Orientalism in Ancient Literature and its Transmission into Modern Popular Culture

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Orientalism in Ancient Literature and its Transmission into Modern Popular Culture

By
Alan Jerome Wheeler

Accepted in Partial Completion of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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Master’s Thesis

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Alan J Wheeler

March 4, 2024
Orientalism in Ancient Literature and its Transmission into Modern Popular Culture

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Alan Jerome Wheeler
February 2024
Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the bias writers in the ancient world had in their portrayals of Achaemenid Persians, how that bias permeated the written record for thousands of years to influence twentieth and twenty-first century historians, and how the accumulated bias in turn became part of modern popular culture. Orientalism, the mechanism for studying and understanding the negative portrayal of the Middle East in European texts conceived of by Edward Said, is applied throughout this work when discussing modern sources. These portrayals are always negatively comparing the Eastern world to the Western with Europe as the positive – the West is logical, the East is superstitious; the West is chaste, the East is perverse, etc. Despite Said’s intention that this theory is intended for texts from the modern age, I apply it in an ahistorical manner to ancient sources, particularly Herodotus’s *The Histories*, as I argue that an Orientalist bias appeared before the European colonialization of the Middle East and Asia. In analyzing modern popular culture sources like the graphic novel and movie *300*, the film *Alexander*, and others, I conclude that these sources embrace the Orientalist themes, particularly the concept that the East, which is primarily made up of Black and other people of color, are invaders set on destroying the Western world. Further, I argue that inherent in these portrayals is the repeated insistence that the East is homosexual, which is always cast as a negative, and that such biased depictions are harmful to modern populations.
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To my incredibly patient and wonderful wife Holly, who has endured my many (many) years of procrastination and excuses, thank you for supporting us. I love you.

William! My sweet son, my world, my little buddy, this is what I was working on when you asked me to play with you and I said “not now, sweety, I’m sorry but I have to work.” No more! Now we can wrestle and play and game as much as you want. I love you so much and for ever.
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Introduction

In 480 BCE Greek forces, led by a Spartan contingent, assembled at the mountain pass known as Thermopylae – the Hot Gates. This was intended to be a delaying action in order to provide the bulk of the armies of Greece to prepare for the coming Persian invasion. The Persian empire, led by Xerxes I, pushed westward in an attempt to secure trade routes around the Black Sea where Greek colonies had been sprouting up; to Persia, these routes were seen as in their sphere of influence. The mixed-Greek forces unit at Thermopylae managed to hold out for three days before virtually all of them were killed and the Persian forces continued on. Eventually the Persians entered Greece proper, burned Athens to the ground, and returned to Persia, largely satisfied with their efforts. The primary source for this Greco-Persian War is Herodotus’s *The Histories*, written a few decades after the war. Herodotus, himself a Greek man born in Persian-controlled Halicarnassus, is widely known as the father of History, and his work is still regularly read in classrooms around the world. The events and people of the Greco-Persian War are colored with his opinions and biases, which in turn suffused through the centuries and influence readers in the modern era. Herodotus was so effective in his framing of the conflict, in his admiration for the Greek forces, and particularly the Spartans, that they are now essentially deified in 21st century Western culture, particularly in the United States.

This thesis is a study of the historiography of Achaemenid Persia and the Greco-Persian wars and will examine how historical, Orientalist portrayals of these Persians have been adopted by contemporary historians and introduced into modern popular culture. That portrayal in our modern media is overwhelmingly negative, with movies, video games, and literature showing Persians, and therefore the Eastern world, as corrupt, villainous, sexually depraved, and the
constant enemy of the Western world and that negative portrayals can be dangerous to the people being represented.

To demonstrate the damage that can be done from negative representations, I will employ a framework based around the critical concept of Orientalism. The term Orientalism was coined by the Palestinian-American writer Edward Said in the late 1970s to describe the relationship between the “West” and the “East,” or more specifically, Europe and the Middle East and Asia. According to Said, this relationship is not equal, saying that “in terms of the relations, “Europe was always in a position of strength, not to say domination [of Asia].”\(^1\) Drawing on the writings of 19th and 20th century European politicians, Said observed the terms used to frequently defined Middle Easterners and Asians, and that those European writers described them as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different,” thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal.”\(^2\) When examining the literature of the West, Said noted that the in imagined geography of Orientalism, “Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant.”\(^3\) The Oriental was fecund, sensuous, degenerate. Where Europeans were logical, intelligent, skeptical, Asians were “shown to be gullible, “devoid of energy and initiative,” much given to ‘fulsome flattery,’ intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals.”\(^4\) They could not understand the function of a road or sidewalk, and “in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race.”\(^5\) Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the West was masculine

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2 Said, 40.
3 Said, 57.
4 Said, 38.
5 Said, 39.
whereas the east was feminine. This concept developed by Said, where the East is compared negatively to the West, is at the crux of my argument for this thesis.

According to Said, while there had always been a relationship between the Western world and the Eastern, for the purposes of his theory Orientalism really began with Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt as part of the larger war of the Second Coalition. Napoleon’s invasion focused the eye of the Western world onto Egypt and the discoveries which came out of the region, prominent among them the Rosetta Stone which excited an interest in the ancient Egyptian writing system, and within a decade periodicals attempting to detail and explain “the Orient” were published, as the fledgling field of Orientalism began to grow. This is the time period from which the majority of Said’s references are pulled, as multiple empires had more contact with this region than they previously had before; to Said, Orientalism was largely a construct of the modern world, based on modern and biased observations. Despite this, I will apply his methods and framework in an ahistorical context and thousands of years removed from the events Said studied. I will argue that the ancient writing of Herodotus, Aeschylus, and others contain prejudices against the Eastern world that can be understood as an Orientalist view.

Orientalism will also be applied when examining and discussing my secondary sources. These sources are all from the perspective of the Western world and each contain biases and prejudices against the Eastern world, with all of them using Herodotus and other ancient writers as sources. Orientalism will connect my primary sources to the secondary sources, and in turn connect to the modern popular culture sources, with all the negative portrayals which are found in Said’s framework.

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6 Said, 42.
7 Said, 43.
In addition to the framework provided by Said and Orientalism, I will utilize the article “How To Do The History Of Male Homosexuality” by David M. Halperin, in which the author describes four models to which same-sex behaviors are constructed. Halperin is trained as a classicist and has written extensively on the history of sexuality and on ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. He is included to critically assess portrayals and claims of homosexuality throughout the popular culture media in this thesis. With this article I will demonstrate that despite how several of these movies and books portray Greece as a purely heterosexual society and intentionally portray homosexuals and non-heteronormative people in a negative light, there were people in ancient Greece who we would understand today as homosexual. While Said’s framework does not directly reference homosexuality, he does discuss sexuality in general and how the East is debauched, how it “offended sexual propriety,” in much the same way homosexuality is viewed by some still to this day.²

I will begin by examining the history of the establishment of the Achaemenid empire in 559 BCE, as Cyrus II consolidated his rule in Anshan and expanded his empire through Media, past Babylon and beyond to Asia Minor, projecting power as far west as Macedonia. After this section which sets the Persian Empire in context, I will turn to an examination of ancient sources. These ancient sources I am engaging with are exclusively from the Greco-Roman world and are primarily seen as having a “Western” perspective, and as such contain a bias against the Achaemenids and rest of the Eastern world. Since the primary argument of this thesis is that there existed a strain of Orientalism in ancient writings from the West, I interact exclusively with sources from the West, and exclude Persian and other sources.

² Said, 167.
Ancient historians including Herodotus, Aeschylus, and Livy are some of the earliest authors who discussed Cyrus the Great and Achaemenid Persia, and many of their works have carried enormous weight throughout the ages as they came to be seen as authoritative. Herodotus especially has been revered as the father of History, as he is the first to use the term *historia*, which means “to inquire,” and break away from the Homeric model of reciting the past and is seen as one of the most important writers of the Classical period, with many modern works of history relying on him and *The Histories*. After this examination of ancient sources, I will analyze and discuss how they have been used by modern historians, and how many modern historians still include strong elements of bias against Cyrus and the Persians. I will show that when these authors address Persian culture, they do so by comparing it negatively to that of the Greeks, and particularly the Spartans.

More than a few twentieth century historians, like Ernle Bradford, Peter Green, and Richard Frye, have embraced a view that Cyrus and his descendants were tyrannical monsters who were bent on dominating Greece, controlling the entirety of the ancient world, and imposing Persian culture on their subjects, even though we have enough historical evidence to know that this was not the case. In this thesis I will demonstrate that the Achaemenid empire was seen as more tolerant of personal and cultural beliefs, allowing people to maintain their own religions and places of worship.

The selection of secondary sources chosen for evaluation here are made of those most accessible to general audiences. As with the primary sources, the secondary sources I have selected are by Western authors and are from the Western perspective. The enables me to analyze the extent to which a bias from Herodotus and the other ancient sources appears in these secondary sources. As such, I do not include any secondary sources from a Persian or Eastern
perspective. Ernle Bradford is included in this thesis due to the easily accessible nature of his work. *Thermopylae: The Battle for the West* has been in print since 1980 and is a breezy 245 pages of popular history with little analysis and, as demonstrated by the choice of words in the title, the author had laid out sides regarding his positioning. He makes it clear there that this is not a battle for land, or trade routes, or even for Greece – rather, this is a battle to determine the fate of the Western world. Further, several online reviews of this book reference another which I will discuss later, Steven Pressfield’s *Gates of Fire*, a historical fiction novel detailing the same events. Bradford also referenced and thanked two other sources with which I will engage, Peter Green and Richard Frye. Bradford, presenting an explicitly Western-centric perspective, states outright that “although there can be no doubt that Greek culture was infinitely superior in many respects to that of Persia, it is only from the Greek Herodotus that we gain any real idea about the Persian Empire, the Persians themselves leaving only self-aggrandizing monuments of monarchs.” While Bradford has nothing but disdain for and an Orientalist view of the Persians, Frye is more appreciative of them, although he limits that admiration: “[o]ur view of the Achaemenid empire and its achievement is, of course, somewhat distorted by the brilliant light of Greece. But have we not perhaps asked the wrong question of the Orient in antiquity, as we still do today? One asked why the Orient remained behind the Greeks, as we ask why the Orient today remains under-developed.” He has a more benevolent view of Persia than Bradford, but nevertheless it is one stained by the perceptions of ancient historians like Herodotus and loaded with Orientalism. Frye, who was a specialist in Iran and Central Asia during the time of the


Greco-Persian wars, and was so fond of Iran and its people that he requested to have his remains interred there upon his death, was not without discussing the region in Orientalist terms.

Other modern authors continue Bradford’s framing of the decades-long conflict between the two powers as a clash between the “East” and the “West,” with the future of Western civilization in danger of being snuffed out. Peter Green is a classical historian focusing on ancient Greece, Persia, Alexander III of Macedon, and the wars of the period. Like Bradford, he is a veteran of the Second World War, and is included because of his experience in the field. Green is not without his biases; for example, he contrasts “the towering, autocratic figure of the Great King” and “the voluntary and imperfect discipline of proudly independent citizens,” and condemns Persia for producing no philosophers or moralities, even though our understanding of Achaemenid-era Zoroastrianism informs us that they were influenced by a highly developed set of beliefs and morals that made them keenly aware of how their actions would affect others.\(^\text{11}\) Regardless, these historians insist on describing Greek culture as more civilized, erudite, and valuable than Persian culture.

After examining these historians and their bias against Persia, which was the result of perpetuating biases inherent in the Greek perspective, I will explore the impact of contemporary Western biases in the study of popular perceptions of Persia through the lens of Said’s *Orientalism*. His critique of the western historical and cultural portrayals of the East are relevant to modern discussions of how modern historians like Bradford, Frye, Green, and others discuss the Middle East and the parts of the world ruled by the Achaemenid Empire.

