles of women in the *Histories*, Zaccarini concludes, first, that women possess motives, goals and methods not significantly different from those of men, and that they are not inferior to them (*pace* Aristotle) in terms of rational deliberation. Secondly, they do not all conform to a single 'race of women' category. Rather, they are profoundly diverse, and the intricate webs of analogy that link their stories cannot be reduced to common stereotypes of female behaviour. This conclusion is fully warranted by the complexity of this book's structure – at times perplexing, but also richly instructive.

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