

AN OFFER YOU CAN'T RETRACT:
XERXES' NOD AND MASISTES' WIFE
(HERODOTUS 9.111.1)

Near the end of his *Histories*, Herodotus recounts a tragic turn of events in the royal house of the Persian king, Xerxes (9.108–13). Xerxes' younger brother by Darius I and Atossa was Masistes; Xerxes fell in love with this man's wife, and when he could not win her, wed his son, the future Darius II, to her daughter by Masistes, Artaynte, thinking with practically New Comic logic that this would advance his cause. Yet Xerxes fell in love with Artaynte instead, and they had an affair. Having pledged and sworn (9.109.2) to give her whatever she asked for, he had, despite grave misgivings, to honour her request for a special robe woven by his own wife, Amestris. When Amestris learned that Artaynte was wearing the robe she herself had woven, and so realized her husband's adultery, Amestris swore to avenge herself, not on her husband, nor even on the equally guilty Artaynte, but, 'supposing her mother to have been the cause' (9.110.1), on that innocent woman. Amestris bided her time until Xerxes' birthday, when the custom was that he as king gave gifts to all who asked. She then requested that he hand over his sister-in-law for her to mutilate to death. Unwilling, but compelled by custom, Xerxes 'nodded down' (κατανεύει, 9.111.1) in the time-honoured gesture of assent.

In their recent exemplary commentary, Flower and Marincola write of Xerxes' nod:¹

The verb is Homeric, used of the god granting a request (cf. *Il.* 1.514, 15.374; *Od.* 13.133); it is very rare in prose (Plato *Rep.* 350e3 seems to be literal) and only here in [Herodotus]. As with Zeus' promise to Thetis at *Il.* 1.514, Xerxes' promise cannot be revoked, no matter how much damage it brings in its wake. The use of the word reinforces the sense of irony, since Xerxes at his greatest moment of impotence is described in a language reserved for the gods.

That the verb κατανεύω has special point makes sense; yet the Thetis scene in *Iliad* 1 has rather different dynamics from our scenario involving Xerxes and Masistes' wife. Hera on that occasion accuses Thetis of plotting against her own pro-Greek interests (*Il.* 1.536–43), while Amestris' jealousy, coup or no coup,² is erotic: she cuts off her hapless victim's breasts (Hdt. 9.112).³ There is arguably a

¹ M.A. Flower and J. Marincola, *Herodotus: Histories Book IX* (Cambridge, 2002), 297. Pietro Vannicelli does not comment on this verb in D. Asheri, *Erodoto: Le Storie* vol. 9 *Libro IX: La battaglia di Platea* (Milan, 2006), 332.

² H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 'Exit Atossa: images of women in Greek historiography on Persia', in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (edd.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London and Canberra, 1983), 20–33, at 29, writes: 'There is a taboo on wearing the royal robe by anyone else but the king (cf. Plut. *Artaxerxes*, V 2). On the level of literature the person wearing the royal robe is the king: the first act of any usurper of the throne is to put on the royal robe. It is part of the regalia with which the king is invested on his accession. What Artaynte asks for in the tale is not only a beautiful garment but the kingship with it ... Under the surface of this romantic tale might be hidden an attempt to rebel by a brother of the king.'

³ Amestris mutilated other parts of her body also, but her breasts are mentioned first and in a separate clause: τοὺς τε μαζοὺς ἀποταμοῦσα κυσὶ προέβαλε καὶ ῥίνα καὶ ὄτα καὶ χεῖλεα καὶ γλώσσαν ἐκταμοῦσα ἐς οἶκόν μιν ἀποπέμπει διαλελυμασμένην ('having cut off her breasts, she threw them to the dogs, and having cut out her ears and lips and tongue, she sent

closer point of contact. I suggest that in his nod to Amestris, Xerxes unwittingly re-enacts not so much the Thetis scene, as the myth of Zeus and Semele. The oldest extant source for the story, Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 3.4.3) writes:

Σεμέλης δὲ Ζεὺς ἐρασθεὶς Ἥρας κρύφα συνευνάζεται. ἡ δὲ ἐξαπατηθεῖσα ὑπὸ Ἥρας, κατανεύσαντος αὐτῇ Διὸς πᾶν τὸ αἰτηθὲν ποιῆσειν, αἰτεῖται τοιοῦτον αὐτὸν ἐλθεῖν οἷος ἦλθε μνηστευόμενος Ἥραν. Ζεὺς δὲ μὴ δυνάμενος ἀνανεῦσαι παραγίνεται εἰς τὸν θάλαμον αὐτῆς ἐφ' ἄρματος ἀστραπαῖς ὁμοῦ καὶ βρονταῖς, καὶ κεραυνὸν ἱσιν.

Zeus, having fallen in love with Semele, slept with her without Hera knowing. But Semele, deceived by Hera, when Zeus nodded down that he would give her whatever she asked for, asked that he come to her as he did when he wooed Hera. Zeus, not being able to refuse (*literally* nod up), came into her bedroom on his chariot together with lightning and thunder, and thunderblasted [her].

