Classical Quarterly 57.2 432–444 (2007) Printed in Great Britain
doi:10.1017/S0009838807000481

ACTING OTHER: ATOSSA AND INSTABILITY IN HERODOTUS

In the *Histories*, Herodotus offers numerous examples of difference. He discusses an Egypt in which 'almost all is opposite to other people [with respect to customs and practices]' (τὰ πολλὰ πάντα ἔμπαλιν τοῖσι ἄλλοισι ἀνθρώποισι, 2.35.2).[1] He frequently contrasts the behaviour of the Persians—who flee in disarray, for example, when their general dies (9.65.1)—with that of the Greeks, who cherish their independence. The suggestion of a difference between men and women also appears, as when Herodotus shows men insulting other men by comparing them to women (9.20, 107). Often, however, Herodotus also presents cases where established differences break down: Egyptians use the same song as the Greeks in certain ceremonies (2.79), Persian kings suggest that people should value freedom (9.122), and men and women act more alike than different (the Sauromatae, for example (4.110–17)).

Various accounts of this focus on and upsetting of difference appear among readers of Herodotus. Michael A. Flower and John Marincola mention the dichotomy of Persian and Greek as a key theme in Herodotus' work, which seems at times to serve as an explanatory notion—the Greeks' difference from the Persians partially explains their success; on the other hand, they note, by the end of book 9 the Persians and the Greeks look more alike than different.[2] Paul Cartledge and Emily Greenwood suggest that such 'polarization' helps Herodotus appear credible in his history and in his advice to his contemporaries.[3] Rosaria Vignolo Munson argues that Herodotus discusses cultural differences so that cross-cultural similarities will appear more obvious and more wonderful.[4] A further attempt to explain Herodotus' attentive and disruptive use of difference might supplement notions like Munson's. Perhaps the instability of difference in Herodotus' work is central to his display (his ἀπόδεξις) not for the sake of a message it helps him deliver, but for the sake of the instability itself. In Carolyn Dewald's approach to Herodotus, the 'polyvocalism of the world itself'[5] is a recurrent theme: Dewald sees much of Herodotus' project as an attempt to understand 'the human world, in all its dimensions',[6] and doing so necessarily involves the inclusion of complex, contradictory and unstable views of that world. The shifting boundaries of ethnic and sexual difference offer a further example of Herodotus' attempt to display the world and all of its voices.

In an attempt to examine this notion of unstable difference as part of the presentation of an unstable world, this article focuses on the stories involving Atossa, Darius' wife. Dewald makes a strong case for a broad focus, arguing that 'it is the accumulation of evidence, and not one or two or ten striking examples, that will reveal

[1] I shall make use of Robin Waterfield's translation of the *Histories*, noting any changes.
[2] Flower and Marincola (2002), 37–9.
[3] Cartledge and Greenwood (2002), 363–71.
[4] Munson (2001) writes, for example, that when 'instead of difference or equivaliency, actual similarity occurs [between two ostensibly different cultures], it constitutes a "wonder," that is, a profoundly satisfying discovery that invites reflection' (98).
[5] Dewald (2002), 276.
[6] Dewald (2002), 288.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[things such as] Herodotus' habitual assumptions about women'.[7] A project focused on only one story cannot speak to Herodotus' habitual assumptions; a demonstration and examination of the richness of the instabilities within one or two brief passages, however, should offer a glimpse of the nuance of Herodotus' narrative that a more cumulative approach must disregard.

The portrayal of Atossa in Aeschylus' *Persians* illustrates a similar nuance and uncertainty. Although Aeschylus' queen may not exhibit these features as obviously as Herodotus' Atossa, the similarities in the two presentations of the Persian queen warrant consideration. A brief examination of that play, therefore, should aid the attempt to understand the nuances of Herodotus' portrayal of Atossa.

In the stories of Atossa, then, obvious markers of difference appear, only to come into question, especially in Herodotus' stories. Never in these stories, though, does Herodotus completely subvert the audience's expectations of sexual or cultural difference—the differences between men and women become unstable in the stories, yet those differences do persist. In presenting stories like those of Atossa, Herodotus confronts his reader with a complex and unstable world. By refusing to add artificial stability to his narrative, Herodotus allows his reader the experience of that world in all of its complexity.

I. READING ATOSSA

Atossa—the daughter of Cyrus and subsequently wife of Darius—having been cured by Democedes, the Greek doctor held in Darius' court, appears, at the urging of Democedes, to persuade Darius in his decisions regarding war (Hdt. 3.133–4). Her story presents an interesting variety of views on the relation of men and women in Herodotus. Initially, she appears as decisively different from men in the *Histories*: she seeks Democedes' help because of a growth on her breast, a condition which she had been ashamed even to mention. 'While it was small, she hid it and did not tell anyone about it, out of shame (αἰσχυνομένη), but later, when she was in pain, she sent for Democedes and showed it to him' (3.133.1). Apparently, she felt such shame about revealing her body and her condition that she did not speak of the growth for a good while—indeed, the growth 'subsequently burst and then spread further' before she sent for Democedes (3.133.1). Once she has sought Democedes' help, Atossa suggests that Darius invade Greece, 'having been instructed by Democedes' (διδαχθεῖσα ὑπὸ τοῦ Δημοκήδεος, 3.134.1). Again, this instruction is prefaced by a guarantee that Democedes will not ask her to do 'anything which would cause her shame' (οὐδενὸς τῶν ὅσα ἐς αἰσχύνην ἐστὶ φέροντα, 3.133.2). Shame (αἰσχύνη), and primarily shame with respect to her body, thus motivates Atossa throughout this episode. Being motivated by shame associated with one's body (at least when the αἰσχυν- root is used) occurs only one other time in Herodotus, when Candaules' wife feels ashamed at Gyges' having seen her naked (1.10).[8] Atossa's vulnerability, like that of Candaules' wife, seems to result from her being a woman.

