

# Herodotus and Gender

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## Redefining Masculinity and Femininity

Chrystal Tacker

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This paper discusses gender in Herodotus' *Histories*. Analysis of his entire work in order to construct an image of Athenian Greek gender concepts and the way in which Herodotus portrayed flexible concepts of masculinity and femininity.

In modern scholarship, Athenians are commonly referenced as the standard for Greek culture and customs. In *Gender in World History*, Peter Sterns claimed that male superiority dictated the hierarchical structure in society and presented women as incompetent and generally inferior and it was with these patriarchal ideals that Herodotus wrote his work.<sup>1</sup> Herodotus' *Histories* captured historical and ethnographical accounts that followed those ideals, but he also recorded many examples that mirrored the rigid structures. Francois Hartog believed that the work was partially a traveler's tale to describe the non-Greeks to the Greeks in a way that identified the "anti-sameness" of the barbarians.<sup>2</sup> Paul Cartledge expanded Hartog's theory to include gender polarities<sup>3</sup> and with Emily Greenwood claimed that the gendered polarities were meant to critique the contemporary Greek audience.<sup>4</sup> Michael Flower's article argued that even though Herodotus acknowledged the inferior stereotypes of non-Greek cultures, he also did more by presenting the non-Greek Persians with their own strong characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

As other scholars have argued, the Greek identity was commonly thought to be connected to Athenian standards for dividing gender roles and promoting masculine superiority, but Herodotus' *Histories* presented many ethnographical accounts that challenged the rigidity of the assumed gender norms. In this paper, I will demonstrate how Herodotus used gender in ways to

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<sup>1</sup> Sterns 2000, 21-22 & 25.

<sup>2</sup> Hartog 1988, 213.

<sup>3</sup> Cartledge 2002, 92. He connected Hartog's barbarian to concepts of women as an "other"

<sup>4</sup> Cartledge and Greenwood 2002, 368-369. They suggested that polarizing gender-related actions of the barbarians was intended to suggest the same actions that the Greek men and women should never do.

<sup>5</sup> Flower 2007, 284. He argued that Herodotus did not comment on Persian failure as a result of their inferior ethnicity, but as a result of their military's tactical errors. His was primarily focused on Herodotus' acknowledgement of Persian accomplishments as well as their militaristic failures.

demonstrate flexible concepts of masculinity and femininity that contradicted the rigid Athenian gender roles. By explaining Herodotus' use of polarized genders and his portrayal of both masculinity and femininity in each sex, we can conclude how he presented flexible gender concepts.

## Gender Polarities

Polarities are often defined and associated by the inversion of one thing with another. In the case of gender, masculinity is contrasted with femininity. Carrie Paechter suggested that masculinity was commonly defined by “what is manly or what men do,” while femininity is defined as the inverse and “what is not manly or what men do not do.”<sup>6</sup> Herodotus follows a similar pattern when depicting masculinity in his *Histories*. Men were often associated with specific terms such as bravery, valor, courage, war, and the *polis*. Women were similarly associated with terms that were the opposite of men and manliness; women and femininity were the inversion of men and masculinity. Sarah Harrell was commenting on Artemisia's position of leadership when she mentioned that “one aspect of this inversion is the role that barbarian women play in their societies: they are in control while the men they rule are effeminate.”<sup>7</sup> There were a few examples that addressed this and specifically noted the inversion of men and women. One example comes from Xerxes' comment in book 8: “My men have become women, and my women, men!” (Hdt. 8.88). This comment specifically notes that men and women are opposites. When the comment is placed in the context of praising a female warrior, Xerxes is implying that men cannot be men if women are men.

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<sup>6</sup> Paechter 2006, 254-256.

<sup>7</sup> Harrell 2003, 83.

The second example, from book 2, made note of multiple polarities; one is associated with the Greek and non-Greek dichotomy, while the other addressed male and female tasks and gendered actions. In terms of the cultural dichotomy, Herodotus describes the women of Egypt as performing the actions associated to Greek men. In terms of gender polarity, Herodotus implies that actions of men and women are the inverse of one another: “women of Egypt go to market and sell goods there while men stay at home and do the weaving,” “men [also] carry loads on their heads and women bear them on their shoulders. [And] women urinate standing up, [while] men [do so] sitting down” (Hdt. 2.35). For the modern reader, Herodotus’ account would not sound strange until he mentioned the way men and women urinate. This was one of his attempts to entertain his audience with oddities and inversions to Greek norms. If the portion referring to their urination practices was an inversion of Greek norms it follows that the rest of the passage related to the oddities of non-Greek cultures. After understanding that Herodotus presented these individuals as opposite the norms of the Greeks, it becomes easier to understand that women in the marketplace and men in the home were viewed as an unusual concept and another inversion.

