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# Restoring the Balance: Women as Gardians of Moral Boundaries in Herodotus' Histories

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**Restoring the Balance:  
Women as Guardians of Moral Boundaries in Herodotus' *Histories***

Herodotus' *Histories* have a surprisingly strong female presence, even as they describe a world in which most women had little power. Women are ever-present throughout the history of Persia, appearing often during the downfalls of Persian kings, from Candaules to Xerxes. These women offer warnings and advice for these kings, but also punish them when they ignore these warnings and step beyond the bounds of propriety, fueled by a desire for the forbidden. By using women as advisors and retaliators for Persian kings, Herodotus emphasizes Persia's greed and resulting trespass of moral boundaries.

At the very beginning of the *Histories*, Herodotus introduces the idea of crossing a barrier through an episode directly involving a woman. The first story he tells after his brief introduction concerns Candaules and Gyges and explains how Gyges was able to assume the throne. However, it is Candaules' wife who is the central figure around whom these events revolve. There is little information given about Candaules, other than how he "thought [his wife] was the most beautiful woman on earth," having "conceived a passion" for her which verges on obsession (6). It is this "passion" which causes Candaules to overstep the boundaries of propriety and suggest Gyges view his wife naked, even though Gyges reminds him that "right and wrong were distinguished long ago" (6). However, Candaules does not seem to understand that possible consequences of urging his bodyguard "to behave contrary to custom," insisting that "there is nothing to be afraid of... either from [him] or [his] wife" (6). It is possible that his insistence merely results from a different view of morality than that of his wife and Gyges, but, as Candaules reminds Gyges to "mind she doesn't catch [him]," it would seem he is fully aware

of the violation of custom they are committing (6). Candaules is the first Persian king Herodotus discusses for more than just a brief moment, and he is the first to show the proclivity of Persian kings for breaking both moral and physical boundaries; a theme that will reoccur throughout the book. However, it is only Candaules' wife that can rectify the moral violation that has occurred, asking that Gyges kill either himself or her current husband, thereby making certain that the only man who has ever seen her naked will be her husband (7). It is also she who reminds Gyges that it his "blind obedience to the king" that has "tempt[ed him] to see what [he has] no right to see" (7). Just as Candaules is the first Persian leader seen to violate a boundary, it is his wife who is the first woman to serve as a reminder of true propriety.

This role of a woman as an upholder of morality is shown again when the Persian king Cyrus attempts to conquer the Massagetae and is pitted against Tomyris, their queen. However, Tomyris, unlike Candaules' wife, not only gives Cyrus retribution after he has gone too far, but also warns him beforehand, advising him "to abandon this enterprise, for [he] cannot know if in the end it will do [him] any good" (90). This role of advisor is also fulfilled in this episode by Croesus, who reminds Cyrus that "human life is like a revolving wheel and never allows the same people to continue long in prosperity" and gives him advice on how to attack the Messagatae (90). However, Croesus advice, no matter how wise, leads Cyrus to his doom, as it is this battle which finally claims Cyrus' life (93). If Cyrus had instead followed Tomyris' entreaties to "rule [his] own people, and try to bear the sight of [her] ruling [hers]," he might have gone on living (90). Unfortunately, Cyrus ignores Tomyris' advice and follows Croesus' instead, since he believes it will earn him more land and riches. As a result of his greed, Cyrus decides "to cross the river," going beyond the boundaries of his own empire and trespassing into that of Tomyris, only to then slaughter a third of Tomyris' army by underhanded means which

have “no smack of soldierly courage” (91). Tomyris gradually turns from advisor to avenger, engaging Cyrus in a battle “more violent than any other fought between foreign nations” after he has once again refused her offer of truce (93). By the end of this battle, Tomyris has punished Cyrus for his trespass into her country by “push[ing] his head into a skin which she [has] filled with human blood” and proved the falsity of “his belief in his superhuman origin” which had “roused his ambition and [given] him courage to undertake this new war” in the first place (89). Tomyris both warns and punishes Cyrus for his greed and his hubris, restoring balance just as Candaules’ wife had done with Gyges.

