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“Barbarians or Super-villains? The Persians in Frank Miller’s 300, Greek Vase painting, and literature”

The medium of Classical vase painting has elements in common with that of contemporary comics. Comics and vase painting share such qualities as mass production,¹ the combination of drawing and writing, repeated representation of familiar characters, and even a paneling of sorts. However, a central question of this paper is whether vase painting conveys a narrative or ideological statement the same way that comics do. Addressing this issue, I wish to examine a common motif of ancient vase painting and modern comics, one that tells us much about the functions of different art media as well as the state of mind of artists in different cultures, both at war in Persia.

In his *300*, graphic artist Frank Miller’s artistic rendering of the Persians is so extreme that many have accused him of creating a racist and warmongering allegory that reflects the present conflict of the United States in the Middle East.² He presents the Achaemenid Persians as morally deviant and corrupt, and ethnically Africans and Arabs. His Persians range from the power mad, deviant Xerxes, to the arrogant, pierced and studded ministers ready to bribe and corrupt the Spartan oracle, to the spooky, depersonalized “Immortals,” and finally, to the hapless Persian soldiers who are no better than victims and slaves of their king’s monomania, and certainly no match for the Spartans.³ Overall, they are a

¹ They are alike in that they are both “assembly line” products, that a central “artist” would design, and then delegate to a workshop for execution and production. Although the scale of modern comics production is larger, the collaborative workshop process of comics publishing is quite similar to that of vase painting. See p. 7, below.

² See Tony Kashani, “*300* : Proto-Fascism and the Manufacturing of Complicity” at www.dissidentvoice.org (April 5, 2007).

³ *300* was initially published as a monthly five-issue comic book limited series by Dark Horse Comics, the first issue published in May 1998. The issues were titled “Honor, Duty, Glory, Combat and Victory.” Later, these were combined into one graphic novel, but I will refer to the page numbers of each individual issue

bizarre and frightening collection of characters, with a variegated appearance that contrasts with the simplicity of the Spartan costume. In contrast, in Greek vase painting after the Persian Wars, although gods and mythological characters commit their traditional atrocious crimes on many pelikes, kraters, and amphoras, Persians overall are portrayed in a neutral, or even positive light. On vases, one sees Persians engaged in combat with Greek hoplites as worthy adversaries, bearing the trappings of Persian culture, or even presiding over dignified processions.⁴ Yet the Greeks compensate for positive visual treatment of Persians in their moral judgments against them in literature.

Following the Persian Wars, Greek writers did much to disassociate their culture from that of Persia. In particular, the Athenian tragedians after the Persian Wars systematically put down the Persians, amassing a host of contrasts that have come to be collectively termed the “Hellene-Barbarian antithesis.” For example, in Aeschylus’ *Persians* (72-5, 388-423), the Persians are like a herd, and lack tenacity, in contrast to the discipline and courage of Greeks. In depicting them in this way, Aeschylus explains the Greek victory in absolutist cultural terms.⁵ Another example of this view is the fragmentary *Persians* of Timotheos of Miletos, where Persians suffer a cowardly defeat at the battle of Salamis, showing servility to their own king as well as to their conquerors, and drowning in the

throughout this paper. The first image of a Persian in *300* is the emissary of Xerxes who comes to Sparta. A full close up of his face delineates his clearly Negro features (*300* “Honor” p. 12). Persian arrogance is manifest in his demands to the Spartans for “earth and water” (*300* “Honor” p. 13) He is accompanied by troops in Bedouin-like head coverings (*300* “Honor” p. 13) and Persian foot soldiers throughout the *300* (ex. “Combat” p. 2, 4) appear in similar gear, reminiscent of “Arab” costume. Persian spies shown bribing the Spartan “oracle” are represented as black Africans, as is king Xerxes himself, along with his satraps (*300* “Duty” p. 6). For the facial piercings of Miller’s *Persians* as indicative of moral weakness, see *300* “Duty” p. 6, “Combat, p. 7, and below, p. 12. For Miller’s *Immortals* see *300* “Combat” p. 10.

⁴ I have included a list and description of the vases at the end of this paper, and in the text will refer to them by “VL (=vase list)” and the numbers I reference them under there, as well as an “Achaemenid Art List,” or “AAL.” Some examples of vases depicting Persians in this light include: VL 2, 17, 18, 19.

⁵ See Aeschylus, *Persae*, 50-60 ; 230-245; For barbarians lacking “*paideia*”: see Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 293-294, Also, for depictions of Phrygians as cowardly, see Eur. *Orestes* 1367-529, *Alkestis*, 675-6, Aristoph. *Birds* 1244-34, 1326-29).

water while Greeks swim.⁶ The negative stereotype against Persians persists into the time of Aristotle, who suggests in the *Politics* that it is their warm climate that makes them so cowardly, albeit clever.⁷

One wonders then, if Miller's source is more literary in nature than visual, since Greek authors tend to concur with Miller's negative depiction of Persians. The literary dimension of the *300* goes beyond the narrative limits of vase painting since Miller is able to use writing whenever he needs to. Yet drawing, not writing, is his primary tale-telling vehicle. He greatly simplifies and mythologizes his Herodotean material, using only the loose plot structure of the tale, and some of the good Spartiate "lines."⁸ In most details the *300* relies on Miller's visual constructions and character-driven action. Because of this, his Leonidas and Xerxes act like typically exaggerated comics heroes and villains, and dominate the action of the *300* much more than in the *Histories*. The complex, extended events of the *Histories*, then, become in the *300* a simple clash of good and bad ideals—a "good" war with a clear moral basis. Also, if one actually examines his sources, Greek authors are scarce. Looking at the penultimate page of the *300*, one sees that Miller has included, not a bibliography, but a short list of "recommended reading." Clearly, he is not hampered by the need to weigh the opinions