The bias of ancient sources against the East has been transmitted into the modern world and our media, with each step of that transmission carrying some element of Orientalism. The biases reflect the fact that Herodotus contrasts the Persians culturally with the Greeks, with the former being identified with greed, chaos, base emotion, and femininity, while the latter are the epitome of law, order, logic, and masculine heroics. Herodotus, when describing military actions of the Greeks and Persians, habitually casts the Persians as cowards, weaklings, or less than manly, as he did after the first contact between Spartans and Persians at Thermopylae: it was “plain to everyone, however, and above all to the king himself (Xerxes), that although he had plenty of troops, he did not have many men.”\(^{12}\) Not only are the Persian warriors effeminate, their king himself is erratic and overemotional, as Herodotus tells of the instance when Xerxes tried to cross the Hellespont.\(^{13}\) These sentiments, that Persians were erratic, illogical, and effeminate, has made its way into the popular culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in works like 300 and Gates of Fire.

In exploring the Orientalist nature of ancient sources and modern historiography, I will demonstrate how the Greco-Persian wars have been appearing in popular culture over the last twenty-plus years in the form of movies, historical fiction, graphic novels, and video games. I will demonstrate that many forms of media depict the Persians in a negative light and are informing modern audiences with this negative portrayal of Achaemenid Persia; for many


\(^{13}\) Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.34.; According to Herodotus, the Great King was so enraged upon learning that the bridge had been destroyed that he ordered that the Hellespont be lashed three hundred times and for his men to “revile it [the sea] in terms you would never hear from a Greek.” The men lashing the sea do so, exclaiming “bitter water, your master is imposing this penalty upon you for wronging him even though you had suffered no injustice from him. And King Xerxes will cross you whether you like it or not. It is for just cause, after all, that no human offers you sacrifice: you are a turbid and briny river!”
viewers these unfavorable representations are the first time they will have encountered ancient Persia. This negative portrayal of an ancient Middle Eastern culture is especially important considering the West’s, and specifically America’s, long and fractious relationship with the modern Middle East, particularly over the general time frame in which many of these popular books and movies have been released.

Throughout *The Histories* Herodotus mentions aspects of various peoples’ cultural practices, including what they ate, how they greeted each other, how they handled the dead, and more. At no point does he mention homosexuality, a common practice and one which he would have been familiar with. Despite this, the secondary popular culture sources I am using here all conflate the Persians and other people from the East with homosexuality in such a way that it can only be interpreted as a negative connotation. These movies, graphic novels, books, and television show all have their Greek or Western protagonists refer to Xerxes specifically and Persians generally as homosexuals using slurs or imagery meant to make it clear that homosexuality is part and parcel of the Eastern world. In this way it has become part of the portrayal of Orientalism in these pop culture properties. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries homosexuality has been associated with many of the negative descriptions that the East has been as defined by Said and is for many part of a binary much the way West and East are – heterosexuality is chaste, homosexuality is promiscuous. Heterosexuality is pure, homosexuality is perverse. Heterosexuality is normal, homosexuality is abnormal. With this binary established in much of modern popular culture it has become easy for authors and directors to link the two concepts, those being the racism of Orientalism and the bias against homosexuality. In this thesis I will show how racism and homosexuality have become intertwined to the extent that they are
all but indistinguishable from each other and are often used simultaneously to make the same point: that the Eastern world is different and lesser than the Western world.

The first chapter will introduce a history of the Achaemenid Empire and Classical Greece before transitioning to an examination of Herodotus and the other ancient sources, their motives, the era in which they were living, and how they portrayed the ancient Persians. The main primary sources surveyed in this chapter include Herodotus’s *The Histories*, Aeschylus’s *Persians*, and a brief look at Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*. I will also examine the ways modern historians have interpreted and been influenced by those ancient historians and their sources. Herodotus, our Father of History, is a common thread linking these historians; all of these modern historians will have read him, analyzed him, and incorporated something of his work into theirs. Many of them are upfront about their bias regarding the Greco-Persian wars. Ernle Bradford in his introduction comes right out and makes a declaration that Greek civilization and culture were superior to that of Persia, and his title, *The Battle for the West*, makes it clear he is arguing that a Greek victory was instrumental in preserving “Western civilization.” Others like Peter Green also make this claim, while historians like Richard Frye are more neutral on the matter, though he cannot avoid several displays of his anti-Persian bias.

The second chapter will address the ways in which popular culture has embraced the Greeks of this period and set them against the Persians by inspecting the portrayal of ancient Persia in modern media. Frank Miller wrote the graphic novel which inspired *300* and its sequel, *300: Rise of an Empire*. Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* premiered before *300*, was less stylized than that adaptation, and may have appealed to a different demographic than the pair of *300* movies. The popular animated show *South Park* produced an episode heavily based on the movie *300* shortly after it was released, including biased portrayals of Persians. These popular depictions are
readily available to consumers and can focus more on entertainment and narrative than historical fact and rigor. Both this chapter and the following will include discussion with Edward Said and Orientalism, as many of these works are laden with Orientalist depictions of Persia. In addition to the overtly positive light in which these sources describe the Spartans, they appear in many different places – the ubiquity of Spartan culture demonstrates the importance of them in our modern society and the inherent risks associated with biased portrayals. These popular and recurring representations of negative stereotypes can ultimately be harmful.

**Chapter 1. Historical Background**

*Persian History*

Around 600 BCE Cyrus II was born in the kingdom of Anšan, which is now in the modern country of Iran. Cyrus II’s great-grandfather Teispes was king there under an Elamite overlord, and their control over the region began to wane until Cyrus was able to challenge the Medes in the 550s. After consolidating his power in Anšan and defeating Astyages and the Medes, Cyrus turned his attention west and to Asia Minor. Sometime between 546 and 541 BCE Cyrus fought and defeated the Lydian king Croesus and captured his capital at Sardis, gaining a substantial amount of treasure and an uneasy foothold in Asia Minor and to the doorstep of Europe.14 Croesus became part of Cyrus’s entourage and was later given a Median city over which he

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could rule and so continue to live in a lifestyle according to his rank, a tactic that Cyrus would employ again.\textsuperscript{15}

After settling matters in Asia Minor, Cyrus moved down the Phoenician coast and forced them to accept his rule; at this point, it is likely that he had both the largest army and navy in the region at that time.\textsuperscript{16} By 539 he turned his attention to the Neo-Babylonian state, the last substantial political entity in the area that represented a threat to him. The last king of the Neo-Babylonian empire, Nabonidus, has often been portrayed as an absent and impious king, spending much of his time away from Babylon in Teima, Arabia, establishing a cult to the god Sīn rather than paying tribute to the chief god of Babylon, Marduk. After defeating and deposing Nabonidus, Cyrus commissioned a foundation deposit, since referred to as the Cyrus Cylinder, which laid out the argument Cyrus made for his legitimate rule over Babylon.\textsuperscript{17}

After securing Babylon, Cyrus continued his military campaigns, expanding the nascent Achaemenid empire. From about 538 to 530, Cyrus “took control of Parthia, Aria, and Margiana, as well as Bactria, Sogdiana and Ferghana in the northeast, and fought against the Massagetae, probably one of the Scythian tribes who occupied the territory east of the River Jaxartes.”\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} Briant, 36.
\textsuperscript{18} Brosius, 12.
\end{flushright}
the time of his death in 530 BCE, Cyrus’s empire reached from the Bosporus Straight in the West to the Jaxartes River in Central Asia, with the core being the old imperial land of Babylon.

Several of Cyrus’s successors added territory to the empire. His son and heir Cambyses II brought Egypt into the empire before his untimely death in 522 BCE. The next long-term ruler, Darius I, went on to push the empire further east by adding Punjab and Sind and further west by moving into northern Greece.\textsuperscript{19} By the time of the Greco-Persian War, the Achaemenid Empire stretched from the Indus river in the east to the Bosporous in the west, the Aral sea in the north and down the Nile river valley in the south.

The Immortals were a handpicked force of elite Persians who were among the best trained of Xerxes’s army; according to Herodotus they numbered 10,000, and when one Immortal would die or retire, his position would be filled, always keeping the number of soldiers the same.\textsuperscript{20} A number of ancient sources detail the composition and equipment of the Persian army during this time. Herodotus, for example, describes not only the Persians and their felt caps and armor like fish scales, but the Assyrians with bronze helmets, Bactrians with caps and reed bows, Arabs in long robes, Paphlagonians with plaited helmets and long boots, and more.\textsuperscript{21} The nations Xerxes assembled each had their own unique arms and armor representing diverse peoples across the region.

\textit{Greek History}

The Greek world with which the Persians found themselves in conflict was the Classical Greek civilization, certainly the one most familiar to viewers and readers. The fifth and fourth centuries BCE in Greece represented the end of the Archaic Period and beginning of the Classical

\textsuperscript{19} Bardiya, supposedly Cyrus’s youngest son and Cambyses heir, reigned for less than a year and was overthrown by Darius I, did not add to the empire.
\textsuperscript{20} Herodotus VII.61.
\textsuperscript{21} Herodotus, 7.61-72.
Period.\textsuperscript{22} This was the period of the \textit{polis}, the Greek city-states which defined the region for centuries. The \textit{poleis} were culturally similar; they spoke dialects of the same language, shared the same religious beliefs, placed importance on the communal market and gathering space of the agora. At the same time, these poleis were politically distinct, with some like Sparta a monarchy where its rival Athens practiced a form of democracy.

In the centuries leading up to the wars with Persia, the Greek world planted trading ventures which blossomed into Greek colonies throughout the Mediterranean world including along the coast of Asia Minor, parts of Italy, and around the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{23} Many of these colonies in Asia Minor eventually fell under Persian rule, existing for the most part peacefully and allowed to maintain their Greek culture and beliefs, as was common in the Achaemenid empire.\textsuperscript{24} Darius the Great even expanded westward to include Thrace and parts of Macedon, and his new Greek subjects coexisted in relative comfort as Persia’s first European satrapy.\textsuperscript{25}

However, in 499 BCE several poleis in Asia Minor rose up in revolt against their Persian overlord, largely because they viewed the imposed taxes as too high.\textsuperscript{26} The Ionian Revolt, as it became known, was quickly crushed by Darius, who did allow the cities the right to elect their own leaders, rather than install Persian rulers. Athenian support for this revolt irked the Persians, who believed that this revolt could happen again if the Persian-controlled poleis turned their gaze West and decided to forge alliances with the Greeks there.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\addcontentsline{toc}{section}{References}
\item[22] Cole, 62.
\item[24] Briand, 64.
\item[25] Ball, 45.
\item[26] Briand, 149.
\item[27] Cole, 73.
\end{thebibliography}
This line of thinking led Darius to make a preemptive strike on Athens and Eretria in 490 BCE. After razing Eretria, Darius and his army turned to Athens; it was here that Persia suffered (to them) a minor defeat at Marathon, something which was quickly seized by Athens and others in the Greek world as a major victory. Furthermore, it has become seen as the first blow of the West against the tyrannical East.

In 480 BCE Xerxes, Darus’s son and successor, assembled an army and set off to invade mainland Greece. Many poleis quickly surrendered as Xerxes’s army wound its way through Greece; a few thousand Greeks, famously including some three hundred Spartans plus their helots, attempted to stage a delaying action at the mountain pass of Thermopylae. Like the battle at Marathon, this battle has become an enduring component of Europe and the West’s way of viewing itself, in opposition to tyranny from the East. In 479 BCE the Persian army was defeated at Plataea and they returned to Persia, generally satisfied with occupying and burning Athens.