### **Manly men**

Norma Thompson’s article addressed the gendered division between the Greek male dominated a public sphere (*polis*) and the private sphere (*oikos*) where women were confined.<sup>8</sup> The separation of men and women into different spheres caused men and women to have different roles in society and perform different tasks. Paechter’s article defined masculinity in the

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<sup>8</sup> Thompson 1999, 49. *Polis* related directly to the city or the public sphere and *oikos* related to the home or the private sphere.

ideal terms of “what men and boys do.”<sup>9</sup> Masculinity defined as “what men do” would suggest that masculinity is specifically tied to men and their actions. Many of the men in his *Histories* can be seen as actively participating in the public positions of leadership, including kingship, which allowed them to do what men do: wield power, wage war, and conquer others. Since Herodotus recounted various stories of powerful leaders waging war and conquering, the examples will be limited to just a few of the leaders. Herodotus commented that “Gelon’s power was said to be great and of all the other Greek states, none had power greater than his” (Hdt. 7.145). He followed that claim with an account of how Gelon took his seat of power and further expanded it. Powerful leaders often wage war. Those who wage war continue till they conquer. Darius was one of the Persian kings who conquered many people including the Getai, who were then enslaved (Hdt. 4.93). These powerful rulers of military forces should be viewed as hyper masculine by fitting all of dominating behaviors that men were supposed to do.

Another portion of men in Herodotus were the typical men referenced generically or in ordered groups. Non-Greek and Greek groups were still known for performing the manly tasks. Herodotus often qualified their masculinity in battle with words like bravery, strength and valor. He claimed that “of all the peoples of Asia, none had more bravery and strength in battle than the Lydians” (Hdt. 1.79). Their bravery and strength was associated positively with the tasks that manly men perform. The Spartans or Lacedaemonians were noted to have the courage to fight even when severely outnumbered (Hdt 7.102). Xerxes argued that the courage to fight when outnumbered is rare, but he also bragged that his own “Persian spearmen ... would gladly fight three Hellenes at once” (Hdt. 7.103). The discussion of the rare courage to fight when outnumber

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<sup>9</sup> Paechter 2006, 254.

suggested that it was another example of hyper masculinity. Herodotus also referred to maintaining valor by never conceding in battle and certainly not when fighting against a woman. Cyrus did not concede or retreat before Tomyris and her forces because he had plans for the Persians “to perform great deeds of valor” (Hdt 1.207). This example pulled together both aspects of public leadership and the generic reference to conquering in battle and maintaining masculinity.

### **Manly or strange women**

The *Histories* referred to specific women and groups of women with the same actions and characteristics that were previously associated with “what men do.” Paechter’s article argued the inflexibility of defining gender in polarized terms and it is apparent that Herodotus may have agreed that the duality of the ideal gender leaves no room for variation. Sarah Harrell believed that Herodotus depicted several examples of manly women to challenge the typical association of men as manly and women as womanly.<sup>10</sup> Herodotus did depict women, like Tomyris and Artemisia in masculine roles as warriors, conquerors, and leaders. The Massagetai were “ruled by a woman named Tomyris” (Hdt. 1.205). Tomyris held the same leadership role that men commonly hold. Herodotus made several specific references to her leadership and even her controlling ownership of the army and empire (Hdt. 1.205-1.214). This woman also “gathered her entire army,” attacked, and killed Cyrus in the “most violent of all battles” (Hdt 1.214). As seen above, Cyrus was held in high esteem for his power and kingship. Herodotus described Tomyris’ actions in the same way that he described the actions of men and as a result she was portrayed as yet another strong and great manly fighter, conqueror, and leader in his work.

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<sup>10</sup> Harrell (2003).

Herodotus also described Artemisia and he found “it absolutely amazing that she, a woman should join the expedition” (Hdt. 7.99). He emphasized how rare it was for a woman to perform the roles of men, but he did make an effort not to diminish her accomplishments. He acknowledged that “she held the tyranny, and then... she went to war, roused by her own determination and courage” (Hdt. 7.99). Herodotus highlighted her masculine characteristics when he commented on her determination and courage as “she led the men.” As a result she was also depicted as any other male warrior, conqueror, and leader would have been. These women gave the audience an alternative perspective for defining women as masculine.