⁶ The papyrus of Timotheos of Miletos relates four episodes of the battle of Salamis. The Persians are described as dying with 'barbarian' grief and lamentation (111-13, 151); servile (166) and prostrating themselves (157-8, 189). See Timotheos of Miletos, Fr. 790; See also Edith Hall, "Drowning by Nomes: The Greeks, Swimming, and Timotheus' Persians." In *The Birth of the European Identity: The Europe-Asia Contrast in Greek Thought 490-322 B.C.*, ed. H.A. Khan, 2, 44-80. Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1994.

⁷ Aristotle *Politics* 7. 1327b3-37.

⁸ Miller does not cite Plutarch's *Apothegmata Laconica*, and *Life of Lycurgus*, but does show consciousness of the tradition of Laconic wit. Witness the Arcadian's remark, "Damn Spartans always know what to say." ("Duty" p. 8) Sometimes he changes the context, wording, or speaker of a famous line; for example, the famous response of Leonidas to Xerxes' offer of safe conduct if he gave up his troops: "Μολών Λαβέ," may have become "Persians, come and get it." ("Glory" p. 13, cf. Plutarch, *Apothegmata Laconica*, 225c.11). He includes a small number of direct Herodotean quotes, for example, the throwing of the Persian emissaries into the well to "dig" for earth and water (*300* "Honor" p. 4; cf. Her. *Hist.* 7.133); and Dianetus' line, given to "Stelios:" "We will fight in the shade." ("Glory" p. 7 cf. Her. *Hist.* 7.226).

and evidence of a range of scholars. His only cited ancient source is Herodotus' *Histories*. Perhaps this list, from which so many ancient and modern texts are absent, is meant to purposely disassociate the *300* from a Classical tradition that is so heavy with evidence it could weigh down the tale.⁹

Nevertheless, to compare the different cultural perspectives of Frank Miller and the Greek vase painters after the Persian Wars requires some historical contextualization. Under the perceived ascendancy of the Greeks over the Persians in the 5th century BCE, a time when the Athenian Empire and the epitome of Classical culture were at their height, a surge of popularity of things Persian is evidenced in vase painting.¹⁰ Perhaps after driving back their traditional enemy, many Greeks were ready to see more of their positive qualities, since they no longer felt so deeply threatened by them. At least, they felt comfortable enough with them to paint them frequently on their tableware.

Frank Miller, on the other hand, first published the *300* in 1998, in the years leading up to the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, when tension

⁹ For this reason, the inclusion of historian Victor Davis Hanson seems particularly significant. Hanson argues that Eastern cultural constructs are ineffective in battle compared with Western, not only in the Persian Wars, but also throughout the history of this conceptual geographic division. See Hanson, Victor Davis. *The Western way of war : infantry battle in classical Greece*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; also see *Why the West Has Won: Carnage and Culture from Salamis to Vietnam*, Faber, 2001.

¹⁰ See P.J. Rhodes, "The Impact of the Persian Wars on Classical Greece" in *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars*, (2007) p. 31-46. According to Rhodes, there was evidence of both positive and negative Greek views of Persia from 479-330 BCE, depending for the most part on needs of the political moment. The Greeks enjoyed Persian luxuries while condemning their cultural character. Pericles' Odeum, for example, was built as a replica of a Persian tent. Parasols were also popular (ex. Arist. *Birds* 1549-51), and Eros holds one for Aphrodite on the Parthenon frieze (cf. Margaret Miller 1992). Later, according to Rhodes, the elite fashion switched over to Spartan austerity, and "Persian fashion moved down the social scale (p. 37)," becoming most prominent in vase painting. Yet when politicians needed it to be so, Persia could easily take on the role of traditional enemy. Throughout the fifth century the Athenians maintained a curse in the opening ritual of the Assembly on anyone making overtures of peace to the Persians (Plutarch, *Arist.* 10.6, Isocrates *Panegy.* 4.157), and the Peace of Antalcidas, in which the Eastern Greeks were essentially sold out to Persia, was contrasted rhetorically with the anti-Persian Peace of Callias (Rhodes, p. 40). Yet although they periodically played the alien enemy, never again were the Greeks and Persians so polarized as they were during the Persian Wars. Also see Margaret Miller, (1997).

and unresolved hostility towards the Middle East already abounded. To a degree, the atmosphere of distrust and alienation with all things Arab under Miller worked and his readers lived could be responsible for his negative characterization of the Persians. Their qualities recall the viciously caricatured portrayal of Japanese in such prewar comics as *Tintin*,¹¹ in contrast to the postwar absorption of Japanese culture we see in the popularizing of Akira Kurosawa's films, or even the Godzilla movies. Another analogy is wartime anti-Nazi propaganda films of the Allies, as opposed to the comedic post-war treatment of Nazis in TV shows like "Hogans' Heroes."