During the Battle of Salamis, the female commander Artemisia serves in a major role as an advisor to the Persian king Xerxes. However, she also serves to emphasize Xerxes loss of power, in contrasting her conquering strength as a woman with Xerxes’ powerlessness as a man. Before the Battle of Salamis has even begun, Artemisia asserts her power, noting how “[her] past services give [her] the right to advise [him] now” when Xerxes asks all his commanding officers for counsel (522). It is Artemisia who reminds Xerxes that he has already “taken Athens, the main objective of the war,” suggesting that any further conquests by Xerxes into Greece would be unwarranted and only the result of greed (523). Artemisia’s suggestion to wait, rather than attack, is unique, as all of Xerxes’ male commanders “were unanimously in favor of engaging the Greek fleet” (522). However, it is likely this suggestion from Artemisia would have saved Xerxes from the defeat the Battle of Salamis brought him, for the Greek forces were already experiencing internal conflict and would almost certainly have disbanded had the Persians not forced their hand (525, 527). However, just as Cyrus ignored Tomyris, Xerxes ignores Artemisia, despite having been “highly pleased” with her advice, and decides to enter into the battle that will be his final defeat in Greece (523).

It is also over the course of this battle that Xerxes begins to dwindle in perceived power alongside Artemisia, who conversely rises to power as the battle goes on. When she sinks a ship belonging to an ally of Xerxes, he mistakenly assumes that she has instead sunk an enemy ship (530). In fact, “by this very act which harm[s] the king [Artemisia raises] herself higher than ever in Xerxes’ esteem,” suggesting that Xerxes is no longer able to manage his own armies, unable to discern the loyal from the disloyal (530). This disempowerment of Xerxes is continued when he proclaims, “My men have turned into women, my women into men,” implying that his male-dominated army has become weak and ineffective, thereby acknowledging his own lack of power (530). The ultimate blow to Xerxes’ authority comes after “he realize[s] the extent of the disaster” of the Battle of Salamis and desires to flee to Persia, yet cannot take action without first asking Artemisia for her advice (533, 535). Even though Artemisia’s advice is “the expression of his own thoughts,” Xerxes feels unable to act without her approval (536). Though Artemisia does not directly reprimand Xerxes for going too far in his desire to conquer Greece, her rise to a position of power over him diminishes his image of strength, and it is her advice which gives him the permission he needs to return to Persia and retreat from the country in which he has trespassed. Artemisia curbs Xerxes’ greed, allowing the restoration of the boundary between Greece and Persia.

However, before the *Histories* reach their final conclusion, Xerxes is punished once more by a woman after he has crossed moral boundaries, echoing back to the very first instance of trespass that Herodotus described. In this last episode, Amestris, Xerxes’ wife, serves primarily as an avenger, rather than an advisor, after she has discovered Xerxes’ affections for his daughter-in-law Artaynte. Just as Candaules was aware of the illicit nature of his plan for Gyges, so is Xerxes clearly aware of the violation he is committing, as he is “afraid of Amestris, who

already guessed what was going on” (599). However, just as Candaules’ wife found out about her husband’s treachery too late to advise him away from it, so does Amestris, and so is left with only the path of vengeance. In its similarity to the episode of Gyges and Candaules, Amestris’ revenge emphasizes the constant presence of women throughout Persian history and their necessity in order to curb the immoral desires of Persian leaders.

As leaders of the Persian empire, the Persian kings are all representative of Persian values. Their downfalls are repeated throughout Herodotus’ *Histories* for the same reason—crossing a boundary from the moral to the immoral. However, these downfalls are almost always accompanied by a female presence that seeks to keep the balance of morality intact and to keep Persia from giving into its constant desire for the forbidden. Herodotus views Persia as a country that values material wealth, unlike Greece, which values pure honor, shown when Xerxes is unable to understand why Greek men would “compete with one another for no material reward, but only for honour” (509). Women such as Tomyris, Artemisia and the respective wives of Candaules and Xerxes hold Persia back from straying over the boundaries of morality as a result of these material values, fulfilling the same role as Greece in defending against trespass.