Apollodorus' story is implied in Euripides, when Dionysus calls the still-smoking ruins of Semele's house the *ἄθνατος Ἥρας μητέρ'* εἰς ἐμὴν ὕβρις, 'undying (token of) Hera's outrage against my mother' (*Bacch.* 9). That the story could be so casually alluded to in 407/406 B.C. suggests that it was already familiar, perhaps from Aeschylus' *Σεμέλη ἢ Ὑδρόφοροι*, which may have recounted Semele's death (Ζεὺς, ὃς κατέκτα τοῦτον, Σ A *Il.* 4.319 = fr. 221 TrGF [ταύτην Hartung], 'Zeus, who killed him (i.e. Dionysus) [or her (i.e. Semele)]'),⁴ Aeschylus having died in 456, probably three decades before Herodotus published his *Histories*.⁵

Whoever first told the story, the nod is integral to it, for it alone stops Zeus recanting his promise, as he tells Thetis, in a passage echoed by Aeschylus⁶ (*Il.* 1.524–7):

εἰ δ' ἄγε τοι κεφαλῇ κατανεύσομαι, ὅφρα πεποιθῆς·
τοῦτο γὰρ ἐξ ἐμέθεν γε μετ' ἀθανάτοισι μέγιστον
τέκμωρ· οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸν παλινάγρετον οὐδ' ἀπατηλὸν
οὐδ' ἀτελεύτητον, ὃ τί κεν κεφαλῇ κατανεύσω.

But come, if (you wish), I will nod with my head to you, so that you may be persuaded: for this indeed is the greatest token from me among the immortals: for concerning whatever I may nod with my head is not to be taken back by me, nor deceitful, nor destined to be unaccomplished.

Amestris' jealousy, like Semele's, is sexual: she displaces her wrath from the cheating husband on to an innocent victim, and pursues her grudge (ἔγκοτος, Hdt. 9.110.1) to its fatal end. For of all Hera's plots against Zeus' lovers and bastards – especially Io, Leto and Heracles – only that against Semele was lethal.

her home shamefully maltreated'). It may be significant that breasts are the part of the body associated with nurturing and motherhood, since it was in fact her daughter Artaynte who had the affair with Xerxes.

⁴ See E.R. Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae* (Oxford, 1960²), xxx.

⁵ The standard view is that lines 524–9 of Ar. *Ach.* of 425 parody Hdt. 1.1–5.2, and that this further implies publication of the entire *Histories*, rather than a public reading of selections.

⁶ Aesch. *Supp.* 91–2: πίπτει δ' ἀσφαλὲς οὐδ' ἐπὶ νώτῳ, | κορυφῇ Διὸς εἰ κρανθῇ πράγμα τέλειον ('a matter falls safe, and not on its back, if it is accomplished perfectly by the head of Zeus'). A form of non-retractable promise shared by all the gods is the oath by Styx (*Il.* 15.37–8, Hes. *Theog.* 400).

The story of Xerxes and Masistes' wife near the end of the *Histories* echoes that of Gyges and Candaules' wife near the beginning (1.8.13).⁷ Yet while the earlier story is a tragedy of choice, into which Gyges is innocently drawn, the latter is a quasi-Sophoclean tragedy of error⁸ that climaxes when Xerxes, as he nods, recognizes the disaster – which, if not yet a fact, is now inevitable – and, worse still, knows that he has caused it.

Scholars have seen Biblical parallels in the book of Esther, with Ahasuerus as Xerxes and Esther as a most un-Herodotean Amestris, or the story of Salome.⁹ To my knowledge, however, no one has seen the Semele myth as a formal model. No doubt something like what Herodotus says *did* occur; I suggest only that Herodotus has added colour to his narrative by shaping his tale through the myth of Zeus and Semele.¹⁰

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⁷ See esp. E. Wolff, 'Das Weib des Masistes', *Hermes* 92 (1964), 51–8, at 56.

⁸ I am thinking of such figures as Creon, Deianira and Oedipus. Sophocles and Herodotus, incidentally, shared views on many topics: e.g. Soph. *Ant.* 908–12 = Hdt. 3.119.6; Soph. *El.* 417–23 = Hdt. 1.108.1; Soph. *OC* 337–41 = Hdt. 2.35.2; Soph. *OT* 1528–30 = Hdt. 1.32.5; Soph. *El.* 62–4 = Hdt. 4.95; and Soph. *OC* 1224–47 = Hdt. 7.46.3–4.

⁹ For Esther, see R.W. Macan, *Herodotus: The Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Books* (London, 1908), 1.2.812. For Salome (cf. Matthew 14: 3–12 and Mark 6: 21–6), see W.W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford, 1912), 2.334 *ad* 9.110, and E.S. Schuckburgh, *Herodotus IX: Kalliope* (Cambridge, 1954), 164.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Dr Rhiannon Ash and to an anonymous referee for *CQ* for helpful comments on an earlier version.

NOT A NEW FRAGMENT OF EPHORUS

In 'Ephorus (?) on the Spartan consitution',¹ David Whitehead suggests that a new fragment of the historian Ephorus is to be found in the Suda² and Eudemus³ gloss ἀγαθοεργοί αίρετοί κατ' ἀνδραγαθίαν ἐκ τῶν ἐφόρων, where for the last word he would read Ἐφόρου. The Spartan ἀγαθοεργοί are known in literature (as distinct from lexica) only from Herodotus 1.67.5, who says they are the five oldest former ἱππεῖς in each year. Among the lexica Hesychius⁴ agrees with and

¹ *CQ* n.s. 55 (2005), 299–301.

² A. Adler (ed.), *Suidae Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1928–38), α 115. That 'Suidas' is the title, not the author, and that the correct form is 'Suda' is now generally accepted, after F. Dölger, 'Der Titel des sog. Suidaslexikons', *SBAW* (1936), 6. The fundamental treatment of the lexicon and its sources is Adler's article in *RE* IV A 1 (1931), 675–717.

³ For this work see below p. 313.

⁴ K. Latte, P.A. Hansen, I.C. Cunningham (edd.), *Hesychii Alexandrini Lexicon* (Copenhagen and Berlin–New York, 1953–2009), α 251 (and hence *lex. rhet.* 209.4 Bekker, *Anecd. Gr.* 1; for the interpolations in this work from Hesychius see Latte, 1, XXI). This gloss will derive from his principal source, Diogenianus (2nd c.), who used various earlier compilations.