Candaules' wife, however, once motivated by shame, no longer appears as some powerless woman: instead, she compels Gyges either to kill Candaules or to die

[7] Dewald (1981), 92.

[8] Or perhaps I should say: as far as I can tell, this is the only other occurence of bodily shame as a motivating factor. In the Gyges story Herodotus assures the reader that this shame of being seen naked would also affect a 'barbarian' man; the fact remains (as far as I can tell), though, that no man suffers such an indignity in the *Histories*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

himself—indeed, Gyges begs her 'not to force him to make such a choice' (*μή μιν ἀναγκαίῃ ἐνδέειν διακρῖναι τοιαύτην αἵρεσιν*, 1.11.3). The power the unnamed wife wields seems not at all hampered by her gender—she appears, in fact, the strongest of the characters involved, despite Candaules' belief in her weakness (he assures Gyges, for example, that Gyges 'needn't be afraid of [her]',1.9.1).[9] After she has been cured, likewise, Atossa convinces Darius to invade Greece. Darius acts on her suggestion the next day, which seems to substantiate the claim, made by Josine Blok, that women 'play a salient role in the historical world as Herodotus portrays it'.[10] Atossa appears as an agent here, as having the ability to affect changes and direct her husband's actions. Perhaps, then, as Dewald writes, Herodotus' 'portrait of women emphasizes their full partnership with men in establishing and maintaining social order':[11] the reason Atossa offers Darius for invading is that it will foster confidence in his rule among the citizens (3.134). Her role, then, may seem to suggest a partnership of equals rather a relationship based on difference.

Atossa, however, resists such a reading—the language she uses to encourage her husband to use war to secure the trust of the Persian citizens points again to sexual difference. One reason he should attack is 'so that the Persians might understand that their ruler is a real man' (*ἵνα σφέων Πέρσαι ἐπιστέωνται ἄνδρα εἶναι τὸν προεστεῶτα*, 3.134.2). Thus, as soon as Atossa appears to assert her agency, she reminds the reader of the primacy of men—implicitly, therefore, reminding that reader of Atossa's lesser role. Furthermore, when Atossa introduces the idea of making war, Darius avers that he already intended to do so (3.134.4). Perhaps the original focus of Atossa's status as a woman—as different and as occupying a lesser role—more accurately captures the story's implications.

When Darius says that he was already planning a war, but that his intended enemy was the Scythians, Atossa counters that she would like to have Greek handmaids (3.134.5). After Atossa's suggestion that he attack the Greeks instead, he replies that he will seek information on them, 'since it seems good to you for us first to make a try against Greece' (*ἐπεὶ τοίνυν τοι δοκέει τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἡμέας πρῶτα ἀποπειρᾶσθαι*, 3.134.6). Her words, then, do direct the course of history. Atossa does appear powerful in this scene. Interestingly, though, her profession of a home-centered, gendered desire for Greek handmaids gives her the power she demonstrates: by taking on the different, inferior status of a woman, Atossa simultaneously wields the sort of political power expected of a man.[12] Almost all of the other decisions pertaining to war in the *Histories*, after all, are made by men.

[9] Both Dewald and Blok, among others, point to Candaules' wife as an example of women portrayed as 'serious social actors' (Dewald [1981], 106) or of 'women's agency' (Blok [2002], 231). See also Wolff (1964) and Tourraix (1976).

[10] Blok (2002), 225.

[11] Dewald (1981), 92.

[12] Artemisia is one of the few woman in the *Histories* who appears as powerful as Atossa, though she wields power in quite different ways, as the anonymous reviewer from the *Classical Quarterly* has reminded me. Like Atossa, Artemisia wields powers usually restricted to men. In fact, she not only advises the king (in her case Xerxes) like Atossa, but also fights and leads troops in battle against the Greeks. Artemisia, though, wields her power not by taking advantage of her role as a woman, like Atossa, but rather by taking on male roles. Herodotus finds it 'particularly remarkable that a woman should have taken part in the expedition against Greece'; indeed, she did this not under compulsion, but becuase of her 'manly courage' (*ἀνδρηίης*, 7.99.1). Atossa exercises power through her role as wife and mother; Artemisia, on the other hand, exercises power just as a man would, as an adviser and general. Herodotus' portrayal of Artemisia nevertheless involves ambiguities like those found in his portrayal of Atossa. For example, when

