REVIEW DISCUSSION
The Role of Women in Herodotus

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Recent years have witnessed a renewed scholarly interest in the feminine universe and its representation within the literary culture of ancient Greece. This book by Matteo Zaccarini clearly belongs to this emerging *nouvelle vague*. The title of the work, with its emphasis on the presence of women in Herodotus' *Histories*, highlights two significant aspects. The first is the aim to give due prominence to a dimension that has not yet received adequate critical attention (perhaps in Italian scholarship more than in British or US scholarship). The second, perhaps less immediately evident, concerns the methodological approach. Rather than grounding his analysis in a sociological theory or a general interpretative framework, Zaccarini distances himself – at times explicitly – from the proliferation of essays shaped by gender studies. What he offers instead is a sustained exercise in critical 'weaving', that is, a methodical effort to frame the presence of women in Herodotus' *Histories* as figures that guide both the historian's inquiry and narrative role. This is made clear in both the Preface (7–14) and the first chapter, a methodological note titled 'Women in perspective in the *Histories*' (15–24).

Anyone who engages with Zaccarini's volume will quickly recognize that it also constitutes a broader rethinking of Herodotus' work and its critical and historiographical tradition, viewed through the lens of the feminine universe – an interpretative space that encompasses not only historically attested figures (such as Artemisia), but also deities, legendary peoples and mythological characters. The discussion remains closely aligned with Herodotus' own text, frequently citing transliterated Greek terms and, at times, brief passages in Greek (which are translated only when the quotations are extensive).

Zaccarini's study asserts that the *Histories* should not be viewed solely as an example of historiography – though this dimension is never called into question – but rather as an archive of narrative material that sheds crucial light on the evolving relationship between Herodotus and his audience, episode by episode. This material highlights exemplary stories of women, ranging from the powerful Atossa (Hdt. 7.3.4; pp. 64–5) to more humble figures, some of whom remain unnamed (a phenomenon Zaccarini discusses on several occasions).

In most cases, this material is subjected to two deeply interconnected levels of analysis. On the one hand, each individual figure is examined within the narrative context in which she appears, often with helpful references to broader themes in Herodotus' work and to other characters or motifs that illuminate the case under discussion. On the other hand, this narrative analysis is problematized from a distinctively historiographical perspective through engagement with critical debates that concern Herodotus directly but also extend to wider discursive fields relevant to understanding him. The range of these insights is broad, encompassing – to name just a few – the composition of the *Histories*, their

possible contexts of publication and Herodotus' relationship with figures such as Thucydides or with contemporary theatre.

Zaccarini deserves credit for the way he modulates these components through a writing style that remains clear without ever becoming superficial or reductive.[1] References to more technical critical issues are introduced only when required by the argument, and never burden the exposition. The result is a volume that can be read with both satisfaction and intellectual benefit by scholars of various aspects of the ancient world, and – one hopes – by university students as well.

Following the preliminary sections already discussed, the volume is structured around five chapters, each devoted to a general theme. While each chapter can be read as a self-contained essay, the abundance of internal cross-references facilitates navigation not only through the *Histories* but also within the volume itself. The book is further enriched by an extensive and up-to-date bibliography, as well as an appendix that meticulously inventories the women featured in the *Histories* (147–64).

The first essay (Ch. 2, 'The Origin of Wars: Abductions (?) of Women', 25–45) addresses the theme of war's origins, which Zaccarini frames through mythological figures such as Helen and Clytemnestra – both guilty, in different ways, of betraying their husbands in epic and later historiographical tradition. The choice of topic is unsurprising, given the centrality of the Trojan War in Greek culture and the figure of Helen as its symbolic 'cause'. Precisely for this reason, in Herodotus' time, some writers sought to clarify the contours of Helen's character. Gorgias famously did so in a provocative and at times irreverent manner; Herodotus, too, engages with the theme in his prologue, invoking not only Helen but also Io and Medea. The prologue thus emerges as the moment in which Herodotus immediately displays the credentials of his historiographical approach – marked by a deep familiarity with the multiplicity of opinions that transcend the often elusive boundary between Greeks and barbarians, and aimed at eliciting, wherever possible, the historian's own judgement. It is also noteworthy that the prologue, alongside the moderate scepticism with which Herodotus views the world of mythic narratives, nonetheless constitutes a meaningful engagement with that world, maintaining a continuity between the realms of myth and epic on the one hand, and history on the other (cf. 32).