The *300* has gained its greatest popularity in the aftermath of 9-11, a time when Muslims appear regularly in the media as terrorists opposed to Western culture. Unlike the Greeks, Frank Miller and his readers still live in a miasma of grave paranoia and insecurity about the Middle East, and a severe lack of confidence in the ability of the United States to cope with it. This atmosphere has only intensified since the original publication of the *300* in 1998, and has greatly influenced the reception of the comic itself, as well as the media treatment of the film version. In interviews from this period concerning the 9-11 attacks and the themes of the *300*, Miller evinces a terrible fear of the single-mindedness of the Arab terrorists, as well as contempt for their "sixth century barbarism."¹² At the same time, he voices criticism of the apathy and weakness of the United States, suggesting we have behaved like a "collapsing empire" reminiscent of that of the Persians in the *300*.¹³ Might it be possible, then, to see the Arab enemies of the

¹¹ Specifically, for instance, *Tintin and the Blue Lotus* (Herge, 1936).

¹² "Talk of the Nation," January 24, 2007.

¹³ It seems to me quite obvious that our country and the entire Western World is up against an existential foe that knows exactly what it wants . . . and we're behaving like a collapsing empire. Mighty cultures are almost never conquered, they crumble from within. And frankly, I think that a lot of Americans are acting like spoiled brats because of everything that isn't working out perfectly every time. . . "Talk of the Nation," January 24, 2007.

United States representing the single-minded, yet brutish Spartans, who know exactly what they want, and who they are? Yet looking at Miller's views on the Spartans themselves, this parallel is not sustainable:

“Sparta was a very peculiar culture... The Spartans were free people, and defenders of freedom, facing an army of slaves... and it is ironic that a tribe that was as tyrannical to so many of their subjects was also a fountainhead of freedom, but those were times full of irony. Without Sparta there would never have been a flourishing of Athens, and without Athens we wouldn't have had Rome. So, while the Spartans were a very rough bunch, they were also necessary against a tyrant who had swallowed the rest of the world.”¹⁴

To Miller, the Spartans of the *300* are brutal and violent, yet they are “free men,” making the Greek world safe for the “necessary” democracy, and remain firmly aligned with the manifest destiny of Western culture. Neither do the visually stereotypical Persians of the *300* seem to reflect any real people, but rather a projection of all that is negative in American values. Revealingly, in the following excerpt he describes his feelings about 9-11 as finally showing him the difference between his made-up world of comics villains, versus the shocking revelation of real-life evil:

Now, I draw and write comic books. One thing my job involves is making up bad guys. Imagining human villainy in all its forms. Now the real thing had shown up... For the first time in my life, I know how it feels to face an existential menace. They want us to die.¹⁵

One must remember that these interviews, as well as the mass marketing of the *300*, have taken place long after the composition of the *300* itself. It seems as if Miller wrote the comic in his normal mode of fictional invention (the mental state of unreality he describes), but following 9-11, he and his readers have inevitably invested it with a new identity, that of a summons to war and a warning to the apathy of the United States, after the fact. To me, this makes any strict political interpretation of the *300* suspect. There are

¹⁴ http://www.moviehole.net/interviews/20070305_interview_frank_miller.html.

¹⁵ “Morning Edition,” September 11, 2006.

different reasons, then, why the Persians of the *300* are so much more lurid and shocking than those of vase painting.

Another approach to explaining the question of Miller's Persians is to look at them less in political terms than as an outgrowth of the potential of different art forms. Miller follows his long experience as a comics artist in making his villains frightening and ominous. Like him, the Attic vase painters follow their own artistic traditions, yet overall, portray their long-term territorial enemies, the Persians, much more neutrally than Greek writers do. Does this discrepancy suggest that comics and vase painting actually have little in common as art media after all?

Comics bring writing and drawing together, with the narrative of the action parallel to the graphics. Vase painting is the closest one comes in ancient Greece to this union of writing and drawing. The only preserved medium that combines even a minimal amount of writing with a pictorial element, it also has a lot in common with comics in its repetition and stylization, as well as its cheapness and mass production.¹⁶ Even the marginalized images, such as we see in the Pygmy and Crane battle on the famous François vase, work to a degree in a similar way to paneling in comics.¹⁷ Finally, comics artists as well as vase painters share a certain social stigma. Until recently, with the rise of the "graphic novel," comics have been associated with a certain low-class pulpiness

¹⁶ For evidence on mass production of Greek pottery and the social status of potters and painters, see Onians (1991) 66, Richter (1958) ; Sparkes (1996).

¹⁷ See VL 6: François Vase. Lissarrague (1997) writes that the placement of the Pygmy story on the borders of the vase marginalizes it as a visual narrative. This is different from the use of paneling in comics in that the vase uses "panels" to mark off a completely separate myth. Nevertheless, the idea of narrative separation is basically the same. Hurwit discusses the enlivening of the backgrounds of vases during this period, when they change from the static, decorative fields of the geometric style to a dynamic space with which the painted figure can interact, introducing an element of narrative and action. See Lissarrague, François. "The Athenian Image of the Foreigner." in *Greeks and Barbarians*, ed. Thomas Harrison, 101-24. New York: Routledge, 1997; Hurwit, Jeffrey. "Image and Frame in Greek Art." *American Journal of Archaeology* 81, no. 1 (1977): 1-30.

and sense of inferiority to literature and painting. Likewise, Attic potters were not high on the social stratum of artisans.¹⁸