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Yet it was at Democedes' direction that Atossa said all that she said: she only serves as a means to his end. She put forth the proposal to Darius 'having been instructed by Democedes' (διδαχθεῖσα ὑπὸ τοῦ Δημοκήδεος, 3.134.1). By encouraging Darius to investigate Greece, using Democedes as a guide, Atossa makes Democedes' escape possible. Furthermore, as noted above, it is her status as a woman in ancient Persia (or, perhaps, as a woman in a story told by someone in ancient Greece?) that makes her especially susceptible to manipulation by Democedes. Her initial shame seems to cause her to wait until her condition was quite serious, thus appearing to render her willing to agree to Democedes' bargain, in which he would cure her if she would do whatever he asked. This story of Atossa seems to illustrate Herodotus' view of the centrality of women in decisions that shape history; she appears to illustrate simultaneously the fact that Herodotus treats women—even in their important historical roles—more as instruments than as agents.

Atossa does show up later in the *Histories*, adding one more bit of instability to the picture. In book 7 Herodotus offers an account of Darius' decision that Xerxes, the son of Darius and Atossa, should succeed him after his death (7.2–3). One version Herodotus recounts suggests that the counsel of Demaratus the Spartan inclined Darius to favour Xerxes. Herodotus, though, adds an afterthought to the account: 'It seems to me, though, that he would have made Xerxes king even without this advice; for Atossa was all-powerful' (δοκέειν δέ μοι, καὶ ἄνευ ταύτης τῆς ὑποθήκης βασιλεῦσαι ἂν Ξέρξης· ἡ γὰρ Ἄτοσσα εἶχε τὸ πᾶν κράτος, 7.3.4). Was Atossa all-powerful? If so, one would expect quite a story, since no other woman in the *Histories* receives such an appellation.[13] The reader certainly sees no further demonstration of Atossa's omnipotence. Perhaps, though, in Herodotus' mind she really did hold a great deal of power: her success at persuading Darius to invade Greece rather than Scythia, though it was not her own idea, does show her ability to sway Darius. Of course, that a woman could be all-powerful in Persia may only be another illustration by Herodotus of a surprising, backward custom among non-Greeks. In any case, the fact that Herodotus' only mention of her power concerns her securing the Persian throne for her son again suggests difference. Power in men is exercised in many ways; an all-powerful woman's power, conversely, depends upon her relationship with her husband and son.

II. APPROACHING ATOSSA

A variety of ways exist for approaching Atossa, for attempting to tease some sense out of Herodotus' treatment of her. Does she embody the typical woman, concerned for her body, her handmaids and her son's success? In that capacity, is she a foil for male characters, or for maleness as an abstract? Or does her status as Persian suggest that Persian men, unlike Greeks, are swayed by women? Cartledge and Greenwood

Artemisia advises Xerxes, through Mardonius, not to commit his fleet to battle at sea, she says that 'at sea your men will be as far inferior to the Greeks as women are to men' (8.68). Even this 'manly,' powerful woman calls attention to women's supposed inferiority. Although her case is quite different from that of Atossa, then, similar tensions between expected and subverted gender roles appear. I refer those interested in Artemisia to the discussions in Munson (1988) and Weil (1976).

[13] The half-woman, half-serpent that Heracles has sex with, engendering the Scythian race according to one myth (4.9–10), is the only other female I can track down who has any κράτος in the *Histories*—and her power is limited to her own country (she says χώρης . . . τῆσδε ἔχω . . . κράτος, 4.9.4).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suggest that by showing the bad behaviour of non-Greeks with respect to women, Herodotus shows 'the sorts of abominations the Greeks must at all costs avoid'.[14] Perhaps Atossa's behaviour—though obviously not an abomination like Candaules' violation of his wife's modesty, which Cartledge and Greenwood discuss—offers a further indication of something to be avoided by Greeks. Perhaps what power Atossa has over her husband indicates an unsavoury barbarian practice more than a nuanced view of gender roles.

Atossa and tragedy

The puzzling figure of Atossa might be fruitfully approached by way of Greek tragedy: tragedies often appear to present, and at times challenge, contemporary Athenian views on both gender and ethnicity. Examining briefly tragic representations of women, non-Greeks, and non-Greek women, therefore, might help one get close to Atossa. Aeschylus' Atossa provides an illuminating example: the prevalence of disagreement among readers as to just how Aeschylus represents his Atossa provides further insight into her portrayal by both Aeschylus and Herodotus. Many readers find in the *Persians* a demonstration of the supposed inferiority both of women and of a culture, like that of Persia, that could empower women. Comparing Aeschylus' Atossa to Aethra in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, however, enables one both to see how similar Atossa appears to a laudable Greek woman and, thereby, to understand why other readers of the *Persians* speak of Aeschylus' Atossa as a figure drawn in a positive light. An examination of these views and these characters should enable a more thorough reading of Herodotus' Atossa. The disparate treatments of characters like Atossa by both playwrights and commentators nicely presages Herodotus' ambivalent portrayal of Atossa.