It is perhaps no coincidence that another passage in which Herodotus displays his credentials as a knowledgeable connoisseur of Homer also concerns Helen – this time from the Egyptian perspective, according to which the heroine never reached Troy but remained in Egypt (2.112–20). In presenting this version, Herodotus remains firmly anchored in a traditional interpretative framework, albeit one reinterpreted in light of the intellectual and social provocations of his time, when the sophists had made Athens a sounding board for new and

[1] In certain instances, Zaccarini includes references or makes observations that appear motivated by a desire to engage a broader audience beyond the academic sphere. One notable example is his remark that having a woman undress in the very first scene is a reliable – indeed, 'overused' ('inflazionato') – method for capturing the audience's attention in television series and films (53).

provocative ideas. This cultural context allows us to appreciate the prominence Herodotus seems to give to female initiative, even if he does so in terms that appear more aligned with familiar themes of Greek misogyny (see 1.4.2 and Zaccarini's commentary on 30 and 44).

Zaccarini next devotes attention to the theme of power (Ch. 3, 'Power, Honour and Justice', 47–77), foregrounding the role of women in political affairs. Given that their scope for action cannot match the range of options available to free men, the dominant narrative motif often becomes one of deception and intrigue. After the most famous example – that of Gyges, Candaules and the latter's wife (1.8–12) – he turns to the central female figures in the life of Cyrus the Great. First come Mandane and Spako, who respectively enabled the birth and survival of the sovereign, despite the will of the Median king Astyages (Mandane's father); then comes Queen Tomyris, whom Cyrus tries in vain to subdue, ultimately meeting his death. The narrative remains within the Persian sphere but shifts to the next generation, focusing on Atossa, daughter of Cyrus and wife of Darius. Her first appearance involves the court physician, a Greek from Croton named Democedes, who cleverly manages to return to his homeland thanks to Atossa's skilful manipulation of her husband. The focus then shifts to the two cities that emerge most prominently during the Persian Wars: Sparta and Athens. In the case of Sparta, Zaccarini highlights female figures who, in various ways, reflect the tensions between the city's two royal houses. These tensions begin with Argia, wife of the last monarch Aristodemus and mother of the twin sons who inaugurated the diarchy (6.52), and continue into more recent times with the conflict between Cleomenes and Demaratus, centred on the true identity of the latter's father (6.64–72). For Athens, Zaccarini selects the episodes involving Phye and Pisistratus (1.60.3–5), and the story of Timo, a priestess from Paros who advises Miltiades to conquer the island – an endeavour that ultimately ends in failure (6.134–5).

The following chapter (Ch. 4, 'Gender Equality, Inversion and Assimilation', 79–98) foregrounds the relationship between the two genders. Zaccarini begins by observing that in many ancient cultures, gender was a fundamental aspect of life, rather rigidly socially determined. In the Greek world, women were consistently marginalized in three key domains: politics, education and warfare. Often, the exploration of gender-role stereotypes occurs through comparison with 'other' peoples – that is, barbarians – or through episodes in which the temporary breach of those stereotypes paradoxically reinforces the perceived 'naturalness' of the distinction. Within this framework, Zaccarini discusses the Amazons, who receive considerable attention in the *Histories*, and the Scythians' unsuccessful attempt to render them 'docile' (4.113.3; cf. p. 85). Also significsant is the episode of revenge against the Persians orchestrated by the Macedonians under Alexander the Philhellene, who disguised themselves in women's clothing to deceive and kill their enemies.