For all these reasons, one would think comics and vases have much in common. Yet major differences between them must be kept in mind. Although mythological scenes on vase painting often do tell part of a story, without the use of multiple panels, it is the story itself, existing apart from the image, which has impact.¹⁹ A given scene on a vase is metonymic if you know the myth. Therefore, if there is no myth being told, “stock” scenes show figures in a vacuum, separate from any plot structure, with a decorative and formulaic, rather than narrative effect. Scenes such as battles of Amazons and hoplites, heterosexual and homosexual love, dressing, soldiers at dice, and so forth, do not appear to be part of any unified narrative structure. The depiction of Persians is a prime example of this. Unlike the famous lost painting of the battle of Marathon by Polygnotus, depictions of Persians engaged in combat with Greeks are completely out of context, with no theater of battle mentioned.²⁰ Persians who are not fighting are even harder to place, and appear to exist only to carry their fans and flywhisks, and wear their multi-patterned outfits in a decorative fashion. In addition, the main function of vase painting was to decorate a household tool, whereas comics exist primarily to tell a story, and often a

¹⁸See Onians (1991), Richter (1958); Sparkes (1996). See note 1, above.

¹⁹ It is interesting to compare comics such as “The Far Side,” or the cartoons of the New Yorker, which although they are only single-panels, are able to evoke a narrative context that is essential to the joke. I would argue that in such examples, it is not the goal to encapsulate an extended tale into one picture, but rather to evoke a familiar situation or story, which can then be manipulated to give rise to the joke of the comic. In this way, these single-panel cartoons are not unlike vase paintings.

²⁰ One interesting exception is the Eurymedon vase, (VL 11). This unattributed vase, which references the battle of Eurymedon against Persia under Cimon in 468 BC, is the only case in which a Persian is shown at a distinct moral disadvantage, but this is expressed as a parody of the erotic pursuits that also form a “stock” theme of vases. For discussion of various theories about this vase, see : Smith, Amy C. “Eurymedon and the Evolution of Political Personifications in the Early Classical Period,.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 119 (1999): 128-41; Schauenberg, K. “Εὐρυμέδων εἰμί.” *AthMitt* 90 (1975): 118.

frightening one. Therefore, it makes sense for vases to be more decorative than shocking or frightening, although there are plenty of examples of grotesques on vases.

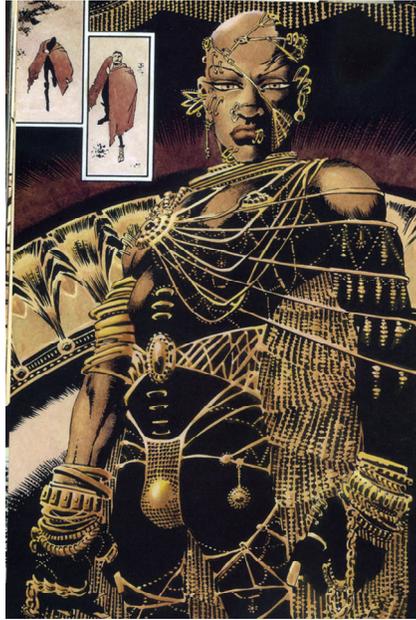
One element the two media do have in common is their stylization of social types. Vase painting relies on the repetition of familiar, recognizable mythological and cultural characters. Individual artists, as well as workshop and group trends show a consistency of types over time. Likewise, Miller's Persians reflect his personal artistic tendencies as well as his roots in comics. He uses an eclectic mix of tropes to create his "bad guys." To make his villains as unlike his heroes as possible, he draws on his stored models of what is frightening, hidden, and dangerous, and expresses this through costume and ornate, fetishistic disguise. Entrenched in thirty years of practice in creating ninjas, punks, mutants, and costumed weirdoes, Miller presents us with the Persians, opponents of the heroic Spartans, as super-villains.²¹

Meanwhile, vase painting also uses an eclectic set of stored tropes—but with very different results. Looking at many vase depictions of Persians, Scythians, Amazons, and other "barbarians," a general image begins to emerge. Vase-Persians are purposefully brought together to create a visual contrast with portrayals of Greeks, almost as if they create a nice little "set." For example, ornate, repeated patterns of dress are extremely familiar from Persians' costumes on vase paintings, as are their long shields, bows, and caps.²² Persians are placed repeatedly next to the heroically nude Greek hoplites who bear the proper arms of the citizen of the polis.

²¹ Miller began writing and drawing comics in the 70's. He has worked on characters created already, such as Daredevil (1981) Electra (1987), and Batman (1986), and has also created his own, such as Ronin (1983), Martha Washington (1994), and the many characters of *Sin City* (1993-2005).

²² See VL 2, 17, 18, 19.

Full Regalia (300)



Miller does imitate this contrast between clothed Persians and nude Spartans, and takes some details of his Persians' costume from Greek and Achaemenid Persian art, especially his depiction of the rank and file soldiers.²³ In the social code of the *300* dress is extremely important in conveying socio-economic and military status. Most Persians go fully clothed, ranging from the common infantry to the resplendently ornate satraps and aristocrats.²⁴ This is consonant with what we know of the Persian disapproval of nudity, which the Greeks found so bizarre.²⁵ Yet if one examines Miller's past body of work, his Persian "henchmen" actually have much more in common with the minor, expendable villains he has created repeatedly in his past work. For instance, one of the recurrent elements in his drawings is that his bad guys have their heads and faces covered. Miller's "Ninja" motif occurs notably in *The Dark Night Returns*, when the

²³Hoods and trousers appear repeatedly in Achaemenid portrayals of servants. Ex. AAL 1, 2

²⁴*300*, "Glory" p. 3.

²⁵ See Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.10.