(1) Tragic non-Greek woman: Aeschylus' Atossa

One avenue of approach to Atossa, then, moves through Aeschylus' *Persians*, which also features the queen.[15] Winnington-Ingram writes that 'Herodotus is the best commentator on the first half of the *Persae*, giving us the range of ideas within which the Aeschylean characters are moving.'[16] The relation between Herodotus and Aeschylus—at least with respect to Atossa—seems in fact symmetrical. Herodotus may provide commentary on the *Persians*, but it is also true that the *Persians* ought to illuminate Herodotus' treatment of Atossa, especially as it is one of few ancient texts which discuss the queen.[17] In that play, Atossa appears—in the eyes of some readers—as a clear symbol of 'barbarian' excess and depravity. Women with power often appear in tragedy, and often such women's actions presage calamity.[18] When these empowered women are not Greek, their actions suggest both that powerful

[14] Cartledge and Greenwood (2002), 369.

[15] Many commentators note that the text of the play refers only to the 'queen,' suggesting that the appellation 'Atossa' was added later (see, e.g. Hall [1996], 121)—this queen, nevertheless, invites comparison with Herodotus' Atossa.

[16] Winnington-Ingram (1983), 7.

[17] For discussion of the paucity of sources on Atossa, see Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1983), esp. 23–7.

[18] Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* may be the clearest example; for discussion of this theme in Greek tragedy, see Hall (1997); Zelenak (1998), esp.59ff.; and Foley (2001); Hall (1989) also offers an insightful discussion of the association of 'disruptive' women with 'barbarian mores' (202–3).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

women are a threat and that the flaws of non-Greek cultures are exhibited through the power accorded women in such cultures. Aeschylus' Atossa, then, appears to illustrate the danger of allowing women to wield power—and the tragedy that befalls the Persian empire might in part be explained by this unwise permissiveness.

The powerful position of the queen in Aeschylus' play, combined with her apparent character traits, renders Aeschylus' presentation of Atossa—in the eyes of many readers—an attack on Persian culture. That a woman could have political power seems both to feminize Persian culture and to illustrate the poor judgement of a culture that would empower a woman. Further, the fact that this woman appears not only ignorant but also overly concerned with private affairs (as opposed to public ones), invites readers to see this character as a criticism of both women and non-Greeks. At her entrance, the elders of the chorus prostrate themselves (*Pers.* 152), and she soon reminds them of their place in the Persian state: Atossa informs the elders that Xerxes 'is not accountable to the community (οὐχ ὑπεύθυνος πόλει). Provided that he has survived, he is still sovereign of this land' (213–14).[19] As Harrison writes, it 'is clear that there are limits to the Elders' power: it is the Queen, Atossa, who is the real representative of the monarchy'.[20] That a woman could be portrayed as wielding such power in Persian society itself might mark disapproval of that society. Many readers point out that it is often the case in tragedy that when a woman assumes a position of power in a community, that community suffers.[21]

Aeschylus' Atossa is not only an empowered woman, however: she also appears ignorant and selfish. These traits might again be a reflection of negative views of women and non-Greeks. Atossa worries primarily about private matters: after reporting her dreams and hearing the elders' positive interpretation, she tells them that they 'have pronounced them favourable to my son and my household (παιδὶ καὶ δόμοις ἐμοῖσι, *Pers.* 226–7). Rather than worry about the Persians, Atossa worries about her family. At her exit later in the play, Atossa returns to this theme: 'the misfortune which hurts me most of all to hear about is that my son is disgraced by his clothes on his body' (846–8). Not only is Atossa pained most by personal rather than political matters; what pains her most (μάλιστα) is the dishonour brought by Xerxes' clothes. This apparently odd setting of priorities seems at once to illustrate both the short-comings of Atossa and those of the Persians, who—in the play's conceit at least—consent to be ruled by a woman concerned more for the welfare of her children's attire than for that of the state.

Among the queen's other questionable values are a strong concern for wealth, a short-sighted focus on numbers, and an assumption that despotism is the system that governs the best cities. As Hall points out, her questioning of the elders about Athens (231–45) 'draws a picture of the Persian political psyche, for her concerns are limited to the size of the Athenians' army, their wealth, whether they are good archers, and the identity of the sole political and military leader she assumes rules over them'.[22] Thus, Atossa represents the Persian government as thinking not of its subjects, but of its numbers, its rulers and its wealth—her first spoken line refers fittingly to the 'palace with its golden ornaments' (χρυσεοστόλμους δόμους, 159).[23]

[19] I shall make use of Edith Hall's translation of the *Persians*, noting any changes.
[20] Harrison (2000), 45.
[21] See n. 17, above.
[22] Hall (1996), 127.
[23] Hall brought this detail to my attention (Hall [1996], 122).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

At least one further facet of Atossa's character comes to light in her questioning of the elders about Athens: she does not know the location of Athens, the city her son has set out to conquer, and so asks in 'what part of the world do they say that Athens is situated?' (231). Along with questionable priorities, Atossa appears to possess a 'puzzling ignorance'.[24] Sidgwick, then, sums up her character: 'an anxious, superstitious, ignorant woman'.[25]

Aeschylus' queen appears, in the eyes of many readers, an ignorant, flawed woman driven by selfish concerns for family and wealth. Furthermore, the fact that Persian culture empowered such a woman appears an indictment of that culture—indeed, it has even been suggested that the powers exercised by women in the Persian empire contributed to the decline of that empire: in the eyes of their Greek contemporaries,[26] the deficiencies of Persian culture appear in part to justify the decline of that culture.[27] Aeschylus' Atossa seems concerned with little other than clothing, money, and her son; Herodotus' queen, similarly, seems driven by her shame, her desire for handmaids, and her son. Perhaps, therefore, these characters draw attention to the flaws of women; perhaps to the inferiority of non-Greek cultures that empower women—both themes, in fact, seem to arise in the presentations of Atossa.