Herodotus gave many examples of women who collectively behaved manly. In one example, Herodotus explained the story of the Sauromatai who were previously Amazon women who intermixed with Scythian men (Hdt. 4.110-4.117). These people were guided by the Amazon women and their culture’s customs. They were called the “man-slayers” and their “marriage customs demand that no virgin ever gets married until she has slain a male enemy” (Hdt. 4.117). The Sauromatai were masculine warriors first and feminine wives second. This depiction continued to imply that women were capable of acting as men. Presumably, Herodotus included the accounts of women as “man-slayers” to suggest that women were capable of taking the initiative to behave as men do if and when they decide.

Vivienne Gray argued that Herodotus described these women in masculine roles, not to give them manly power, but to associate them with the otherness of barbarians.<sup>11</sup> Gray supported her argument by suggesting that Herodotus would not refer to instances of Greek women overpowering their men, yet he specifically mentioned Athenian women acting as fighters and killers

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<sup>11</sup> Gray 1995, 208.

on at least two occasions. The first occasion was a story about why the Athenian women now wear linen tunics in the Ionian fashion; he claimed that the women became outraged with the only survivor to return home from battle so “they stabbed him with the pins of their [Dorian] cloaks ... until he too died” (Hdt. 5.87). On the second occasion the Athenian women “stoned to death [Lykidas’] wife and children” in response to Lykidas’ acceptance of Mardonios’ bribe (Hdt. 9.5). When Herodotus portrayed women in the same roles as men, he presented his audience with a flexible definition of masculinity – one where men and women were both capable of doing “what men do.”

### **Womanly women**

Stephanie Larson suggested that Herodotus specifically left out the names of the honorable and “good” women in order to maintain their respectability.<sup>12</sup> This would not apply to Kandaules’ wife; although she was left nameless she forced Gyges to kill her husband for his dishonorable behavior (Hdt. 1.8.1-1.12.2). This nameless wife would have more in the definition of a masculine woman. Proper women must then be identified by “what men did not do.” Josine Blok claimed that men were free to wander the *polis*, while women were remained bound to the domestic sphere or the *oikos*.<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Dewald analyzed women and determined that there were seventy-three examples of family women portrayed as daughters, wives, and mothers.<sup>14</sup> She also suggested that their roles were frequently in the background of the narrative and were commonly

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<sup>12</sup> Larson 2006, 226.

<sup>13</sup> Blok 2002, 242.

<sup>14</sup> Dewald 1980. Her article provides numerous examples of women in their various roles in Herodotus’ work.



performing a protective role for their family members.<sup>15</sup> For example, Polykrates' daughter tried to protect her father from the danger she envisioned. That would not have been seen as unusual, but the daughter behaved strangely when "she uttered ominous words to him" (Hdt. 3.124). Polykrates did not feel that it was the daughter's place to demand he act in a certain way that she wanted, it was apparently customary for her to behave according to his demands. Polykrates threatened to punish her by refusing to allow her to marry and thus to prevent her from becoming a mother. It would appear that it was a woman's duty to marry, have sex, and thus produce children; Polykrates' threat would have made her "an unmarried virgin for a long time" and would have kept her from her womanly duties (Hdt 3.124). His daughter aimed to protect Polykrates at all costs and would suggest a devoted daughter and a good woman.

Herodotus gave more examples of women attempting to save or protect their men. The story of when the Minyan men escaped a Spartan prison was presented several sides for the image of women (Hdt. 4.146). First, when the women came to the prison to visit their husbands, the Spartans "could not image that these women could do anything deceitful" (Hdt. 4.146). This suggested that people believed that women were not capable of doing anything devious or cunning. Women were not smart enough or strategic enough to save their men from prison, but as it turns out these women were. The depiction of women being incapable was representative of contemporary ideas of women, but the rest of the story suggests that women were capable of doing nearly anything to save and protect their family. When the women swapped clothing with their husbands to allow them to escape in the "guise of women," the women successfully

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<sup>15</sup> Dewald 1981, 94.

performed their role a protector and savior for the family. The women saved their men and thus performed their duty as wives.