Yet there is no doubt that the most singular and certainly one of the most celebrated female figures in Herodotus' work is Artemisia of Halicarnassus – a valiant queen (or rather 'tyrant') who chose to fight against the Greeks not as a Persian subject, but of her own volition (cf. 7.96.2, 7.99.1; pp. 91–8). Artemisia's autonomy is also expressed through her strategic and diplomatic acumen, including her boldness in contradicting the Great King himself, particularly on

the critical issue of how to confront the Greeks. She is the only one to advise Xerxes against a naval battle, arguing that the Greeks are as superior to the Persians at sea as men are to women (8.68α.1) – a seemingly paradoxical judgement that, in some ways, anticipates Xerxes' own reflections in the aftermath of Salamis (8.88.3). As Zaccarini emphasizes, Herodotus' portrayal of Artemisia is not defined by a reversal of gender traits, but rather by their ambivalence (97). The tyrant retains her feminine attributes (wife, widow, mother) while acquiring traditionally masculine ones (tyrant, general, advisor). It may not be coincidental that such a singular representation is devoted to a figure from Herodotus' own city. As Zaccarini rightly notes (98), however, interpreting this solely as an expression of patriotic pride on the historian's part would be overly reductive.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the theme of family ('Family, Sexuality and Social Classes', pp. 99–124). In ancient Greece, the strict separation of gender roles confined women to the domestic sphere and to a very limited – and socially regulated – presence outside of it. In many respects, men were considered the masters and guardians of the household, and thus of the women within it. Nevertheless, women could also exercise a degree of agency in this domain. Defending the family and its members could prove costly, as shown by various male and female figures in Herodotus. One particularly striking case is that of Intaphernes' wife. After her husband fell out of favour, Darius offered her the chance to save one relative. She chose her brother, explaining that she could find another husband and have more children, but could never have another brother (3.119.4–7). In this chapter – perhaps more than in the others – one observes a coexistence of male and female figures within the familial universe, moving beyond a purely female-centred focus. This is evident, for instance, in the survey of polygamous or promiscuous practices that Herodotus attributes to certain populations.

The discussion of various forms of concubinage is more extensive, with examples that link Egypt and Persia. In this context, Herodotus demonstrates familiarity with three different versions used to explain the Persian conquest of Egypt by Cambyses. Despite their differences, these versions share a common thread: the Great King's demand to take the Pharaoh's daughter as a concubine. The Pharaoh attempts to circumvent the request through deception, but ultimately fails (3.1.1–4). The Achaemenid court, moreover, frequently serves as the backdrop for palace intrigues in which women are objects of male desire. This is vividly illustrated by Xerxes' infatuation with one of his sisters-in-law – the wife of his brother Masistes (9.108). Her resistance prompts the king to devise a plan: he arranges a marriage between his son and Artaynte, the daughter of Masistes and his wife, hoping this would grant him easier access to the mother. Instead, he falls in love with the daughter. This passion leads to disaster, as Herodotus notes in one of his evocative remarks: 'it was fated that the whole household would come to ruin' (9.109.2). Artaynte asks Xerxes for the cloak made for him by his wife Amestris. Amestris, in turn, takes revenge on Artaynte's mother, and the satrap's entire family is massacred at Xerxes' command. This episode, with its almost novelistic contours, would be merely dramatic were it not for its tragic conclusion, which encapsulates key themes in Herodotus' broader narrative: power, ethical-political horizons and individual choice. It also resonates, in a way, with the story of Candaules told at the beginning of Book 1. In this sense, the *Histories* are

effectively 'framed by female figures and their impact on the most powerful men in the world' (118).

From the theme of family, the chapter transitions – via an expansion of the theme of sexuality – to that of prostitution, which in Herodotus serves to illustrate remarkable cases of personal entrepreneurship. The most famous of these is undoubtedly Rhodopis (2.134–5), a Thracian slave whose story in Greek tradition intersects with those of Aesop and, above all, Sappho. The chapter concludes with a brief paragraph that, in a more subdued tone, links bread-making with dynastic power (123–4).