Mutants go from one brand of goggle-like headgear to another after turning into the “Sons of Batman.”²⁶ Also, in *Ronin*, Miller’s fantasy of a medieval Samurai transported to a futuristic NYC, the eponymous hero encounters a full-page spread group of actual ninjas with basket-like helmets.²⁷ Similar Persian face covering often takes place in the *300*, whereas it does not in Greek vase paintings, and is rare in Achaemenid Persian art. This deviation is particularly extreme in the rendering of the “Immortals,” of whom we have an artistic record from Darius’s palace at Susa and whom, on the other hand, Miller depicts in his preferred Japanese vein, with iron kabuki-like masks.²⁸ Finally, even when Miller does show the faces of common soldiers, they are not wearing the “Persian cap” of vase painting, or the crowns and hoods of the Achaemenids, but Bedouin-like turbans.²⁹ In this way, Miller taps into a stereotypical image of a modern Arab, while relying primarily on his “Ninja” model with Greek additions. The fact the Persians so dressed appear simply as unimportant spear-fodder in the *300* suggests that he designs them by formula, without the special creativity and deviancy that goes into the depiction of the Persian elite.

Stranger costumes are in store for these upper classes Persians. In particular, Miller diverges from the Persian dislike of nudity with his depiction of the *300*’s super villain, Xerxes. Unlike the dignified Achaemenid portrayals of great kings, Miller’s Xerxes is scantily dressed.³⁰ Parading around nearly naked, festooned with sharp wiry jewelry, his exhibitionism stands out from his fellow Persians as well as from the simple, heroic

²⁶ Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley. *Batman : The Dark Knight : The Dark Knight Returns*. 4 vols. New York, NY: DC Comics, 1986. (Vol. 1, p. 7 ; p. 22).

²⁷ Miller, Frank, Lynn Varley, and John Costanza. *Frank Miller's Ronin*. New York, NY: DC Comics, 1987, p. 16-17.

²⁸ See AAL 7. Contrast with Miller, *300*, “Combat” p. 10.

²⁹ Miller, *300*, “Glory” p. 11; “Combat” p. 4.

³⁰ See AAL 6. Contrast with Miller, *300*, “Combat” p. 7, depicting the full figure of Xerxes.

nudity of the Spartans. The same kind of contrast is true in many of Miller's costumed superhero comics, where the henchmen often operate at a lower pitch of deviancy than the main archenemy, who often sexualizes a tendency to violence in dress.³¹

Greek and Persian. Triptolemos painter, Edinburgh, arv
364.



One prominent visual detail of the *300* is the Persian practice of piercing the face and body. This recalls the many “punks and freaks” of Miller's previous comics, who use facial and bodily piercing as the external symbol of their deviance from society, as well as of their status and commitment to a cause.³² Xerxes, then, as ruler, has the most piercings, and his satraps have fewer.³³ Again, contrast is key, since the Persians' glut of gaudy visual trappings starkly opposes the Spartans' egalitarian nudity and matching red cloaks. Less interest in dress is coded as “strong” in the story. The one Greek who goes bad, Ephialtes, betrays the Greeks for a uniform. Miller makes him a sad, deformed

³¹ See the transvestite villain “Bruno” in *Batman, Dark Knight*, v. 3 p. 2, as well as the “Mutant Leader” in *Dark Knight Returns*, v. 2 p. 17.

³² Miller, *Ronin*, Ch. 2 p. 40-44. ; *The Dark Knight Triumphant*, p. 7.

³³ *300* “Honor” p. 12; “Combat” p. 7.

monster, who only wishes to be accepted by his society.³⁴ He offers his military service to Leonidas, who refuses him, as his deformed left arm cannot support a shield. This tool of the Spartan battle line, which they lock together in a wall, represents their single-minded, unified identity. The physically deficient Ephialtes seeks for the outward trappings of group identity, the clothing, rather than the shield of war. When he fails to attain a Spartan uniform, he achieves a Persian one through his treachery. His obsessive wish for any uniform underscores the association of dependency on dress with moral weakness, alienation, and monstrosity.

On vases, although the contrast of dress is there, the Persians lack the lurid, ominous quality of their counterparts in the *300*, as well as the rampant bestiality of Greek mythological characters, such as centaurs and satyrs.³⁵ In addition, on vases, Greeks and Persians generally appear the same in their ethnicity. Although their costumes and weapons are quite different, their physical features belong to the same ethnic strain of Caucasian Mediterraneans.³⁶ They are “other,” certainly, but not extremely so; they are only a step or so removed from the starting point of the adult male citizen of the Greek *polis*, and their ethnic similarity supports this. Miller deviates glaringly from this in the blackness of his Persians. Yet this has precedent in his previous work. Take, for example, the polarized appearance of skinheads and panthers, whom he often depicts in his comics. In *Ronin*, these opposing groups govern the post-apocalyptic nightmare of New York. In one particularly vivid panel, a black male panther and white female

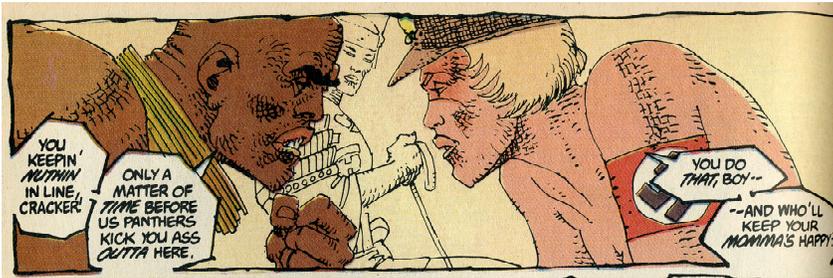
³⁴ *300*, Glory p. 1; 9.