Ancient Historians

Herodotus

Herodotus, our Father of History, was born in Halicarnassus, in Asia Minor, sometime during the Greco-Persian Wars. From what little is known about his life, Herodotus probably lived until 420 BCE and so was positioned to witness the aftermath of Persian War and the

28 Briant, 149.
29 Ball, 58.
30 Brosius, 24.
31 Brosius, 24.
32 Ball, 63.
33 Strassler, ix-x.
beginning of the Peloponnesian War. In addition to living in Halicarnassus, Herodotus spent some time in the Athenian colony of Thurii in Italy, and traveled and lived throughout the Greek Mediterranean world, travels which shaped and influenced his opinions of the people he would write about. In addition to being a history of what was understood to be the world, *The Histories* is also an ethnographic work, as Herodotus collected and studied the behaviors, customs, and physical attributes of Scythians, Egyptians, Persians, and many others.

As I will demonstrate below, in addition to his paramount place in academic historical work, Herodotus and *The Histories* have been an important source of inspiration for movies, television shows, video games, comic books, and other forms of entertainment for decades, and is commonly read by public audiences. *The Histories* has been an enormously influential work in the more than 2,400 years of its existence. For more than two thousand years, ever since the Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero proclaimed Herodotus the Father of History, that appellation has stuck. His name is rarely mentioned without “Father of History” preceding or following, whether it is mentioned in a textbook, video, or dictionary. “A Smaller Classical Dictionary,” part of an early 20th century collection of reference books called the Everyman’s Library, immediately refers to Herodotus as the Father of History. The textbook “An Introduction to the Ancient World” by Routledge for “students of history…whether at college, at undergraduate level or among the wider reading public” does the same.

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34 Strassler, x.
the TED organization known for their talks across disciplines and about a host of topics, maintains a YouTube channel with animated shorts in a similar vein; their episode titled “Why is Herodotus called “The Father of History”? has been viewed more than two and a quarter million times since it was uploaded in 2017. The Wikipedia article for Herodotus mentions the phrase Father of History in the first paragraph. Very Short Introductions, a series by Oxford University Press provide readers with short and concise introductions on a wealth of topics, from science to the humanities to art and beyond, all written by experts in the field; the Very Short Introduction about Herodotus also refers to him as the Father of History. In the Editor’s Preface of The Landmark Herodotus, editor Robert Strassler says that “Herodotus has been called the ‘father of history,’ and whether or not we would credit him with originating the field, we in the English-speaking world must admit that his work is the progenitor of much that we now call history.” Arnaldo Momigliano, historian of historiography, said of Herodotus and his position as the father of history, “we cannot say how much he owed to earlier writers. But we know enough about Herodotus’ alleged predecessors—Cadmus of Miletus, Hecataeus, Dionysius of Miletus, Charon of Lampsacus, Xanthus of Sardes—to state confidently that they did not do the work for him. There was no Herodotus before Herodotus.” Momigliano argued that while there may have been men who wrote history before Herodotus, the breadth and depth of Herodotus’s

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41 Strassler, xxxvii.
research and writings proves that he deserves his singular place in history. Finding a reference to him without the moniker “Father of History” is possible, but unlikely.

Certainly, virtually every book, monograph, article, or paper written about the Persian Wars, Achaemenid Persia, the Scythians, the ancient Mediterranean, Marathon, and a hundred other topics has cited or referenced *The Histories*. Every ancient historian and classicist has at least one copy of Herodotus on their bookshelf, if not more, and every college student enrolled in an introductory Ancient History or ‘Western Civilization’ course has encountered him. Due to the age of the work, *The Histories* is considered to be in the public domain, meaning that anyone can publish it and no permission is needed to do so. This means that any university or publishing house can produce their own edition of *The Histories*, and that anyone can offer a translation or commentary, resulting in millions of copies across the United States alone, to say nothing of the availability in other countries and in digital, online formats. Herodotus and *The Histories* is readily and inexpensively available to anyone who wants to obtain a copy.

This availability is a mixed blessing. On one hand, it allows almost anyone to access an important work of history and the opportunity to explore a viewpoint from antiquity. On the other hand, such widespread ease of access means that many who will read *The Histories* may do so casually, uncritically, and without considering potentially problematic aspects of the text. Reading uncritically is especially problematic for a text like *The Histories*, considering the many and well-known problems inherent in the text. Issues of Herodotus’s reliability have existed for at least a few centuries. Voltaire, the eighteenth-century French historian and philosopher, at one

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point described him as “Herodotus, who does not always lie.” This is a common refrain from Voltaire, who often applied the word ‘fable’ to Herodotus and his work, as can be seen in Voltaire’s own *History*: “But when Herodotus recounts the stories he heard, his book reads like a novel resembling Milesian fables.” Voltaire did concede, however, that “The closer that Herodotus comes to his own time, the truer and more informed his history becomes.” To Voltaire, Herodotus probably was not intentionally lying or telling fables, he was just so far removed from some of the events about which he was writing that he did not know fact from fiction.

Herodotus may be the most well-known ancient historian, but his contemporaries also wrote about the Greco-Persian War and did so with the same bias he did.

*Aeschylus*

Aeschylus, unlike Herodotus, was born before the events of the Persian wars and indeed fought at Marathon against Darius and later during the invasion of Xerxes. Aeschylus was so proud of his part at Marathon that his epithet mentions not his written works but rather his bravery, reading: “This tomb in grain-bearing Gela covers an Athenian, Aeschylus son of

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Euphorion, who died here. The famous grove of Marathon could tell of his courage and the longhaired Mede knew it well.\textsuperscript{47}

His play, \textit{The Persians}, is considered to be among the first Greek tragedies written and performed, with its first recorded performance dating to 472 BCE, shortly after the events depicted occurred.\textsuperscript{48} Set in the Persian court, \textit{The Persians} is a lamentation about the failure of Xerxes in Europe and the loss of Persian men in the process. Throughout the play, Aeschylus describes the Persians, and particularly Xerxes, in negative and biased ways.

Upon hearing from the Messenger that the Persian fleet was destroyed and the army was smashed, Atossa, widow of Darius and mother to Xerxes, wonders “Who is not dead?/ And whom shall we mourn?/ Of all the leaders/ whose hands grip authority/ which one/ left his post unmanned, deserted/ when he died?”\textsuperscript{49} Xerxes, who returned to Asia after the capture and destruction of Athens, left an army in Greece under the command of Mardonios; he lost a major battle at Plataea and ultimately seems to be blamed for abandoning his post.

During his recounting of the battle, the Messenger is less than flattering in his Orientalist description of Xerxes, who watched his army from a throne. Atossa asks the Messenger how the Persian soldiers died; he tells her of Xerxes and his reaction, saying “Then Xerxes moaned out loud/ to see how deep disaster cut./ Throned on a headland above the sea, he’d/ kept his whole army clear in sight./ And he ripped his clothes/ and screamed/ and gave shrill hasty shouts to his


whole land force/ dismissing them./ They fled in disorder.” Aeschylus is showing his audience an over-emotional Asian king, one who rent his clothes and shrilly screamed at seeing a battle, the same erratic king who lashed the Hellespont in rage.

Continuing with this narrative, Aeschylus’s Chorus accused Xerxes of destroying his army, saying “The Persians’ proud and manswollen army, now/ You’ve destroyed it.” Later in the same verse, the Chorus asks Xerxes to listen to Asia groan with the loss of son – “Xerxes conveyed them/ HE CONVEYED THEM/ Xerxes destroyed them/ HE DESTROYED THEM/ Xerxes the hothead brought on the whole rout.” He is then negatively compared to his father who never would have made such a mistake: “Once/ we knew Darius’ rule/ a bowchief who/ never volleyed such hurt/ and Susa’s men loved him/ WHY HAVE TIMES CHANGED?” Aeschylus not only refers to Xerxes as a hothead but strongly implies he did not have the same support from the people as his father did. In fact, the Chorus chants later that Darius was such a good king that “Never once/ did he kill men with/ Folly’s blind and life-devouring haste/ He was/ called the Persians’ godbright counselor/ and godbright counselor/ he was/ who steered the army on a true course.” Xerxes, in addition to running when his army was destroyed and being called out on his temper, is less of a ruler than his father.

Darius, when his shade appears, questions Xerxes’s readiness and fitness to rule. As he recited some of his ancestry and the men who served under great men like Cyrus, Darius said “Chosen by lot, I gained what I wished for/ and fought a thousand times with my fighting thousands/ but never/ threw evil like this on the nation./ But Xerxes my son, green in years./

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50 Aeschylus, 752-760.  
51 Aeschylus, 869-870; 889-893.  
52 Aeschylus, 895-900.  
53 Aeschylus, 1045-1050.
thinks green/ and forgets what I taught him.”

Then turning to the Chorus, Darius tells them that “But you, men of my own generation,/ plainly understand/ that everyone of us who has held power/ cannot be shown/ to have worked such devastation.”

Aeschylus described Xerxes as cowardly, inexperienced, hotheaded, and inept, and had these opinions expressed by other Persians. Xerxes’s mother Atossa, the ghost of Darius, and the Chorus, who are described as “old men, regents of Persia” all castigate Xerxes and blame him and him alone for the stunning loss in Europe, which was so tragic that it shook the continent of Europe.

Hellenistic and Roman Sources

The events of the Greco-Persian War were commented upon by later Classical historians, as the works of Herodotus and Aeschylus were read by later Greek and Roman writers. As with previous historians, these new ones found ways to include bias against Persians in their works. Ancient sources also commented on the effect that exposure to Persians and the East had on others. Alexander III of Macedon, due to a combination of his tactical prowess, strategic mistakes made by Persians satraps and Darius III, and a good dose of luck, defeated multiple Persian armies and chased Darius east across the empire until the Persian king was finally betrayed and killed by his few remaining soldiers. Establishing himself in Babylon, Alexander quickly began to adopt royal Persian customs, which not only irked his men but was behavior that was commented on later as a sign weakness and the danger of Asian influences.

54 Aeschylus, 1283-1289.
55 Aeschylus, 1290-1295.
56 Aeschylus, 32.
The Roman historian Livy, who died in the second decade of the Common Era, included a discussion of Alexander in his vast and now partially lost works on the history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita*. When relating the career of the general and consul Papirius Cursor, Livy was initially very complimentary of the Macedonian king. Papirius was such a skilled general that “people regard him as one who might have been a match in generalship for Alexander the Great, if the latter, after subjugating Asia, had turned his arms against Europe.”\(^5^7\) This recitation of the great qualities possessed by Papirius Cursor, his physical strength, how fast he could run, his heroic capacity for food and drink, his power of command, which led to the introduction of Alexander to Livy’s history in turn leads to a discussion where Livy imagined how famous Roman generals would compare in battle to Alexander. In doing so, however, Livy reveals an Orientalist bias against Persians and an opinion that exposure to them had a negative impact on Alexander. An imagined response from Alexander contains one such instance of this bias, as Livy thought Alexander “would have said it was not Darius whom he had to deal with, trailing women and eunuchs after him, and weighed down with the gold and purple trappings of his station. him he found a booty rather than an enemy, and conquered without bloodshed, merely by daring to despise vain shows.”\(^5^8\)

First, Livy is making a condescending reference to Darius III, Persian emperor from 335-330 BCE, who lost the empire to Alexander. Thinking that the upstart Macedonian king was just lucky and that making him face a Persian army led by a Persian king would quickly settle matters, Darius traveled with his army and several members of his immediate family to face

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\(^5^8\) Livy, Book 9.17.16.
Alexander at Issus in 333 BCE.\(^{59}\) Given the fact that Darius did bring his wife and mother along with him certainly indicates that he was feeling confident about his chances; unfortunately for him, his army was shattered and Darius fled the field so quickly that he abandoned his family to be captured by Alexander.\(^{60}\) Fortunately, the Macedonian recognized their station and treated them as royals; later Darius offered this same daughter to Alexander, hoping that buying him off with marriage and land would stop him.