(2) Greek and non-Greek alike: Aethra and Atossa[28]

The notion, however, that all women who wield power threaten their states, along with the notion that only 'barbarians' permit women to wield power, must finally appear an over-simplification. Indeed, at times the strength of female characters helps preserve Greek cities. In Euripides' play *Suppliant Women*, Aethra, mother of Theseus, seems to wield political power in Athens with positive results. In that play, the suppliants—seeking Athens' help in securing their sons' bodies from Thebes—supplicate Aethra first of all (*Supp.* 42). The suppliants ask for her διάνοια (57), her 'kind regard', 'feelings', or perhaps even 'understanding'; and they ask that she persuade Theseus to help them (60), as she has some power (τι πάρεστι σθένος) to ease their suffering (65–8). Further, Theseus himself asks for her input, asserting that 'wise advice often comes even from women' (πολλά γ' ἐστὶ κἀπὸ θηλειῶν σοφά, 294). The advice Aethra gives dictates the action of the rest of the play: on her recommendation, Theseus does aid in securing the bodies from Thebes. This Athens, therefore, is one in which a woman wields both power and understanding in ways that benefit the city: a culture with empowers women, then, cannot thereby stand as inferior, lest Athens itself be inferior. If the Atossas share character traits with

[24] Hall (1996), 127.

[25] Sidgwick (1903), x.

[26] To be clear, this essay does not attempt to evaluate historical facts concerning Atossa or Persia: the characters in Aeschylus and Herodotus are, for this essay's purposes, just that, characters in texts, and are here evaluated as such. As Hall puts it, the queen's character in the *Persians* 'clearly reveals no truth whatsoever except that the Athenians *thought that* Persian queens' had certain character traits (Hall [1996], 7—italics original).

[27] Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1983) offers an excellent discussion of such views on the influence of women on Persian history—her own evaluation, however, does not endorse the view expressed above, but rather relegates such views to 'their real place, that is in literature' (32). As noted above, that evaluation accords with the one put forward in this essay, which assumes its subject to be literature, not history.

[28] I thank the anonymous reviewer from the *Classical Quarterly* for suggesting this (I hope) fruitful examination of Euripides' Aethra.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Euripides' Aethra, the character of Atossa need not appear a condemnation of the woman or her culture.

Anyone who reads Aethra's portrayal as positive, however, must answer at least one objection: in the play it may appear an unfortunate yet unavoidable fact that Aethra wields power.[29] Before the suppliants address her, Aethra does say that 'it is proper for women who are wise to do everything through men' (*Supp.* 40–1). That this dictum is immediately challenged by the suppliants, who address not Theseus but Aethra first, may cast doubt on the propriety of Aethra's position of power in the play. Daniel Mendelsohn has also construed Theseus' initial reply to her advice as proof that he judged it to be inappropriate and transgressive. In that reply, Theseus asks the following question:

> *τί γάρ μ' ἐροῦσιν οἵ γε δυσμενεῖς βροτῶν,*
> *ὅθ' ἡ τεκοῦσα χὑπερορρωδοῦσ' ἐμοῦ*
> *πρώτη κελεύεις τόνδ' ὑποστῆναι πόνον;*
>
> What will ill-disposed men say of me then,
> when you, the woman who bore me, and who is now so terrified for me,
> are the first person to enjoin this task upon me? (Supp. 343–5)[30]

According to Mendelsohn, this question parallels Aethra's assertion earlier that if Theseus does not help the suppliants 'someone will say of you that it was through unmanliness (*ἀνανδρία*) of your hands that you took fright and so refused' (314). This parallelism, according to Mendelsohn, 'implies that Aithra's intervention, though ultimately beneficial to Theseus and his city, is potentially as shameful to Theseus as is *anandria*'.[31]

On Mendelsohn's reading, then, Theseus fears the harsh judgement of others because he is being instructed by a woman. A much more reasonable reading of the lines, however, would focus on the contrast Theseus seems to draw between his mother and those 'ill-disposed men': as Foley paraphrases the sentiment, if 'his mother, who fears for him more than anyone else, bids him act, how can he avoid the slurs of enemies if he fails to do so'?[32] This more credible reading of the lines has Theseus assert that if he risks disapproval from his mother, his most ardent supporter, then he certainly risks much more disapproval from those ill-disposed toward him. These lines of Theseus, therefore, do not offer credible evidence that in the play Aethra's power is seen as a threat.