³⁵ See VL 14.

³⁶ For examples of ethnic resemblance between Greeks and Persians see VL 1, 2, 10, 13, 20, 22.

skinhead snarl and try to stare each other down, startlingly different in appearance, but united in their psychopathic extremism.³⁷

Panther and Nazi (*Ronin*)



In the *300* Miller achieves the same contrast by making the Persians black, so that they stand out from the white Greeks much more than their counterparts do in Classical vase painting. On the other hand, in classical art and literature, first, Persians are not black, and secondly, even though there is certainly a contrast between black Africans and white Greeks, there is little tendency to show “Blackness” in a negative light. If anything, the Ethiopians are described in literary sources such as Homer and Herodotus as superior in many ways, and beloved by the gods.³⁸ In vase painting, like the Persians,

³⁷Miller, *Ronin*, Chapter 3, p. 16.

³⁸*Iliad* 1.413, *Odyssey* 1.11, Herodotus, *Histories* book 3.17-26; 94. Some scholarship dealing with ancient representations of black Africans includes: Frank Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.) 1970; William Leo Hansbury, *The William Leo Hansbury African History Notebook: Africa and Africans As Seen By Classical Writers*, ed. Joseph E. Harris (Washington DC, Howard Univ. Pr.) 1977.

they are decorative rather than threatening.³⁹ Nor do Athenian artists represent either Persians or Ethiopians engaged in such bestial--one might say "barbaric"-- behavior as the Greeks display in mythological depictions. Even doing battle, foreigners on vases do not have a horrific impact. That is reserved for mythological disasters such as the murder of Agamemnon, or the sack of Troy.⁴⁰ Miller, on the other hand, mythologizes history in a horrifying way, drawing on a different cast of characters.

Stylistically, the Persians of the *300* are cousins of the collection of rapacious cyber-punks, gangsters, ninjas, and deviant sexual freaks that have populated Miller's comic tales over the years. While Miller is a product of a cultural environment rife with stereotypes, the relationship of the *300* to his past work is the determining factor in the character of his portrayal. The subliminal *result* of his making the Persians black Middle-Easterners, however, is that readers connect the events of the *300* to our current military and cultural deadlock with Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Greek pottery, in contrast, seems disengaged from issues of racial prejudice as we understand it. Yet it does show strange developments in its cultural relationship with Persia over time. In the post-Persian war period, a marked tendency appears for Greek painters to abandon a great degree of racial and ethnic diversity in their depictions of foreigners, in favor of gradually "Persianizing" all of them. Witness the story of Busiris, the hapless Egyptian king who tries to sacrifice Heracles. In an early fifth century BCE vase of the Pan Painter,⁴¹ the priests and the king look like Egyptians, while in a later

³⁹ Claude Berard does make the case for class prejudice in the depiction of African royals on vases, for the servants are usually Negro and the princes Caucasian. Yet this occurs only in the context of mythological depictions, rather than isolated images of Africans. See: Berard, Claude, "The Image of the Other and the Foreign Hero." In *Not the classical ideal : Athens and the construction of the other in Greek art*, ed. Beth Cohen, 390-411. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2000. (p. 406).

⁴⁰See VL 9, 12.

⁴¹ See VL 15.

treatment of the myth by the Darius Painter, the king appears with a Persian hat, approached by a noble procession.⁴² Likewise, Amazons dressed like hoplites in the sixth century, wear variegated colors and caps in the fifth.⁴³ Phrygian and Trojan kings, such as Midas and Priam, begin to be depicted in the Persian style as well.⁴⁴ The Athenians seem to have had Persians on their collective mind, in reducing a variety of foreign types to their most famous enemies, who are familiar adversaries, and extremely decorative to boot.

The conclusions of scholars studying the relations between Greece and Persia during the post-war period (after 479 BCE) generally show that these were more frequent and more positive than the literary sources might admit. Margaret Miller, for instance, discusses the fact that though classical Greek writers make much of the Greek-Barbarian contrast, in fact there was copious cultural interchange in post-Persian War period, in areas of art, dress, luxury, and cultural exchange. She offers extensive evidence that trade as well as diffusion of spoils plays large role in this.⁴⁵ David Castriota is another scholar who debunks the negative rhetoric about Achaemenid ideology before and after the Persian wars. He finds that the notions of statecraft that the Persians set forth on their

⁴² See VL 8. Margaret Miller discusses this issue in her article "The Myth of Bousiris : Ethnicity and Art." In *Not the classical ideal : Athens and the construction of the other in Greek art*, ed. Beth Cohen, 413-42. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2000.

⁴³ See VL 16; VL 3.

⁴⁴ See Keith de Vries, "The Nearly Other: The Attic Vision of Phrygians and Lydians." In *Not the classical ideal : Athens and the construction of the other in Greek art*, ed. Beth Cohen, 338-64. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2000. DeVries describes the transmogrification of Phrygians in vase painting. In the early Classical period they appear in Hellenized dress, (p. 344) whereas in the second half of the fifth century BCE. they appear Persianized (p. 345). See Athens Nat. Arch. Mus. Inv. No. 12257 (p. 347, fig. 13.5).