But this incident, regardless of Darius’s wisdom in bringing his wife and daughter so close to a battle, is pointed out by Livy as being indicative of the Persians’ arrogance and pride. Darius was so confident in his chances that rather than bringing enough men, he brought “women and eunuchs after him,” and instead of materiel, he was “weighed down with the gold and purple trappings of his station.”\(^{61}\) At Issus, Alexander “found a booty rather than an enemy, and conquered without bloodshed, merely by daring to despise vain shows.”\(^{62}\) Livy added vanity to his charges of arrogance and pridefulness, three attributes that none of his Roman generals could be accused of.

The Alexander who fought Darius at Issus was different than the one who would claim the throne in Babylon – he was “not yet overwhelmed with prosperity.”\(^{63}\) Livy, in his thought experiment, envisioned Alexander later turning his attention to the Italian peninsula after conquering Persia. That hypothetical Alexander “would evidently have come to Italy more like

\(^{59}\) Ball, 74.
\(^{60}\) Considering that the Achaemenids had a traveling court and would relocate throughout their empire during the year, it is likely not hubris on the part of Darius that his family was there but rather more to do with them moving from one palace to another. For more on this, see Briant (186-7) and Llewellyn-Jones (150-1).
\(^{61}\) Livy, Book 9.17.16.
\(^{62}\) Livy, Book 9.17.18.
\(^{63}\) Livy, Book 8.18.
Darius than like Alexander, at the head of an army that had forgotten Macedonia and was already adopting the degenerate customs of the Persians.”  

Exposure to the Persian court had degenerated Alexander’s abilities and character in Livy’s mind. Alexander, Livy reminded his reader, adopted customs like “the ostentatious alteration in his dress, and of his desire that men should prostrate themselves in adulation, a thing which even conquered Macedonians would have found oppressive, much more than those who had been victorious.”  

Not only did Alexander adopt the humiliating habit of having his men prostrate themselves before him, there were also “cruel punishments and the murder of his friends as they drank and feasted; of the boastful lie about his origin. what if his love of wine had every day grown stronger? and his truculent and fiery anger?”  

Livy claimed that the brief time spent among Persians and in Babylon contaminated Alexander, who consumed wine at unhealthy rates, and became angrier, much in the vein of Xerxes, who became so enraged at his bridge washing out that he whipped the Hellespont. Alexander lost his good Greek self and fell into the mold of the degenerate Asian kings.

The Athenian writer and rhetorician Isocrates was an early and ardent voice when it came to the matter of Europe and the concept of conflict between Europe and Asia. Isocrates was born some fifty years after the Greco-Persian War and during his life saw the Peloponnesian War, which resulted in his family losing land to the Spartans. His writings concerned a wide range of topics, including education, rhetoric, religion, morality, philosophy, political theory, and history. In these last two topics especially, Isocrates reveals a deep-seated bias against Persians,

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64 Livy, Book 9.18.
65 Livy, Book 9.18.
framing his arguments as a superior Europe, meaning Greece, versus an inferior Persia, meaning Asia.

The concept of Europe in Isocrates’s time was largely connected to the Grecian world; while the broader European continent was known to the Greeks, and parts had been colonized, when Isocrates uses the word “Europe,” he means Greece.\textsuperscript{69} In his letter to Philip II of Macedon, Isocrates laments that fact that they can see Asia flourishing more than Europe and the barbarians enjoying a greater prosperity than the Hellenes; and, what is more, to see those who derive their power from Cyrus, who as a child was cast out by his mother on the public highway, addressed by the title of “The Great King,” while the descendants of Heracles, who because of his virtue was exalted by his father to the rank of a god, are addressed by meaner titles than they. We must not allow this state of affairs to go on; no, we must change and reverse it entirely.\textsuperscript{70}

Isocrates, in his attempt to persuade Philip to make war on Persia, clearly laid out his belief that the Persian empire, founded by the castoff Cyrus, was inferior to Greeks, who are descended from the very gods. His choice of language here is what makes Isocrates’s rhetoric different than his Hellenic peers, though. He mentions Cyrus, and the Persians and Greeks, but his main focus is on the two continents – to him, this conflict is larger than two nations and instead two worlds, the European world, and the Asian world. Moreover, he believed that Europe should be stronger and was more deserving of wealth and importance than Asia.

In addition to framing the conflict between Europe and Asia as one between two continents, Isocrates was comfortable assigning familiar negative biases towards Persians. In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} De Romilly, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{70} “Isocrates, To Philip, Section 132.” Accessed June 14, 2022.
\end{itemize}
Panegyricus, often considered his most important political work, Isocrates repeatedly brings up Persian decadence and degeneracy.

All of the themes and biases used by ancient historians have found their way into the works of much more modern scholars. Even those writing about Persians and the Greco-Persian War in the 20th century have included prejudices against them, portraying the Persians as cowardly tyrants with a culture that was far inferior to the Greeks. In addition to the biases against Persians, each of the following historians leans heavily on Herodotus, demonstrating how his influence continues more than two thousand years after his writing.

Modern Historians

Richard Frye, a Harvard-educated professor of Iranian studies, was one of the world’s foremost experts on the region. While Frye repeatedly expressed throughout his career an overall admiration for the Persian people, he still viewed them as inferior to the Greeks. In his 1963 book The Heritage of Persia he discussed how historians, and people in general, saw the Achaemenids as opposed to and compared against the Greeks. Said discusses an aspect of Orientalism that Frye embraces that explains why the comparison is unbalanced in favor of Greece: “We [the West] had our Newtonian revolution; they didn’t. As thinkers we are better off than they are.”71 Frye leads off with “[o]ur view of the Achaemenid empire and its achievement is, of course, somewhat distorted by the brilliant light of Greece. But have we not perhaps asked the wrong question of the Orient in antiquity, as we still do today? One asked why the Orient

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71 Said, 47.
remained behind the Greeks, as we ask why the Orient today remains under-developed.” To Frye, it is not that the Persians were undeveloped, but rather that Greece was that much more advanced than they were.

Not only did Frye see the Persians as being well behind Greece developmentally, but he also saw them as lacking an understanding of what freedom is. While engaging with T.E. Lawrence, Said noted that the common belief among Europeans was that they had to “prod the Orient into active life,” to “turn the Orient from unchanging “Oriental” passivity into militant modern life,” due to “the canonical view being that Orientals had no tradition of freedom.” Beyond what Frye saw as a difference in cultural development, he also compares the nature of freedom from the Greek and Persian perspectives, coming down as very sympathetic and even admiring of the Greek view. He uses the Persian noble Hydarnes complaining to Spartans, who have resisted the overtures of the Great King to join with Persia, as an example of the two sides having a vastly different understandings of freedom, at least as Frye sees it. The Spartans tell the Persian that “Hydarnes, the counsels which you give us are short-sighted. You know only that which you recommend, not that which you urge us to leave. You understand how to be a slave, but you know nothing of freedom, whether it is sweet or bitter. If you had but tasted it you would counsel us to fight for it not only with spears but with axes.” Frye, and the Spartans with whom Hydarnes was arguing, are ignoring the fact that not only was Sparta a monarchy, a form of government not readily associated with freedom, but also that Spartans were tightly bound to follow the Laws of Lycurgus. These laws prevented Spartans from working the land or holding any profession other than soldier. In fact, these laws were so severe in regard to what

72 Frye, 120.
73 Said, 240-241.
74 Said, 128.
occupations Spartans could hold that they conquered and enslaved their Messenian neighbors so that they might work the land for the Spartans. In neglecting to interact with these facts, Frye is willingly promoting a pro-Greek, biased position, which gives his work an Orientalist undertone.

While Frye’s bias leads to an open admiration of Greek culture, he also describes the Persians and their religion with an unflattering, Orientalist description. The Zoroastrian religion, favored primarily by Persian royalty, was centered around the god Ahura Mazda, who was seen as the ultimate power for good. He favored the just man and accepted all worthy men, women, and children into Paradise. As creator of the universe, He was represented by the four elements of earth, air, water, and fire, all of which were to remain free from contamination or uncleanness. There is a strong argument to be made that Zoroastrianism has had an enormous impact on history, according to Mary Boyce: “Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed credal religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith.”

If we consider the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews and their exposure to Zoroastrianism, and the Achaemenid legacy that can be found in the Bible, we can see some of this influence: “I will stir up Cyrus and help him win his battles. I will make all his roads straight. He will rebuild Jerusalem. My people have been taken away from their country. But he will set them free. I will not pay him to do it. He will not receive a reward for it.”

Here, Cyrus the Great was working with Jehovah when he freed them from Babylon, allowed them to return to Israel, and financed the restoration of the Temple, and is evidence that the author of Isaiah saw

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76 Isaiah 45:13.
Cyrus as a figure of incredible importance. According to Frye, however, there isn’t much to distinguish Ahura Mazda from Zeus.

Regarding other gods surely Ahura Mazda was like a ‘king above all gods,’ perhaps already identified by many with Zeus and other such gods in other pantheons. Darius and a Magian could equally have been followers of Zoroaster irrespective of different burial customs or even different rites in sacrifice or worship, or one could have been ‘more Zoroastrian’ than the other. The practices and rite which later came to be identified as hallmarks of ‘orthodox’ Zoroastrianism must have accrued to a religion in formation gradually and from several sources.  

Frye does not have much interest in pursuing the origins, impact, or details of Zoroastrianism any further than declaring it essentially an Iranian version of the Greek religion.

Much like Frye, Peter Green is a writer and professor of Classics who has written widely on ancient Greece. His 1996 book The Greco-Persian Wars, which is a reprint of his 1970 work The Year of Salamis, deals with the conflict between Greece and Persia from the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE until 479 when hostilities ceased. Green begins his book with the statement that the Greco-Persian wars were about ideology, made up “On one side, the towering, autocratic figure of the Great King; on the other, the voluntary and imperfect discipline of proudly independent citizens.” Green is clearly setting his book up as tyranny against freedom, and later frames the struggle as Europe against Asia, as exemplified by his statements like the following:

Modern Europe owes nothing to the Achaemenids. We may admire their imposing if oppressive architecture, and gaze in something like awe – from prostration-level, as it were – at the great apadana of Persepolis, with its marvelous bas-reliefs. Yet the civilization which could produce such things is

77 Frye, 80.; Here, Magian refers to a member of the Zoroastrian priesthood.
78 Frye is certainly off a bit, as early Zoroastrianism seems to have evolved from henotheism to monotheism, and directly influenced the three monotheistic Abrahamic traditions.
79 Green, 3.
almost alien to us as that of the Aztecs, and for not dissimilar reasons. Achaemenid Persia produced no great literature or philosophy: her one lasting contribution to mankind was, characteristically enough, Zoroastrianism. Like Carthage, she perpetuated a fundamentally static culture, geared to the maintenance of a theocratic status quo, and hostile (where not blindly indifferent) to original creativity in any form.  

This is not Green paraphrasing Herodotus, this is his own Orientalist interpretation of the Persian empire at the time of the Greco-Persian wars – a monolithic, unchanging, tyrannical entity with no culture, art, or creativity. Green also makes it clear that his disdain is not limited for Persians – he included an asterisk in the aforementioned quotation which states in part “This attitude is characteristic of all the Near East civilizations, even (despite a more striking artistic achievement) Egypt.” Not only that, but the Great king Xerxes was “Orientally capricious…when crossed” When stymied for any reason, he “flew into a furious temper” and his “wrath, like his gratitude, tended to be both arbitrary and overwhelming.” The Great King, according to Green, lacked the refined thinking of a Greek, and is irrational, like all ‘Orientals.’ This is perhaps the most obvious, blatant example of Orientalism in his book.