That Aethra herself advises Theseus, rather than acting through a man—which she holds to be the wise course of action for a woman—certainly cannot be held against her, as she persuades rather than compels Theseus: the action remains through a man, for Theseus must go along with Aethra's suggestion if anything is to happen. Although the text does stop short of endorsing the absolute empowerment of women,

[29] A second objection might focus on Euripides' subversive writing: perhaps his giving voice and power to women might have been regarded, as in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, in a light more harsh than this essay assumes. I cannot in the space of this essay address Euripides' reception or reputation; but it cannot be denied that his plays were successful, and that he and Herodotus are nearly contemporary: thus it does not seem wholly unreasonable to examine Euripides in discussing Herodotus.

[30] I present Mendelsohn's translation (2002), as it is his interpretation I take issue with; the issue, it should be noted, seems independent of questions of translation.

[31] Mendelsohn (2002), 169.

[32] Foley (2001), 278.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there seems to be nothing but approval of the degree of power that Aethra does hold. Goff points out that Aethra 'is, in fact, accorded the respect and relative freedom that may reward older women who have successfully, in patriarchal terms, negotiated marriage and motherhood'.[33] Within such bounds, such political power does not seem to offend the characters in play; indeed, as even Mendelsohn points out, Aethra's exercise of power has the presumably positive effect of broadening Theseus' horizons and persuading him to act for a 'Panhellenic cause'.[34]

Admittedly, Aeschylus' Atossa never appears in as positive a light as does Aethra. Aethra does compel one, however, to believe that the fact that she is a woman with some power cannot by itself imply that her presentation is an indictment of her or her culture. Indeed, many commentators—even aside from the parallel with Aethra—find positive features in Aeschylus' presentation of Atossa. Kitto describes her in laudatory terms:

> She has a definite and interesting character as the Mother, political enough to understand what her son has done, woman enough to sympathize with the bereaved, sensible enough to ask the right questions of the Messenger, prudent enough to think of invoking the aid of Darius' ghost, mother enough to find excuses for her son's folly. She leaves upon us the impression of a wise and gracious woman. . . .'[35]

Calling her 'political', 'sensible' and 'prudent' is praising her in terms an Athenian might praise a character. Indeed, Broadhead writes that in Atossa's reaction to the news of the defeat, 'the poet has made the Queen voice Greek sentiments'.[36] Broadhead goes even further, referring to Atossa's 'practical nature'[37] and recognizing in her exchange with Darius an awareness on Atossa's part of Xerxes' weaknesses.[38] In summary, for Broadhead, Atossa is a character 'sympathetically drawn by the dramatist'.[39] That Atossa's character has been seen in such positive light by readers helps substantiate the claim of her similarity to Euripides' Aethra. That similarity suggests that Aeschylus' text does not offer an unambiguous condemnation of women, Persians, or Persian women through its presentation of Atossa.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Aeschylus' Atossa also appears to some not as a woman wielding power among the Persians, but rather as a woman playing a traditional role, a woman, then, presumably not markedly different from (idealized, at least) Greek women. Foley writes that Atossa in the *Persians*, '[d]espite her august status . . . plays a largely traditional female role in following male instructions and performing religious duties'.[40] Thus, Aeschylus' Atossa does not seem drawn in stark enough lines to close off completely a variety of disparate readings. She might seem to embody traditional Greek notions of femininity, regardless of ethnicity; on the other

[33] Goff (1995), 71.

[34] Mendelsohn (2002), 170. See also Saïd, who writes that in the play 'even the women, who are usually driven exclusively by family loyalties, echo the voice of the polis and endorse Athens' policy of activism' (290).

[35] Kitto (1939), 44.

[36] Broadhead (1960), xxvii.

[37] Broadhead (1960), xxvii.

[38] Broadhead (1960), xxviii.

[39] Broadhead (1960), xxviii. See also Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1983), who describes Aeschylus' Atossa as 'the wise old lady, comporting herself in a queenly dignified way' (24).

[40] Foley (2001), 143–4. This role in religious duties suggests a further parallel with Aethra: Goff argues that part of Aethra's authority stems from her role in the Proerosia festival; for both women, then, their exercise of religious duties accompanies and perhaps justifies their empowerment (Goff [1995], 71–4).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hand, she may manifest a Persian tendency to empower women, and a tendency among women to misuse power. The reading that finds in the *Persians* a condemnation of women and non-Greeks, however, is seriously challenged not only by the positive traits exhibited by Atossa in the play, but also by Euripides' portrayal of Aethra, who wields power for the good of Athens. In Aeschylus' representation of Atossa, therefore, one finds, perhaps, that expectations of women and of non-Greeks are challenged; although conventional views of non–Greek women are not overturned in the play, they are, if nothing else, made unstable. Perhaps Herodotus' Atossa likewise presents not a rejection of standard views of women and Persians, but rather a challenge to those views; perhaps Herodotus' Atossa too exhibits the instability of gender and culture.

Approaching Herodotus' Atossa

Atossa's power and agency in Herodotus, then, may be seen as Herodotus' presentation of a challenge to established notions of gender and difference. According to Munson, Herodotus' strategy in his description of other cultures is 'to thematize similarity and overcome the prejudices of his listeners'.[41] Although she treats the Atossa story as part of the historical narrative rather than any ethnography,[42] Munson suggests a reading of the stories of Atossa as an occasion for Herodotus to break down stereotypes and display similarity to an audience expecting difference.