⁴⁵ Miller, Margaret C. *Athens and Persia in the 5th century BC* (1997). She cites examples such as the adoption of Persian dress by Greeks (183) as well as luxury items like peacock raising (189-190), fans (198), parasols (193), and flywhisks (206). She points out that the possession of blacks, eunuchs and other exotic slaves is attested in literary and epigraphic sources (212-215). She also makes the interesting analogy with Victorian "chinoiserie" which used an alien and subject culture as a source of decorative motifs.(183) Finally, her use of Attic pottery as a marker of trade evidences the wide extent of Achaemenid-Greek trade relations.

monuments and documents are actually very similar to Greek conceptions of moral principle, justice, piety, and valor. Thus, Greek precepts were not actually much opposed to those of Persians.⁴⁶ Finally, Pierre Briant suggests that although the military incapacity of Persians was one of the favorite topics of Greek authors in the Classical and Hellenistic periods, the idea of Persian decadence” was not supported by the facts. Indeed, Briant believes that the repeated emphasis on decadence reflects the Greeks’ fascination with the immense riches of the Great King.⁴⁷

If the Greeks were in fact having much more positive contact with the Persians than their literature would like to admit, taking in Persian luxury items, trade goods, and even habits, the trappings of Persian life would have become increasingly familiar. Persians enabled Greeks to enjoy the massive wealth of which they had become the mistress following the war. Persian culture, then, as “soft” as it was coded in the literary sources, had gained both popularity and familiarity among the Greeks. This could be a reason for the increasing “Persianization” of foreigners on vases: soft culture was popular in real life, as much as it was decried in literature. Persia was popular.

Secondly, one must consider the relative accessibility of literature as opposed to vase painting. How many of the Athenians would have read Thucydides, Isocrates, Herodotus, or even remember Aeschylus’ *Persae*? Only a small percentage of the citizen body was literate or could spend much time reading.⁴⁸ The attempt to justify Greek hegemony in

⁴⁶David Castriota, “Justice, Kingship and Imperialism: Rhetoric and Reality in Fifth Century BC Representations following the Persian Wars” in *Not the Classical Ideal* p. 443-479. Castriota discusses the fact that the Tomb of Dareios-Naqsh-i-Rustam, c. 490 BCE (fig. 17.4) represents over 30 nations acknowledging Darius’ divine right of kingship through his pious service of divinity and their collective support, rather subjection and slavery (p. 449).

⁴⁷ Briant, Pierre. "History and Ideology: The Greeks and 'Persian Decadence.'" In *Greeks and Barbarians*, ed. Thomas Harrison, 193-210. New York: Routledge, 1989.

⁴⁸For a discussion of this issue, see Harris, William V. *Ancient literacy* (1989). Harris argues that the Athenian literacy rate in the 5th cent. BCE at the most was 5-10% of the entire population. (p. 114; 327)

writing was an act of the wealthy classes. On the other hand, everyone used clay vessels, from aristocrats to slaves. Mythological tales were extremely familiar, transmitted orally and easily recognizable as “snapshots” of action in vase paintings. On the other hand, it could be difficult to portray the battle of Thermopylae on a vase. We must remember, too, that each vase painter had the model of actual Persians he may have seen himself, as well as the thousands of other Persians painted before that particular vase. Thus, to an extent, the Greek vase painter took from real-life, and very familiar tropes, in which it was not appropriate to see the Persians as the embodiments of monstrosity, bestiality, or weakness. Why should they, with such a wealth of mythological subjects possessing truly villainous qualities? Considering the strangeness of the monsters and homicidal maniacs that populate Greek mythology, it is not too surprising that the Persians should appear as relatively benevolent and mundane, familiar foreigners. The negative qualities attached to them in literature simply did not transfer over to vase painting.

Miller’s choice to make the Persians evil, corrupt and black is based on conventional American villain making that lacks relativism or complexity. The technical tropes of comics creation remain the driving force behind the political tenor of the work. The comic book “reflex” in which certain looks are associated with evil, as well as the reductive story line and moral coding, has made the *300* into powerful propaganda, whether or not it was so intended, since its imagery cannot be read as neutral given the current political context. Therefore, when examining the construction of Miller’s Persians, ultimately, unreality, formula, and exaggeration are the most telling elements.

Also see Kevin Robb’s book *Literacy and paideia in ancient Greece* (1994). Robb suggests that mimetic techniques like public recitation would have developed familiarity among the illiterate with works of drama, history and philosophy.

Miller takes the boiled-down idea of Greek (and Western) cultural superiority and conveys this through a visual funnel, whereas the decorative Persians of vase painting, who never successfully made a connection to literature, do not perform the same role. Although the two media do share a visual immediacy and love of bizarre mythology, ultimately the Persians of vase painting are decorative and static, whereas Miller, with the help of the ideological impact of narrative, imbues his Persians with all of the terrifying evils of the super villain.