Green engages in a practice that is familiar and undertaken by Bradford – the assignation of World War II concepts, personalities, and participants overlaying the actors involved in the Greco-Persian wars. Such an assignation by Green immediately places the Greco-Persian was in a context that is easily understood by his readers: a conflict of immense importance between two powers that would have global consequences. In addition to this, it compels the reader to sympathize with the Greeks and see them as the heroes, and it villainizes the Persians, Themistocles is cast as Churchill, while those Greek city-states who may have allied with the

80 Green, 5.
81 Green, 6.
82 Green, 77.
83 Green, 77.
Persians are “like French Vichy politicians in 1940.” Green takes this a bit further later, stating that “For one Greek Churchill there are a dozen Greek Lavals,” invoking the memory of Pierre Laval, the Vichy Prime Minister who was executed for treason after the war. Continuing with this comparison, Green at one point refers to those Greeks who wanted to avoid war with Persia as “shabby collaborators,” as the “French Vichy politicians offer a good modern parallel.” With the heroic Western world cast as the Allies, that leaves Green’s readers with only one option with whom to compare the Persians – Nazi Germany.

Like Bradford above, Green compares Themistocles physically to Churchill, saying “there is, surely, nothing conventional or stylized bout that broad forehead and bulldog jaw; they have an indescribable Churchillian quality (see figures 2 and 3). Indeed, of all modern statesmen, Churchill is the one whose career parallels that of Themistocles in so many ways that coincidence will hardly suffice as an explanation.” Such a comparison is evoked again when Green is discussing Athens’s post-Marathon strategy, when Themistocles was arguing that Greece needed to be prepared for more Persian actions, as “Like Churchill, between the two World Wars, he was a voice crying in the political wilderness, an odd man out for preaching what no one wanted to hear.” The events of the time were also compared to World War II, as Green describes Themistocles after the withdrawal from Artemisium as having “little to offer his men at this point but ‘blood, toil, tears, and sweat’, with the additional disadvantage that what we now term the ‘Dunkirk spirit’ was something quite unknown to the Greeks of 480.”

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84 Green, 4.
85 Green, 5.; https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-Laval.
86 Green, 27.
87 Green, 24.
88 Green, 43.
89 Green, 168.
Green litters Orientalist portrayals of the Persians throughout his work and, as so many others have done, of Xerxes specifically. As Said noted, the Eastern world has a “tendency to despotism,” a statement which Green agrees with. Xerxes was “arrogant and autocratic in a way that Darius had never been (or needed to be),” and Green notes that the traditional view of Xerxes is as a “small, blubbery, effeminate Oriental, a cowardly despot ruled by his women and his eunuchs…cruel in victory, spineless in defeat.” Green leans into this portrayal of a cowardly ruler by taking the playwright Aeschylus at his word, and quotes him directly:

…the false friends that he mixed with. “impetuous Xerxes!’
They used to say that you [Darius] won great wealth for your son
At the spear’s point, but he from cowardice
Did his fighting at home, and added nothing
To his father’s treasures. Hearing such bitter taunts
Time and again from these villains, he was stung into action:
This it was led him and his army on the road to Greece. 

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90 Green, 50.
91 Green, 52.
Green accepts Aeschylus’s verse at face value, saying that “This passage rings uncommonly true, and suggest inside information – perhaps obtained from captured high-ranking Persians officers.”92 Rather than looking at what Aeschylus had to say with a critical lens, Green wholeheartedly embraces the Orientalist view that Xerxes was a coward who was induced to invade Greece because he failed to live up to expectations, and that captured Persian officers were eager to talk about Xerxes’s father issues.

92 Green, 52.
In part four – “The Corner-Stone of Freedom” – Green addresses events leading up to, surrounding, and after the battle at Thermopylae. He makes clear his position with the name of the section, joining other writers who have framed this war as a battle for Western Civilization and tacitly takes the side of the Greek forces. In this chapter he is all but openly rooting for the Greeks and championing the bravery of the Spartan warriors. While describing the fighting of the first day, Green is essentially hero-worshipping the Spartans, with phrases like “Leonidas’s grim veterans, muscles cracking with fatigue, still maintained that awesome parade-ground discipline which had made them a byword of Greece.” It is one thing to compare arms and armor, tactics, or martial philosophies of different cultures, but contrasting cultures and claiming one superior, and openly rooting for one, is a step too far for what is supposed to be a history textbook.

Academic history texts are not the only sources from which readers get false or biased information. Ernle Bradford is indicative of the historians who lacks a traditional academic background and who specializes in a more popular form of historical writing, which can be very approachable to those readers who are interested in history but not formally practiced when it comes to reading more academic works. Bradford was the author of a number of books, most of which involve sailing the Mediterranean, Classical history, and military history. He was not a traditionally trained historian in the vein of Frye or Green, instead producing works that are pop history rather than academic. The biography on his publisher’s page makes no mention of a formal university education in history, nor do the biographies in his books. One of his more prominent works is the 1980 book Thermopylae: The Battle for the West, which details the

93 Green, 135.
events surrounding, leading up to, and during the Spartan/Greek delaying action at the Thermopylae pass against Xerxes’s Persian army.

Bradford takes no pains when it comes to hiding his Orientalist, pro-Greek, anti-Persian bias – the epigraph to *The Battle for the West*, for example, is a two-paragraph quote from Michel de Montaigne, the Renaissance French philosopher and statesman:

The worth and value of a man is in his heart and his will; there lies his real honour. Valour is the strength, not of legs, and arms, but of heart and soul; it consists not in the worth of our horse or our weapons, but in our own. He who falls obstinate in his courage, *if he has fallen, he fights on his knees* (Seneca). He who relaxes none of his assurance, no matter how great the danger of imminent death; who, giving up his soul, still looks firmly and scornfully at his enemy – he is beaten not by us, but by fortune; he is killed, not conquered.

The most valiant are sometimes the most unfortunate. Thus there are triumphant defeats that rival victories. Nor did those four sister victories, the fairest that the sun ever set eyes on – Salamis, Plataea, Mycale, and Sicily – ever dare match all their combined glory against the glory of the annihilation of King Leonidas and his men at the pass of Thermopylae.\(^9\)

By choosing this passage from Montaigne, Bradford, before writing one word of his own, is laying the groundwork for his hagiography of the Spartans and Leonidas, and that their defeat was not actually a defeat, but a victory. He is also staking out a line that will be seen again later, that the courage of the Greeks ultimately defeated the Persians, who vastly outnumbered them, because they Greek people were fighting for their very existence.

When we get to Bradford’s own words in the preface, he continues his blatant, Orientalist, pro-Grecian stance. The Western European man has forgotten the debt owed to the Greeks, a people who founded Western Civilization and from whom “the seed of whose

\(^9\) Bradford, Epigraph.
mathematicians, architects and scientists even our most remote modern machinery and artefacts are ultimately derived. In terms of the arts there has never been any doubt, at least among the practitioners of them, of the contribution that the Greeks made in triggering off Western European culture.”

Essentially the entirety of Western civilization, according to Bradford, is a result of this desperate stand at Thermopylae which, although technically a defeat, was in reality a resounding victory for Greece, setting the stage for the eventual clash at Plataea and the Persian retreat back to Asia.

Bradford, however, does acknowledge that there may be some kind of “inevitable pro-Athenian bias,” when it came to the majority of the historical works surrounding the Greco-Persian war. This bias, however, is not seen as a negative for Bradford, but rather of supreme importance, “because the great result of the Persian defeat in Europe led to the shining fifty years (or less) in which Athens transfigured the whole of the West through her architecture, her drama, her poetry, her sculpture, philosophy, and her whole attitude towards man’s predicament in this temporal world.” It is not possible for Bradford to consider his pro-Greek bias as a flaw, since ultimately the Greeks won this most important struggle for freedom and the end result was nothing short of the entirety of Western civilization. Bradford’s pro-Greek position includes effusive praise of and admiration for the Spartans, which is immediately clear in the preface when he states that “the Spartans – those strange and remarkable people, whose virtues the West would do well to emulate in our time.”

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95 Bradford, 13.
96 Bradford, 14.
97 Bradford, 14.
98 Bradford, 14.
for saving Western Civilization, according to Bradford, they were so virtuous that modern society falls well short of them.

Some of the most egregious of Bradford’s statements can be found in his third chapter, “The Persians.” He immediately continues an Orientalist position with his assertion that “there can be no doubt that Greek culture was infinitely superior in many respects to that of Persia,” and that if the Persians had succeeded in their invasion, “the Zoroastrian creed might have been imposed upon the pagan Greeks. There would have been no fifth-century Athens, and all European history would have been very different.”99 This assertion certainly comes from Herodotus, who in Book III describes the disrespect Cambyses directed towards the Egyptians and their beliefs. In one famous episode, Herodotus claims that Cambyses desecrated the Apis bull and mocked Egyptian priests, referring to the later as “pathetic” while mocking their belief in zoomorphic manifestations of their gods. When Cambyses saw the people celebrating, he supposedly grew angry, insulted and attacked Apis, the sacred bull, and laughed at the shocked priests, saying “You are pathetic people! Is this what your gods are like, flesh and blood that can feel the prick of iron? Well, then, this god is worthy of you Egyptians.”100 He then ordered the priests and anyone celebrating to be killed, which led to his final plunge into insanity, and later, death.

The story that Herodotus tells here, which Bradford relies on, runs contrary to what we know about both Persian imperial policy regarding subject peoples and the Egyptian record of this time. Instead of mocking the proceedings and initiating a slaughter, Cambyses instead made certain that “the god was brought in [peace toward the good West and laid to rest in the

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99 Bradford, 40.
100 Herodotus, 3.29.
necropolis in] his [place] which is the place which his Majesty made for him, [after] all [the
ceremonies had been done for him] in the embalming hall.”101 Beyond this, Cambyses had
witnessed his father conquer much of the ancient Near East and successfully rule, in part because
he left his subject peoples to their own devices when it came to their religious beliefs.

Bradford does not hesitate to place the West ahead of the East culturally and also implies
that the West was *morally* superior. The Persians under Xerxes, after all, attempted to purge
Egypt of their millennia-old polytheism, if Herodotus is to be believed; there is no telling what
horrors would have been inflicted upon the nascent Western Civilization had the invasion of
Greece succeeded.

Given their prominence throughout the Greco-Persian Wars and their place at
Thermopylae, Bradford dedicates an entire chapter to the Spartans, briefly discussing their
origin, social organization, and beliefs. In this chapter, and throughout the rest of the book,
Bradford engages in a brand of hagiography that can be seen in not just his work, but in others,
and is a recurring aspect of the portrayal of Spartans not only in historical works, but in popular
culture. One troubling phrase Bradford uses to describe them, apparently unironically, is “The
Master-Race.”102

Bradford does briefly address the matter of the relationship between Spartans and their
Messenian helots. Messenia was at one point a state in the Peloponnese, and a neighbor of
Sparta. Sometime during the eighth century BCE, Sparta invaded and conquered Messenia, which
resulted in the enslavement of most of the population, who became known as helots. The Laws
of Lycurgus prevented Spartan men from working the land or holding any position other than

101 Briant, 57.
102 Briant, 59.
soldier, so this subjugation of another population would serve as a two-fold boon: it allowed the Spartans to have access to a subservient population who would work the land, freeing themselves for soldering duties, and consolidated their grip on the Peloponnese.\(^{103}\) The relationship between Messenian helots and Spartan citizens was fraught with conflict, with more than one uprising having been recorded. The relationship between Spartan and helot was so contentious that there was a Spartan unit, called the *krypteia*, responsible for either assassinating, monitoring, or otherwise controlling the large slave population.\(^{104}\)

There is no doubt that these Messenian helots were a subjugated people, but Bradford’s discussion of them tends to ignore this reality. Relations, he says, “between the rulers and the ruled seem to have been basically amiable.”\(^{105}\) Indeed, in later mentions of the helot population, Bradford operates as if that was the general attitude of the helots, perhaps somewhat annoyed at having Spartan overlords, but accepting of it, eager to fight when directed to, and bystanders of the Laws of Lycurgus.