In her book *Telling Wonders*, Munson sees a great deal of Herodotus' project as concerned with the display of cultural and sexual similarities. In discussing the story of the Amazons and the Scythians (4.110–17), she claims that the two groups 'achieve a society without the inequalities of conventional marriage, since both groups play the male role in identical fashion, while the necessary (though on principle undesirable) female functions are distributed between them across gender lines'.[43] The story of the Sauromatae (the tribe formed of the Amazons and some Scythians), therefore, illustrates the fluidity of those gender lines. The women still submit to the men in sexual situations,[44] but most other expectations of difference are confounded in this story. In the story, Munson writes, 'female is not the antithesis of male, barbarian is not the antithesis of Greek, and the alternative of conquering or being conquered appears invalid. Herodotus' pursuit of the similar within his representation of difference confounds mythical constructs of alterity.'[45] The conflict between the Scythians and the Amazons is peacefully resolved; the Scythians—and even the Amazons—behave in the reasonable way a Greek might behave, and value independence as a Greek might; finally, the men and women, though remaining different, perform the same tasks and appear equal partners.

The Atossa stories present an opportunity for a reading similar to Munson's reading of the story of the Amazons: perhaps Herodotus uses Atossa as another occasion for confounding another 'construct of alterity'. That a woman could be all-powerful and sway political decisions challenges notions of women as subservient.

[41] Munson (2001), 101.

[42] She also takes Atossa's expression of a desire for Greek maids at face value, seeing it as evidence of Herodotus' view on the acquisitiveness of the Persians (Munson [2001], 153). Nevertheless, I feel that the general sort of approach Munson makes use of might offer some insight into the Atossa story.

[43] Munson (2001), 127.

[44] See Munson (2001), 127.

[45] Munson (2001), 132.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Further, that a Persian women could play such a key role in the affairs of her family, and thereby in her state—in terms both of Darius' rule of the Persians and of Xerxes' succession—renders the Persians similar to the Greeks, who view the *oikos* as the 'point of departure for understanding the *polis* as a community and a state'.[46] Part of the common ground between a laudable Greek woman, like Euripides' Aethra, and Atossa lies in the ability of each to work for the good of the state through her domestic influence. When Herodotus' Atossa, in bed, persuades her husband Darius to begin a war, she argues in part that a war will demonstrate that the Persians' ruler is 'a real man' (ἄνδρα). Aethra's advice to Theseus is remarkably similar: she encourages him to assist in retrieving the bodies of the Seven in part because if he refuses, some will say he did so out of 'cowardice' or 'unmanliness' (ἀνανδρία, *Supp.* 314–16). Both women influence their male family members, both in the interest of the state and in the interest of those family members' manliness. That a Persian woman could both influence the actions of the state through her domestic role and do so through arguments referring to manliness suggests that this Persian woman, Atossa, resembles, to a greater degree than one might expect, a praiseworthy Greek woman like Aethra. Perhaps, therefore, Herodotus advances his project of thematizing similarity in his treatment of Atossa, a Persian woman who acts with a Greek woman's concern for her family and wields the power of a man.

One must recall, however, that Atossa only persuaded Darius to invade Greece 'having been instructed by Democedes' (3.134.1). Although she is able to influence the Persian state, and is later called 'all-powerful' (7.3.4), Atossa is also open to the manipulation of her physician. Although she speaks to Darius of actions that might benefit the state, her basic motivation for persuading him is her own. Atossa appears both powerful and weak, concerned for her state and concerned for her shame; she seems at once similar to Greek women like Aethra and irreducibly different.

III. ATOSSA AND THE WORLD

The variety of avenues for assessing Atossa may provide insight just through their variety. Maybe Herodotus has no goal of presenting others and so instructing Greeks in good behaviour; maybe he has no programme of 'thematizing similarity' that compels him to show powerful women and reasonable Persians[47]—maybe the complexity and uncertainty of Atossa's status can be read as simply part of the display, mentioned in the proem, of the human world and human events (τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων) that Herodotus portrays.

Carolyn Dewald reads Herodotus by focusing on two claims: Herodotus' project is an attempt to exhibit and understand the human world,[48] and human understanding is difficult to come by in a complex world.[49] Viewing the Atossa stories through Dewald's focus on the project of exhibiting the world and the limits of human knowledge of that world offers an interesting reading. Atossa exists as both other—ashamed woman, aberrant non-Greek—and similar—she focuses on her family and state as a Greek woman might, and she has the power that normally resides with men.

[46] Blok (2002), 242.

[47] On the other hand, maybe he did intend to enact such fascinating projects—either way, I am concerned less with Herodotus' goals and more with the effects of his stories. Whether those effects were intended is another issue.

[48] Dewald (2002), 288; Dewald (1987), 167–9.