Herodotus associates a wife's duty with the duty to produce and even raise children for the family and the society in general. There are several mentions of the duty for a wife to produce children for their men and for their society. When Kleomenes was king, he was advised to divorce his current wife because she "had borne him no children" (Hdt. 5.39). Kleomenes' wife was not performing her duty as a wife and thus he should have discarded her and replaced her with a wife who could give him children. The Scythian males were away for battle for 28 years and would not have been available for procreation. The duty of producing more people and thus more warriors fell to the women: their wives had resorted to consorting with slaves" (Hdt. 4.1). This adds to the concept that women were the producer of children and thus the maintainers of society, even when the men were away. There were more examples of women who cannot produce children, including the Lemnians. Herodotus suggests that the Lemnians were being punished for crimes against Athenian women (Hdt. 6.139). The punishment was a combination of famine and infertility of the women. This refers to the inability of women to produce children for society and their inability to protect their society from extinction.

Since women were commonly associated with motherhood, it follows that women in Herodotus' work were also described as sexual property. Herodotus describes the Nasamonians as people who "consider [their wives] to common property for the purposes of intercourse" (Hdt. 4.172). They are depicted as people who do not regard their wives as people, but as property for the sexual needs of men and procreative needs of society. Herodotus continues to describe these people, by suggesting that it was a woman's duty to have intercourse with all the guests at the feast of her husband's first marriage (Hdt. 4.172). It is possible that this ethnographical account

was included to discuss the subservient role of women in a society that needed them to produce children. There are several other brief mentions of women as shared property for the purposes of intercourse such as the Massagetai and the Agathyrsoi (Hdt. 4.104). The roles of women can be identified as to produce and protect the men and society through motherhood and their passive roles in society.

### **Womanly or strange men**

As mentioned before, Paechter claimed masculinity to be “what men do,” but she also acknowledged the definitions impracticality in real life applications.<sup>16</sup> It would seem that men who did not do “what men do” were considered less than masculine. Assuming that masculinity was defined as a man or individual who was active in the public sphere either politically as a king or militaristically as a warrior, then a man or individual who failed to succeed in these actions have been feminine. Herodotus presents many examples of men who fail to achieve their goals. For example, Dorieus was a man who expected to “obtain the kingship by virtue of his manly excellence,” but it was Kleomenes who took the position (Hdt. 5.42). Dorieus would have been seen as a failure and less than a man when his manly excellence was not enough to obtain the kingship. (Hdt. 5.42). As an added pointed against his masculinity, Kleomenes obtained kingship “by priority of birth” (Hdt. 5.39). Dorieus was not manly enough to become king and Kleomenes became king without recognition of his manliness.

In Herodotus’ work, there are several examples of men who do not fight as men do and these men are portrayed as feminine. For example, when King Sesostris marched through and conquered Asia, he made note of the people “who struggled bravely and fiercely for their

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<sup>16</sup> Paechter 2006, 255.

freedom” and he did nothing to degrade them besides having conquered them (Hdt. 2.102). Sesostris also made note of “those whose cities he took easily and without a fight” and he attempted “to publicize their impotence” by inscribing “an image of female genitals” to the pillar of conquest (Hdt. 2.102). These individuals who did not fight as men do, were thus degraded and associated as feminine and women. Similarly, the “Scythians judged the Ionians as ... the most worthless and cowardly of the whole human race” (Hdt. 4.142). The Scythians viewed the Ionians as weak and cowardly slaves or women, since they did not fight bravely and courageously as men should fight. Herodotus briefly mentioned how Croesus pacified the Sardians. He recounted that the Sardians were turned into shopkeepers and how “they will become women instead of men” by prohibiting them from having weapons of war (Hdt. 1.155). Croesus spoke about switching the roles of the warrior men to the roles of the weak women.

Herodotus also made reference to actions that ordinary men could not accomplish. This would have implied that any man capable of accomplishing the tasks would have been viewed as the manliest of men, but this was not the case. He was referring to Telines who won the office of priest of the goddess of the underworld and that such a feat could only be done “by one who possess a brave spirit and manly strength” (Hdt. 7.153). He continued to mention that Telines may have actually been a weak and effeminate man. Telines was still not considered a manly man, even after completing a manly feat. He was still seen as an effeminate man. This example further suggested that Herodotus understood that masculinity was not tied to an individual’s physical gender or even directly related to their actions.

Throughout Herodotus’ text, he explained many different cultures and customs. Each ethnographical account presented different cultural customs for the society discussed, but many of them also presented varying degrees of gender identity. Herodotus made note of the masculine

men and the masculine women. He gave his audience an understanding of masculinity as a flexible identity to be associated with men and women, alike. He also presented his audience with an image of femininity which was related to the home, but could also be related to men and women alike. The Herodotus examined many different examples of gender related activities and his *Histories* produced a flexible image of masculinity and femininity that would have challenged the rigidity of Athenian Greek gender norms.

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