Bradford also demonstrates a willingness to overlook Spartan behavior that he otherwise condemns when he observed it in other cultures, especially if it could be found among the Persians. The most prominent instance of this involves the various religious practices of the two sides. Any religious action undertaken by the Persians was written off as pure barbarian superstition, while any Spartan religious observation is merely noted, with no underlying


\(^{104}\) The actual purpose of the *krypteia* has been debated for some time. Scholars argue that the *krypteia* was either the end stage of the agoge schooling system and a means for young Spartans to hone their skills, or a secret police force designed to murder and terrorize helots. Regardless of which of these is more likely, the *krypteia* was a state-sponsored mechanism designed to surveil the helots and gauge the possibility of an uprising.

\(^{105}\) Bradford, 60.
commentary. For example, when Darius landed at Marathon, Athens had to face him alone because Sparta was busy observing the feast of Carneian Apollo, “the most sacred part of a sacred month when no Spartan might go to war.”

Bradford, throughout this book, maintains that the Persian invasions were an existential threat to Western Civilization, but spares the Spartans any criticism for refusing to fight when Persia loomed large with a fleet at Marathon. Similarly, Persian religious observations are barbaric and superstitious, while Spartan rites are virtuous and heroic.

Bradford neglects a proper conclusion to *Thermopylae*; instead, he ends the last chapter rather abruptly with the Battle of Plataea, its aftermath, and one last insistence that this war was not about trade routes or influence but rather a struggle to ensure “that the patterns of freedom and individual liberty should survive in the West.” The lack of a conclusion is just one of the ways in which Bradford’s work eschews traditional academic practices. There are no citations whatsoever – Bradford is asking his readers to accept everything he says at face value, he fails to properly help his reader find sources so that they might learn more about these events. Works of this nature are not inherently bad; history should not and cannot be confined to the academic sphere. History should be approachable and easily consumed through a wide variety of media, whether that means movies, novels, Twitter threads, blog posts, or works of popular history. But when they stray so far from objectivity and embrace a biased, Orientalist approach, as Bradford does here in *Thermopylae: The Battle For The West*, and one that can ultimately be harmful, that bias must be addressed.

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106 Bradford, 50.
107 Bradford, 97; 102-103.
108 Bradford, 245.
These historians, writing about the Greco-Persian War more than two thousand years after the fact, were heavily influenced by Herodotus and *The Histories*. They lean on him, taking him at his word, quoting him at length and introducing him to new audiences. This includes a perspective that is frequently overly critical of and outright biased against the Persians, their culture, and their motivations, and a bias for Spartans that borders on hagiography. Such biases against Persians and for Greeks, especially Spartans, has spilled over into popular culture, influencing virtually all aspects of modern media. This in turn influences consumers that Persians were weak, tyrannical, corrupt, and that the Greeks were paragons of virtue, with Herodotus in so many cases the core source for these portrayals. I will demonstrate that many of these books, shows, and movies display such a bias.

**Chapter 2. Popular Culture**

The Greco-Persian conflict has generated countless pieces of media, from novels to comic books to movies, and all of these forms of entertainment bear some form of bias against Persians. The media I am examining here are the historical fiction novel *Gates of Fire*, the graphic novel *300*, the film *300* which was based on the graphic novel, its sequel *300: Rise of an Empire*, the movie *Alexander*, and an episode of the television show *South Park*, “D-Yikes!” Across these media there are several types of bias directed towards Persians – that they are effeminate, especially when compared to Greeks, and Persian men are frequently, and negatively, referred to as homosexual; that Persians, particularly their leaders, wallow in ostentatious decadence, and are a corrupting influence on non-Persians; Persians and their people are often negatively depicted with dark skin, physical disabilities, and other ableist portrayals; and that the Persian empire was a entity based entirely on captured, enslaved populations and
fought to subjugate Greece while the Greeks, particularly the Spartans, were bastions of freedom and indeed fought for the very existence of ‘the West.’

*Gates of Fire*

Fictional accounts of the Spartans have been on bookshelves for decades, with varying degrees of accuracy. In 1998 the novelist Stephen Pressfield published *Gates of Fire*, a historical fiction novel that takes place during and after the battle at Thermopylae. It is told as a first-person account by a Greek soldier, Xeones, who as a young man was displaced from his home *polis* (city-state) by war and travels to Sparta in the hopes of serving the Spartans. To Xeones, the Spartans appeared as “avenging gods.”\(^{109}\) He “couldn’t learn enough about these warriors who had so devastatingly defeated the murderers of my mother and father, the violators of my innocent cousin.”\(^{110}\) After arriving in Sparta, he serves a Spartan officer named Dienekes, and travels with a small force to Thermopylae, where they and a few thousand other Greeks fought a delaying action against the invading Persians. Xeones was one of the few survivors of the battle, wrenched out of the afterlife by the god Apollo so that he might inform the Great King Xerxes of the heroism, brotherhood, and tenacity of the Greek forces – especially of the Spartans.

There are many aspects of the Greco-Persian conflict which Pressfield gets right: there was a delaying action fought, the Greeks were overwhelmed after three days, and several characters are accounted for in classical sources (for example, Demaratus was an exiled Spartan king, Leonidas was the current king of Sparta, Xerxes was the emperor of the Persian empire, and so on). However, many of these historical details are intentionally manipulated by Pressfield into historical fiction. Even the officer Dienekes, briefly mentioned by Herodotus, has been

\(^{109}\) Pressfield, 36.

\(^{110}\) Pressfield, 36.
transformed into a prominent character by Pressfield. Pressfield fully embraces an attitude towards the Spartans that is borderline panegyric, continuing the tradition of dismissing the Persians as weak, unmanly, homosexual and effete, and disorganized, while at the same time depicting the Greco-Persian was as a battle for a free Europe and “the West.”

*Gates of Fire*’s popularity means that Pressfield’s fictitious version of 5th century BCE Sparta and Persian is readily available for consumption, often by consumers who likely are unaware of the nature of Pressfield’s intentional historical distortions. Although Pressfield’s novel is very popular with readers interested in history and the Greco-Persian war, having sold over a million copies, the most influential and well-known portrayal of the conflict is the graphic novel *300* by Frank Miller and Lynn Varney. Miller, like Pressfield, engages in outright fabrications, homophobia, and Orientalism in order to further his chosen narrative.

**300 (Graphic Novel and Film Series)**

The graphic novel *300* depicts the events which led up to the battle between the Persians and the mixed Greek forces that met them at Thermopylae. The narrative is tersely written and takes several liberties with the history of the Battle of Thermopylae. Scenes drawn with Miller’s trademark gore. The Spartans, for example, go to battle nude except for sandals, greaves, and a cloak, ignoring the bronze breastplate and other gear which has been well-attested. Later during the battle, several war elephants – referred to in the text as “monsters from half the world away,” make a short-lived appearance, despite there being no record of them anywhere near the

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111 Herodotus, 7.226
In 1999 the graphic novel won three Eisner awards – for Best Limited Series, Best Writer/Artist, and Best Coloring – an award that is often referred to as the Oscar of the comics industry.  

300 remains popular and in print since it was published in 1998, so much so that it was adapted for film in 2006, serving to further spread this version of history into the public consciousness. In the film adaptation director Zach Snyder emphasizes the themes Miller established of a decadent, sexually deviant and monstrous Persia bent on enslaving the West.

The sequel 300: Rise of an Empire arrived seven years after 300 and maintained the same negative portrayal of the Persian empire that its predecessor established. The film continues the narrative begun by 300 and depicts events that occurred concurrently and after the battle for Thermopylae, focusing largely on the Athenians and the sea battles at Artemisium and Salamis. At the Battle of Marathon, however, Themistocles shoots Darius as the attempted Persian invasion collapses and a distraught Xerxes is forced to take his father home to die – this did not happen. In reality, Darius died in the winter of 486 BCE, four years after the Battle at Marathon, of ill health in Persian lands. Nor was he present at Marathon – Datis, “the Mede,” commanded the Persian forces at Marathon. Rather than conform to the known historical facts, Rise of an Empire instead unapologetically manipulates history to further its anti-Persian sentiments, showing again that the Persians are corrupt deviants.

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https://gallery.library.vcu.edu/exhibits/show/eisner-awards.
116 Brosius, 23.; Briant, 227.
117 Briant, 158.
Alexander

Oliver Stone’s 2004 film *Alexander* is a sprawling exploration of the Macedonian king’s life, from his youth in Macedonia to conquering Persia to his exploration of the western reaches of the Indian subcontinent and ultimately his death in Babylon. Like his father Philip II before him, Alexander was obsessed with confronting and defeating the Persian empire, in part to help alleviate the debts he inherited, and the film does ably demonstrate his desire to conquer Asia. As the film goes on though, Stone depicts the increasing influence of Persia, its customs, and its people, as a detrimental and corrupting force on the young king.

*South Park Episode D-Yikes!*

*South Park*, which has been on the air since 1997, has been consistently one of the most-viewed animated comedies on cable. The show, which tells the stories of four boys and the dysfunctional small Colorado town they live in, is aimed at viewers aged fifteen and up due to coarse language and violence. The creators of *South Park*, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, offered their own irreverent, satirical spin on the film *300*, airing an episode just a month after the movie was first released in theaters. In addition to the generally Orientalist nature of the episode, Parker and Stone also embraced aspects of *300*, particularly the heteronormative bias, and the episode contains elements referring to the oft-included claim that Persians are decadent and self-indulgent.

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Freedom vs tyranny and slavery

A common theme found throughout these books and movies is the idea that Persia, representative of the East, is an empire of tyrants bent on bringing the entirety of the known world under their heels. Opposing this is Greece, and especially the Spartans, who stand for freedom and independence, representing the West and the nascent light of democracy. As I will explain, these media use language and imagery to convey this ahistorical and biased theme.

A number of such instances are found in Pressfield’s Gates of Fire. While exhorting his men for the upcoming struggle against Xerxes, Pressfield’s Leonidas claims that Sparta will show the Great King “once and for all what valor free men can bring to bear against slave, no matter how vast their numbers or how fiercely they are driven on by their child-king’s whip.”

This invented dialogue conveniently ignores the irony of Leonidas calling Xerxes a slave driver, considering the Spartan’s reliance on tens of thousands of slaves they themselves kept, known as helots – native Messenians who had for centuries been enslaved by Sparta largely for agricultural purposes, which meant that Spartan men could focus solely on war.