The final thematic essay is devoted to violence (Ch. 6, 'Violence against Women, Violence of Women', 125–39). As elsewhere in the volume, Zaccarini examines a phenomenon by exploring the complexity of its manifestation in the female world, recognizing that women can be both objects and agents of violence. The first story is essentially symbolic (126) and concerns a group of Paeonian brothers who attempt to manipulate Darius by exploiting their sister's beauty – an effort that ultimately backfires (5.12–15). The discussion then turns to the wives of pharaohs who suffer the consequences of their frustration (as in the case of Sesostris' successor, Pheron), and to Cambyses' marriage to his two full sisters. In the Greek world, perhaps the most emblematic case is that of Periander of Corinth, who killed his wife Melissa and forced all the women of the city to strip naked after gathering them in the sanctuary of Hera. Even this episode may carry symbolic weight, as Zaccarini notes (132), suggesting that it may have been linked to sumptuary legislation. On the side of violence perpetrated by women, the story of Pheretime of Cyrene stands out. She avenges the murder of her son Arcesilaus with the support of the Egyptian satrap Aryandes, in an act of extreme political violence – one that, as Herodotus emphasizes (4.205), is met with an equally extreme punishment.

The final two stories concern episodes of collective violence. The first recounts the reaction of Athenian women to the madness that overtakes the men who travel to Aegina to retrieve statues stolen by the Aeginetans (5.82–7). The second focuses on the island of Lemnos, its complex 'Pelasgian' past and its conflict with Athens: the recurring violence on Lemnos is closely tied to the (legitimization of the) Athenian conquest of the island (6.140; cf. pp. 138–9).

The volume concludes with a succinct final chapter ('Conclusions: The Other Half of the Story', 141–6), in which Zaccarini emphasizes that, while it would be entirely misleading to portray Herodotus as a champion of social sensibilities that only emerged in the late modern era, one cannot deny that women constitute a significant presence in the *Histories*, embodying fundamental dimensions of human experience – both Greek and non-Greek. Above all, the feminine world reveals a will and a capacity for action fully comparable to that of the opposite sex. More broadly, according to Zaccarini, Herodotus seems to embody a contradiction that is not unique to him, but rather reflective of the broader cultural landscape of his time. While certain prejudices eventually gave rise, in Greece, to the notion of a 'race' or 'lineage' of women, a strong sense of the unity of humankind nonetheless persists. The *Histories* themselves resist simplistic ethical or social generalizations regarding gender, and instead stand as an archive of individual portraits that cannot – and should not – be interpreted through 'masculine' categories: 'The

feminine element in the *Histories* is ... complex, diverse, essential and consistently presented as such. In a word, it is *realistic*' (146, emphasis original). Accordingly, Zaccarini argues that Herodotus' work demonstrates the necessity of studying the feminine 'not as a separate sphere, but as an integral part of History'.

In foregrounding female presences, the volume inevitably runs the risk of encountering certain limitations. One such limitation lies in the fact that Herodotus does not always elaborate these narratives in detail, which at times results in a somewhat constrained approach that may resemble a cataloguing of female figures. Another issue arises from the decision to place the stories themselves at the centre, which can lead to Herodotus as an author receding into the background. The manner in which certain narratives are presented – assigning specific roles to individual figures – can at times evoke the 'combinatorial' and formalistic approach that characterizes some narratological studies. This resemblance is occasionally reinforced by the use of terms such as 'schema' or 'function' in relation to seemingly typified narrative roles (cf. 74, 102 for the former; 103 for the latter).

Having said that, it must be emphasized that Zaccarini consistently provides the reader with analytical tools and interpretative frameworks that allow for a nuanced understanding of Herodotus as a historian, beyond the constraints of narrative structure. This does not detract from the fundamental robustness of the author's project, which stands as a genuine contribution to ancient history – understood in its fullest sense – through a focused exploration of the feminine world. This investigation is conducted with scholarly rigour and a deep familiarity with the intricacies of Herodotus' text, all while maintaining engagement with the central concerns of historiographical inquiry.

In this respect, Zaccarini's volume is not a history of women in Herodotus, but rather a historical inquiry into the feminine world as depicted by the historian of Halicarnassus, and the ways in which this world – despite its complexities – is woven into the fabric of grand historical narrative.

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