[49] Dewald (1987), 158–61 and 168; Dewald (2002), 276 and 287; Dewald (1997), 80–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Herodotus does not resolve this tension—he never tells the reader how to read Atossa. Perhaps this refusal to direct the reader toward some point (that her behaviour should be avoided; that women are not so different from men; that they are quite different, etc.) furthers the credibility of his exhibition of the world. Few individuals exist as truly other or truly similar; few cultural stereotypes have no exceptions; few stories have obvious morals. That the story of Atossa has no obvious moral, then, makes it appear a credible story about an individual in the world. By presenting Atossa with such ambiguous status, Herodotus seems simply to present her, Atossa.

Carolyn Dewald has been accused of painting Herodotus as too much of a 'postmodernist trickster';[50] perhaps it stretches credibility to see Herodotus displaying such a nuanced view of the world and of humans' hopes for knowing that world. Worse accusations have been made. Certainly, as Dewald points out, the Solon and Croesus story (1.29–33) shows Herodotus as aware of the uncertainty of human knowledge.[51] Furthermore, this reading of the Atossa stories does not require the attribution of any special mental acuity to Herodotus: rather, this reading merely claims that Herodotus says that he set out to exhibit the world and that he did so.[52]

Seattle, Washington YANCY HUGHES DOMINICK
yancy9@gmail.com

[50] Szegedy-Maszak (1987), 173.

[51] 'Herodotus has early in the Histories taught us to 'look to the end' to understand meaning, and to resist speculating on meaning when the end is not yet clear' (Dewald [1997], 81).

[52] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the *Classical Quarterly*, along with Judith Mossman on the editorial board, for their help in improving this paper; I would also like to thank Pamela Gordon, whose excellect seminar on Herodotus at the University of Kansas first gave me the opportunity to pursue this research.

WORKS CITED

Herodotus

The Histories, translated by Robin Waterfield, with notes and introduction by Carolyn Dewald. (Oxford, 1998).

Flower, Michael A. and John Marincola. *Herodotus Histories Book IX* (Cambridge, 2002).

Hude, Carolus. *Herodoti Historiae*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1927).

Secondary literature

Blok, J. (2002) 'Women in Herodotus' *Histories*', in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, ed. E. J. Bakker, I. J. F. de Jong, and H. van Wees (Leiden–Boston), 225–242.

Broadhead, H. D. (1960) *The Persae of Aeschylus* (Cambridge).

Cartledge, P. and Greenwood, E. (2002) 'Herodotus as a critic: truth, fiction, polarity', in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, ed. E. J. Bakker, I. J. F. de Jong and H. van Wees (Leiden–Boston), 351–71.

Dewald, C. (1981) 'Women and culture in Herodotus' *Histories*', in *Reflections on Women in Antiquity*, ed. H. P. Foley (New York), 91–125.

— (1987) 'Narrative surface and authorial voice in Herodotus' *Histories*', *Arethusa* 20: 147–70.

— (1997) 'Wanton kings, pickled heroes, and gnomic founding fathers: strategies of meaning at the end of Herodotus' *Histories*', in *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*, ed. D. H. Roberts, F. M. Dunn and D. Fowler (Princeton), 62–82.

— (2002) ' "I didn't give my own genealogy": Herodotus and the authorial persona', in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, ed. E. J. Bakker, I. J. F. de Jong and H. van Wees (Leiden–Boston), 267–89.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Foley, H. P. (2001) *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton–Oxford).
Goff, B. (1995) 'Aithra at Eleusis', *Helios* 22: 65–78.
Hall, E. (1989) *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford–New York).
— (1996) *Aeschylus: Persians* (Warminster).
— (1997) 'The sociology of Athenian tragedy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. Easterling (Cambridge), 93–126.
Harrison, T. (2000) *The Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus' Persians and the History of the Fifth Century* (London).
Kitto, H. D. F. (1939) *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*. (London; 2nd edn., 1950).
Kovacs, D. (1998) *Euripides Suppliant Women, Electra, Heracles* (Cambridge, MA–London).
Mendelsohn, D. (2002) *Gender and the City in Euripides' Political Plays* (Oxford).
Munson, R. V. (1988) 'Artemisia in Herodotus', *ClAnt* 7: 91–106.
— (2001) *Telling Wonders: Ethnographic and Political Discourse in the Work of Herodotus*. (Ann Arbor).
Saïd, S. (1998) 'Tragedy and politics', in *Democracy, Empire and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, ed. D. Boedeker and K. A. Raaflaub (Cambridge, MA–London), 275–96.
Sancisi-Weerdenburg, H. (1983) 'Exit Atossa: images of women in Greek historiography on Persia', in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (London–Canberra), 20–33.
Sidgwick, M. A. (1903) *Aeschylus Persae* (Oxford).
Szegedy-Maszak, A. (1987) 'Commentary on Carolyn Dewald', *Arethusa* 20: 171–4.
Tourraix, A. (1976) 'La femme et le pouvoir chez Hérodote: essai d'histoire des mentalités antiques', *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 2: 369–86, 389–90.
Weil, R. (1976) 'Artémise ou le monde à l'envers', *Recueil Plassart* (Paris), 215–24.
Winnington-Ingram, R. P. (1983) *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge).
Wolff, E. (1964) 'Das Weib des Masistes', *Hermes* 92: 51–8.
Zelenak, M. X. (1998) *Gender and Politics in Greek Tragedy* (New York).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838807000481 Published online by Cambridge University Press