During the battle of Thermopylae proper, the narrator Xeones again reminds his listener that Xerxes views his forces as nothing but disposable; using soldiers from his vassal states as “spear fodder,” and that the despot Xerxes is “(squandering) their lives without counting the cost.” Again, Pressfield is demonstrating a willful lack of historical integrity, ignoring the fact that Sparta functioned in part because of a large number of Messenian helots not only tended

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121 Pressfield, 317.
Spartan fields but were also forced to march to war with their Spartan overlords. He made a clear decision to obfuscate fact in favor of portraying the Spartans, and all Greeks, as freedom fighters who were dedicated to a notion of liberation from tyranny. The narrator, this time the Spartan queen Gorgo, employs the same language Dilios did – she claims that the Battle of Marathon occurred because “the Persian king Darius, annoyed by the notion of Greek freedom, has come to Greece to bring us to heel.” Continuing this recurring theme of freedom versus slavery, Themistocles exhorts his men to stand firm as they prepare to face the massive Persian fleet: “my brothers, steady your heart. Look deep into your souls. For your mettle is to be tested this day.” As he begins this speech, the scene is intercut with images of Persian slaves bleeding at the oars of Persian ships, as the director Murro wants to make it crystal clear that the men in the Greek ships are free men fighting for their existence, while the men in the Persian ships are slaves, driven to fight by a whip: “if in the heat of battle you need a reason to fight on, an idea for which you will give up all that you will ever have, you need only to look at the man who fights at your side. This is the why of battle, this is the brotherhood of men at arms, an unbreakable bond made stronger by the crucible of combat.” This speech is intercut with another scene in the Persian ships, where whips are striking slaves and slashing their skin open: “you will never be closer than with those who you shed your blood with for there is no nobler cause than to fight for those who will lay down their life for you. For you fight strong today. You fight for your brothers. Fight for your families. Most of all you fight for Greece.”

124 300: RoaE., 32:12.
125 300: RoaE., 32:45.
126 300: RoaE., 33:00.
Themistocles’s men are free men, fighting for freedom and their rowers gladly pull for love of country, while the tyrannical Persians must whip and beat their slaves bloody to get them to do anything, which reminds the viewer of similar scenes in *300* as Persians are driven forward by whips to the Spartans who are ready and willing to stand up to them. Again Snyder and Murro lean into the Orientalist trope that Easterners are tyrants, ready to treat their subject peoples worse than animals.

These two films present their viewers with an image of Persians that is incredibly negative. The Immortals, who have been described as the cream of the Persian crop are reduced to monsters shrouded in black cloth, while the Spartans run around wearing nothing but loincloths and cloaks to emphasize their bravery and invulnerability. The Persians are tyrants, and in both films they are shown whipping their men, who are slaves pressed unwillingly into service while the Spartans and Athenians are free men, fighting not because of the lash at their back but because they love their poleis and the light that they represent. Xerxes is the antithesis of Leonidas: he keeps himself out of danger while Leonidas bravely risks his life and limb with his men. Xerxes is effeminate where Leonidas is the definition of modern masculinity. His men are objects to be used and spent like coin when he sees fit, where Leonidas would gladly die for his. Xerxes wants to dominate the world where Leonidas is willing to sacrifice his life to preserve the light that is Greece and the West.

In addition to casting the East in general and Persia in particular as a corrupting influence on the soul of good Western men, Oliver Stone also sets out to further the Orientalist stereotype that the East is tyrannical and cowardly, where the West is ruled by good and brave men. Old Ptolemy, who is narrating the story, explicitly refers to the Persians as barbarians as the narrative reaches the Battle of Gaugamela. While planning the next day’s attack, Alexander brags that his
plan to drive straight at Darius III has no downside – if he dies, he will be merely one more dead Greek, whereas if the Persian king dies, the entire Persian army will be at a standstill, unsure of what to do, echoing what Leonidas tells his men in 300. Stone is staking out his claim that despite the fact that Persia controlled an enormous empire, they were still barbarians and that if a calamity like the loss of their king were to happen, they would have no idea what to do and would collapse. Conversely, the Greeks would be able to survive the loss of their king due to their more rational and civilized nature.

Stone is sure to give his audience a lengthy depiction of this dichotomy. As battle is joined by the two armies, Darius is shown in his chariot at the head of his vast army, surrounded by generals and advisors.\textsuperscript{127} It is clear that more time was spent attempting to portray how the Persians look in as accurate a manner as possible than in either of the 300 films, with men and horses armed and outfitted as Herodotus had described them. The greater authenticity in costume and battle formations in Alexander reflects the shift in focus from the depravity of the East to the cowardly and tyrannical nature of Persians, Darius in particular. Throughout this extended battle sequence, Alexander is shown leading his men, sharing their dangers, and often in the thick of the fighting. Darius, however, is shown in his chariot, protected by guards, and issuing orders in relative safety. It is not until Alexander spots the Great King and charges him, getting within striking distance, does Darius realize that he is in any danger.\textsuperscript{128} With no hesitation Darius orders his driver to flee, knowing but not caring that the wickedly scythed wheels of his chariot will cut down him own men as he hurries to escape Alexander; the troops around him are mere obstacles to get through, not his men.

\textsuperscript{127} 300: RoaE, 52:23.
\textsuperscript{128} 300: RoaE, 1:00:49.
Stone is eager to demonstrate here that where Alexander bravely rushes in to fight with his soldiers, doing what he asks of them, the Persians is a physical coward who abandons his men at the first hint of danger to his person. Darius’s flight results in the bulk of his army fleeing after him, while Alexander’s personal bravery continues to be shown as he reinforces the general Parmenion, who is fighting on the flank, saving a significant portion of the Greek army. Like Xerxes in 300, Darius is shown to be yet another Persian kind who cowardly hides behind his men, unwilling to put himself in harm’s way.

These sources do not simply show an incorrect view of a freedom loving Greece and tyrannical Persia. They are also loaded with imagery depicting the Persians as effeminate and homosexual and therefore weaker and lesser than their Greek counterparts.

**Homosexuality and Femininity**

In addition to the intentional misrepresentation of Spartan values, Pressfield does the same with the dress and bearing of the Persian forces, and especially the Immortals. Borrowing from Herodotus, Pressfield compares the appearance of the Immortals to that of the Greeks to reinforce his stance that the Spartans were strong and masculine in their appearance, while the foreign, alien Persians were weak and feminine; Persians could not be bothered to armor themselves properly lest their makeup go unnoticed.\(^{129}\) Here Pressfield ignores, or is ignorant of, the importance of physical appearance and beauty among elite men in the ancient Near East. Instead, he is directly tying the appearance of the Persians to femininity and thus to weakness. As the prepared for battle, the Greek men groomed their beards and puller their hair back and

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\(^{129}\) Pressfield, 316.; Herodotus 7.61.1.
girded themselves in bronze armor. Their helmets remove traces of humanity from them by obscuring the eyes, making them seem more than human. The Immortals, however, “wore not helmets, but tiaras, soft felt caps topped with skull crowns of metals glistening gold. These half-helmets possessed no cover for the ears, neck, or jaw and left the face and throat entirely exposed. The warriors wore earrings; some of their faces were painted with eye kohl and rouged like women.” As for their clothes, they “wore sleeved tunics of silk, purple rimmed with scarlet…trousers atop calf-height deerskin boots.” Pressfield, through the Spartan protagonists, has linked the style of Persian dress to our modern notions of femininity, and as I will demonstrate later, to homosexuality.

Pressfield implies that women were the only people in the ancient world who wore makeup, and that any use of them by Persian/non-Greek men was a sign of their effeminacy. However, there is substantial evidence that many men in the ancient world used cosmetics. Kohl, “a powder widely used as a pigment of black eye paint,” was applied by elites of both sexes and has been well-attested to in Egyptian art. Cosmetic palettes, used to grind and mix ingredients for makeup, have been found across the ancient Near East and were used by men and women both. At Shahr-i Sokta in southeastern Iran, cosmetic containers were found in elite male burials dating as far backs as 3000 BCE. Elite men in the ancient Near East were expected to be physically beautiful, well-dressed, and well-coiffed. An ancient king’s beauty, and therefore

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130 Pressfield, 259.
131 Pressfield, 316.
132 Pressfield, 316.
134 https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/39286
physical fitness and ability, were seen as a direct correlation to his ability to successfully rule. In the ancient Near East, displaying “[male] beauty…was a way of indicating stability and strength of the state.”¹³⁶ The importance and portrayal of male beauty is apparent throughout the written and physical record, from the Epic of Gilgamesh onwards. Several lines of Gilgamesh are given to his physical beauty, other kings use similar language in their praise poems, and many kings appear well-muscled and adorned with jewelry in carvings.¹³⁷ The Akkadian language, used to write many of these works, contains the adjective damqu, which means among other similar concepts, beautiful.¹³⁸ Damqu and its related forms were applied equally to both men and women with no distinction between and a king being referred to as beautiful would not have had the same connotations then as it would today, where it is a heavily gendered adjective. The standards of what is masculine or feminine because the use of cosmetics was not gendered then as it is today. Pressfield ignores or is ignorant of this fact and applies a binary scheme for his readers that states: women wear makeup, Persians wore makeup, therefore the Persians are women.

Pressfield not only associates the Persians with femininity and weakness, but also with homosexuality, framed around modern prejudices and conceptions. Throughout Gates of Fire Pressfield has his Greek protagonists refer to the Persians as homosexuals, as can be seen in one instance during a lull in the fighting: “remember, men…that this next wave of Asiatic ass-fuckers has not seen us yet.”¹³⁹ Pressfield associates the Persians with decadence, femininity,

¹³⁹ Pressfield, 316.
weakness, and homosexuality, while at the same time wholly ignoring the legacy of Greek homosexuality and Spartan pederasty.\(^{140}\) Homosexuality is as well-attested to among Greeks of this period, and Sparta is no different.\(^{141}\) One well-known artifact portraying homosexuality in ancient Greece is the Eurymedon vase, a wine container believed to be from a few decades after the Greco-Persian wars.\(^{142}\) Red and black, the vase depicts to men, one thought to be a Greek soldier, the other a Persian soldier (see figures 4 and 5)\(^{F}\). The Greek man is mostly nude and can be seen clutching his erect penis, ostensibly preparing to celebrate his victory by sexually violating the fleeing Persian. This type of act is discussed by Halperin, who argues that it would not necessarily be seen as “real” homosexual behavior but rather opportunistic homosexuality.\(^{143}\) It also signifies an enduring practice of “classifying sexual relationships in terms of penetration versus being penetrated, superordinate versus subordinate, masculinity versus femininity” (emphasis added).\(^{144}\)

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\(^{142}\) Llewellyn-Jones, 15.


\(^{144}\) Halperin, 96.
In the same vein, Pressfield ignores the same-sex relationships between older Spartan men and younger men and boys, a system of pederasty that had its foundation in the *agoge* system.145

Pederasty, a sexual relationship between an adult man and a minor boy, was practiced in Sparta as part of the state-sponsored educational system.146 Vernon Provencel describes this relationship and its beginning as

a homoerotic and overtly sexual (albeit one-sided) relationship between an adult male, called the erastēs (active lover), and an adolescent youth (pais), called the erōmenos (passive beloved). By 600 BC, pederasty was instituted socially as a pedagogical relationship, first on the island of Crete, then in Sparta, after which its institutionalization spread to the rest of Greece.147

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145 Scanlon, 68.
147 Verstraete, 90.
The closest Pressfield gets to addressing this topic is the mentor-mentee relationship between older Spartans and boys in the *agoge*, with one instance of a Spartan warrior sneering at another because the man “has eyes for the comeliness of [his] girlish face,” referring to that man’s *pais*.\(^{148}\) These relationships, as far as they are portrayed by Pressfield, resemble more that of a teacher and prize student, or an uncle with a favorite nephew. At other times homophobic slurs are used to denigrate the behavior of other Greeks, such as when Dienekes is addressing a helot, saying the slave has “got a mouth looser than a Corinthian’s asshole,” likening their lack of trustworthiness to the perceived homosexual nature of Persians.\(^{149}\) Pressfield, using his Spartan characters, not only equates homosexuality with the Persians, but with non-Spartan Greeks, signaling to his readers that Spartans are superior to both groups, and the true heroes of the story.