List of Achaemenid Artworks: (AAL)

- 1) "Achaemenid Servant." New York, New York, USA: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 34.158
- 2) "Achaemenid Servants." Boston, Massachusetts, USA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 31.372.
- 3) "Persian guard." Boston, Massachusetts, USA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Archibald Cary Coolidge Fund 40.170.
- 4) "Achaemenid Spearman." Fragmentary head of Achaemenid Spearman, or Guard. Detroit, Michigan, USA. : The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation 78.47 5th cent. BC.
- 5) "Persian with covered bowl, Achaemenid." Detroit, Michigan, USA: The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund 78.45 5th cent. BC.
- 6) "Achaemenid relief depicting King Darius with Crown Prince Xexes and Attendants behind Him." Treasury, Close-up of a Relief in E Portico of a Courtyard, Depicting King Darius Seated on a Throne with His Son Xerxes Standing Behind Him. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Oriental Institute of the Univ. of Chicago, Photographic Archives P 56563, 520-500 BCE.
- 7) "The Frieze of Archers." Glazed tile relief showing soldiers from the Ten Thousand Immortals. Tell of the Apadana, Palace of Darius I, Susa, Iran. Polychrome glazed siliceous brick. H. 4.75 m; W. 3.75 m. Paris: Louvre, Near Eastern Antiquities AOD 488. Achaemenid Persian Period, reign of Darius I, c. 510 BC.

List of Greek Vases (VL)

- 1) "Persian Head Rhyton." Athenian, red-figure, fig mug, figure vase mug, class w. London: British Museum E791, 5th Century BCE. (Beazeley Archive 218694)
- 2) "Falling Persian." Decoration A: Archer (Persian) running with sword and bow. Decoration B: Fight, warrior with spear attacking archer (Persian) with sword and bow. Basel: Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, BS480, 475-425 BCE. (Beazeley Archive 1287).
- 3) Attributed to Euphronios. "Amazons and Heracles." Komos volute krater, Side A: Herakles and Amazons. Side B: Amazons running up. Arezzo Museo Civico, 1465, 510 BCE.
- 4) Alabastra, The Group of Negro. "Alabastron vase ", Alabastron vase with Negro soldier. Boston, Massachusetts, USA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 5th Century BCE.
- 5) Boston, The Group of. "Black head rhyton: Mug in the shape of a man's head." Ceramic, Black Figure, Height: 17.7 cm (6 15/16 in.) Boston, Massachusetts, USA.: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 500 B.C.
- 6) Kleitias, and Ergotimos. "François Vase." Size: 66cm. (volute-crater) Function: convivial Technique: black-figure Style: Miniature black-figure Subject/s: seven figure friezes on the body above one animal frieze; pygmies fight cranes on the foot Side A (top to bottom): Kalydonian Boar Hunt, Patroklos' Funeral Games, Wedding procession moves towards the house, Achilles chases Troilos and Polyxena at the fountain house drops her water pot, animal frieze. Pygmies fight cranes (foot). Side B (top to bottom): Athenians arrive at Crete by boat and Theseus leads the group, Lapiths fight Centaurs, Wedding procession, animal frieze. Pygmies fight cranes (foot). Date: near mid 6th c. Analysis: unusual and finely made shape (first Athenian known in clay), wealth of small and finely executed mythological scenes, and proliferation of inscriptions, including the names of the painter Kleitias and the potter Ergotimos, indicate that this was a very special piece, exported to northern Italy in antiquity. Florence, Italy: Museo Archeologico 4209, 6th Century BCE.
- 7) Painter, Altamura. "Priam as a Persian King." Calyx krater (mixing bowl) with scenes from the fall of Troy. Boston, Mass., USA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 59.178, 465 BCE.
- 8) Painter, Attributed to the Darius. "Heracles and Busiris." Dinos, Red-figure, Greek, South Italian, Apulian New York, NY, USA: Metropolitan Museum, Formerly 1984.11.7 (now Nostoi no. 57; old no. 51.) ca. 340–320 BCE.
- 9) Painter, Brygos. "Iliupersis Cup." Sack of Troy (side A.) Paris, France: Louvre G 152 480-475 BCE.

- 10) Painter, Chicago. "Greek and Persian." contrast of nude hoplite and archer Persian. Boston, Mass., USA: Boston Museum of Fine Arts 13.196, 460 BCE. (Beazeley Archive 207321).
- 11) Painter, Circle of the Triptolemos. "Eurymedon vase." Hamburg, Germany: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe 1981.173, c. 460 BCE.
- 12) Painter, Dokimasia. "Death of Agamemon." kalyx-krater. Boston, Mass., USA: Boston Museum Fine of Arts, 63.1246, 460 B.C.
- 13) Painter, Eleusis. "Greek and Persian." Fragment (restored) of interior. Boston, MA, USA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 10.196, 6th century BCE.
- 14) Painter, Foundry. "Greek and Centaur." Tondo of an Attic red-figure kylix," ca. 480 BCE. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen Inv. 2640.
- 15) Painter, Pan. "Heracles and Busiris." Red-figure vase. Athens, Greece: Nat. Arch. Mus. Athens Inv. no. 9683, 470 BCE.
- 16) Unknown. "Amazons and Heracles." Amazons dressed as hoplites fight the Heracles. San Francisco, CA, USA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco 1925.368, late 6th century BCE.
- 17) Leningrad Painter. Fragments of Persians playing pipes near an altar, Corinth, Archaeological Museum, T620 (Beazely Archive 206565)
- 18) Meleager Painter. "Seated Persian King with procession of youths," Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 158 (Beazely Archive 217917).
- 19) Mannheim Painter. "Persian King presented with cup by a woman," Vatican City, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco Vaticano, 16536 (Beazely Archive 214363).
- 20) Jena Painter. "Head of Persian." Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum, 128. (Beazely Archive 231004)
- 21) Follower of Douris. "Persian Seated on Rock, Walking Persian," Berlin, Antikensammlung, 3156. (Beazely Archive 21209946)
- 22) Brygos Painter. "Greeks and Persians fighting," Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1911.615. (Beazely Archive 204329).

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