Snyder also avoids any mention of Greek homosexuality and assigns such behavior to the Persians, while also making it clear that anything outside of heteronormativity is a perversion. Xerxes is shown in a clearly feminine light with homosexual overtones. When the two kings meet as Xerxes attempts to sway the Spartans to join his army, he smoothly moves up behind Leonidas and delicately places his hands on Leonidas’s shoulders in a seductive manner. Throughout the film the Spartans have been portrayed in a hyper-masculine manner – they are the epitome of physical strength and vigor. Those Spartans who are bearded have rugged beards – not styled but wild and unkempt. The effeminacy of the Persian king is just as clearly indicated. Xerxes is not depicted as particularly masculine – aside from the deep, distorted timbre of his voice, he is pictured in a clearly feminine light. His eyes are heavily made up with lids painted gold, black eyeliner is pulled into a cat’s eye, his eyebrows are penciled in and

\(^{148}\) Pressfield, 156.

\(^{149}\) Pressfield, 180.
arched in exaggerated fashion, and his nose is pierced. His fingernails are long, carefully manicured, and painted gold.

In his attempt to portray Xerxes as a decadent tyrant, Snyder takes the concept of male beauty and twists it to paint the king as weak and womanly. Compared to the Spartans in general and Leonidas specifically, the portrayal of Xerxes is very androgenous, if not outright feminine, and much of his look is styled to mirror a more modern notion of femininity. Modern men who consume this media have generally stopped using makeup, and as such cosmetics are now almost exclusively the province of women and performers. Xerxes’s femininity is not confined to his makeup and appearance, but also to his mannerisms. The way his hands are placed on Leonidas’s shoulders is almost dainty despite his size, and the look on his face and angle of his head are seductive in the scene is laden with innuendo and a sexual threat from the Persian king if Leonidas does not submit to his will.\textsuperscript{150} This is an inversion of the situational homosexuality Leonidas might have been familiar with, as argued by Halperin. A Greek man could engage in sex with a feminine man and it would be understood that the act would reflect his virility and masculinity.\textsuperscript{151} Placing Leonidas in the role of the passive and penetrated reduces him to the role of a subordinate makes him uncomfortable and, to Snyder’s point, would make the viewer uncomfortable as well.

This portrayal of Xerxes is a deliberate choice made by the director, Zack Snyder. In a 2007 interview, Snyder stated that the decision to have Xerxes portrayed as having both male and female characteristics was clearly thought out and intentional, with the goal of unnerving an audience of straight white males. Snyder asks, “what’s more scary to a 20-year-old-boy than a

\textsuperscript{150} 300, 59:03.
\textsuperscript{151} Halperin, 95.
giant god-king who wants to have his way with you?” It is clear that this homophobic sentiment is echoed throughout the film: Xerxes is threatening to violate Leonidas in the same way Persia is violating Greece. Snyder wanted Xerxes to represent a fear of “unnatural” sex and lust as part of a larger Orientalist theme of Persian sexual deviance.

The depiction of Greek sexual purity versus Persian perversion continues in the portrayal of heterosexual sex. In 300, Leonidas and Gorgo are depicted as having a “normal” heteronormative relationship, while the Persian camp is filled with aberrant sexual behavior, including multiple women in bed with each other. Said describes this as the Orient’s “seemingly perverse morality” as compared to the Western world. In 300: Rise of an Empire, this portrayal is continued through the person of Artemisia, a Greek woman like Gorgo, who was raised by Persians. I will show that Gorgo and Artemisia, while both Greek women, represent an Orientalist dichotomy of sexual normalcy.

Leonidas and Gorgo, his wife, are shown to care for each other and before the king leaves for Thermopylae, the couple spends their last night together. Their lovemaking is intimate, tender, and passionate. Where Persian sex is for sale or to be gifted by Xerxes and is unconventional – including physical monstrosity, same-sex intercourse, and transgenderism – Spartan sex is restrained, loving, heteronormative, and conventional.

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153 Said, 166.
154 It should be noted that I do not intend to impose any value judgements on “non-traditional” relationships or an individual’s right to express or determine their sexuality or gender, but rather engage in an examination of how such relationships and concepts might be compared to others with the filmmakers implying that one is better or more “normal” and accepted than others.
who demands Sparta’s surrender is openly misogynistic towards Gorgo when the queen dares to speak around him, Leonidas welcomes her by his side and makes it clear she should be there.\textsuperscript{155} Clearly Snyder, who had prior to this scene depicted Xerxes as effeminate, is demonstrating that the relationship shown between Leonidas and Gorgo is the correct kind of relationship, as befitting a civilized people. Relationships in the Persian realm, by contrast and demonstrated in \textit{Rise of an Empire}, are depicted as anything but ‘correct.’

The continued theme of Persian sexual deviancy is also part of the portrayal of Artemisia. If we compare Artemisia’s actions in \textit{Rise of an Empire} with those of Queen Gorgo, Leonidas’s wife, it is possible to see two very different depictions of how a woman should act, and since they are the only two women with speaking roles to appear in these films, it makes it that much easier. Gorgo is in a loving, monogamous relationship with her husband, and she takes this relationship seriously. As Leonidas and his men are fighting at Thermopylae, Gorgo is busy pleading with the ephors to send more men to Thermopylae and trying to resist the forceful advances from the corrupt politician, Delios.

Even in the manner in which the loves scene with Gorgo and Leonidas is serious – it is shot in black and white, the nudity is tasteful, the lovemaking itself romantic and tender. Artemisia’s sex is the opposite. It is loud, almost violent, frenzied, and not the act of two people who genuinely care for each other. It is again as Halperin argued, an inversion of what a Greek man would have seen as normal, with him taking on the role of a passive participant. As we have seen earlier, the makers of \textit{300: Rise of an Empire} wanted to show that the Persians were

immoral and debauched and their intercourse is performed for the sake of gaining something, while Greek intercourse is pure, moral, and passionate, saved for that whom one loves most.

Artemisia sought to manipulate the hero of the film, Themistocles. When it becomes clear that the Greek admiral is too savvy to defeat in battle on the sea, she invites him aboard her ship to offer him a place in her fleet. To help him make his mind up, she seduces him, and the pair initiate a rough intercourse throughout her cabin – furniture is broken, positions are changed several times, she slaps him, until she once again asks him to switch sides, at which point he is disgusted and spurns her completely. This frantic coupling is the opposite of the sex shown between Leonidas and Gorgo in 300, which had clearly defined gender roles and was much more chaste in depiction. Artemisia, who initiated the sex and physically controlled much of it, shirks the traditional role of women in bed as demonstrated by the good Greek queen. Enraged, Artemisia throws Themistocles out of her cabin; the next battle sequence, as hinted at by the bemused general, is an all-out attack by the still-furious queen who is upset at being turned down. Her anger and volatility reflect Xerxes’s behavior in 300 when the Great King is spurned by Leonidas, which again casts the Greeks as rational and measured and the Persians as erratic and emotionally driven.

This is not a topic left to the movies but can be seen in television shows as well. Just over a month after 300 was released in theaters, South Park aired the episode “D-Yikes!,,” in which they spoofed several aspects of the movie. The main storyline of the episode involves Ms.

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156 300: RoaE., 54:37.  
157 300: RoaE., 56:58.
Garrison, a transgender woman, who is angry at men the entire episode, becoming the embodiment of the angry woman/man-hating lesbian trope.\textsuperscript{158} The episode begins with her storming into her classroom complaining about men to the children because her most recent date went poorly, and quickly moves to the women-only gym where she is angrily working out. At the gym she meets Allison, who hits on her and takes her to a bar, which Ms. Garrison realizes is a lesbian bar. Eventually the two end up in bed, but not before Ms. Garrison clumsily hypothesizes how two women have sex, which is played up in the next scene for a laugh as the two women bounce around on the bed, legs intertwined. This is an allusion to \textit{300}, where Leonidas and Gorgo are depicted as having a “normal” heteronormative relationship, while the Persian camp is filled with aberrant sexual behavior, including multiple women in bed with each other.

At the end of the episode, Xerxes is revealed to be a woman disguised as a man, which is a clear reference to \textit{300} and its androgynous portrayal of Xerxes. Xerxes also attempts to bribe Ms. Garrison with an important position at the new club, much the way Leonidas was tempted with an offer to join the Persian empire. Ms. Garrison declines and reveals that she knows Xerxes is a woman and seduces her, saving the bar. The narrator at the end of the episode says “and so it was that Les Bos was saved! The Persians had agreed to keep it a lesbian bar, for no dyke should be without cocktails.”\textsuperscript{159} Parker and Stone, obviously heavily influenced by \textit{300} and the Orientalist tropes found there, depict Ms. Garrison as an aberration because of her sexual preference, making fun of her being confused at the way she imagines two women having sex,


and then doubling down on it by the manner they decided to portray that act. They also show characters using sex as a weapon or means of getting what they want, much the way Artemisia does in 300: Rise of an Empire.

Racism, Physical Appearance, and Disability

As these books, movies, and shows use femininity and homosexuality to negatively portray the Persians, so too do they use physical features to do the same. Like Pressfield before him, Miller is more interested in embellishment and outright falsehoods to further his story. Miller’s language choices, such as “monsters from half the world away,” are also subtle indicators of how the reader should view the Persian forces; like the war elephants, Persians are shown in 300 as monsters from far away, not humans.

Miller’s primary and most visible form of bias is found in the way he uses skin color. Where the Spartans have clearly white skin tone and are the obvious heroes of the story, Miller also uses dark skin tone and clothing to denote villainy, employing racist tropes in the art to appeal to racial bias and compel his reader to believe that the Persians are evil. The color black has long been a visual indicator in the media for evil, for the bad guy of the story. In discussing the value of brightness in film, Meier et al. observed that

In American film, characters dressed in black are frequently evil, whereas those dressed in white are frequently good (e.g. in science fiction, Star Wars; in fantasy, The Wizard of Oz; in Westerns, Roy Rogers). More broadly, darkness is often associated with evil and death, whereas light is often associated with goodness and life.\textsuperscript{160}

The Immortals, when they make their appearance, are wrapped head to toe in black cloth with metal masks over their faces in an ahistorical portrayal. Herodotus, a primary source for the garb of Persia and their subject nations, noted that the Persians wore bright colored tunics, shiny scale armor, and felt hats while the Immortals were also conspicuous for the amount of gold which adorned their outfits.\textsuperscript{161} Rather than portray the Immortals accurately, Miller made the conscious choice to dress them all in black, leaving no doubt that they were to be seen as the villains.

In much the same way that black clothes mark a character as an antagonist, Black skin can be seen by an audience as another marker for evil. Implicit biases in human psychology mean that people will frequently, often at a subconscious level, associate darkness with negativity.\textsuperscript{162} This phenomenon has been observed in magazines, which has lightened the skin of Black actresses to make them seem more appealing or darkening the skin to make Black men seem more menacing.\textsuperscript{163} Furthermore, eyewitnesses have been found to unconsciously darken the skin tone of people observed committing crimes when describing the perpetrators, as seen in the case of the Boston bombers.\textsuperscript{164}

The first Persian shown is a messenger sent by the Great King Xerxes to demand a Spartan tribute of earth and water, which had been the traditional token of submission to the Persian empire, or else face the inevitable might of the Persian army as it washes over Greece.\textsuperscript{165} The messenger is depicted as having much darker skin than the Greeks, which can be seen elsewhere in the book. Xerxes is darker than Leonidas, the miscellaneous Persians depicted

\textsuperscript{161} Herodotus, 7.61; Herodotus, 7.83.
\textsuperscript{163} Alter, 1655.
\textsuperscript{164} Alter, 1663.
\textsuperscript{165} Briant, 145.
throughout the battle are shown as darker skinned than the Greeks, and their facial features are more bestial and brutal than those of the Greeks – Miller wanted to make it clear that the dark-skinned Persians wrapped in black clothing are the bad guys. As demonstrated by Meier et al. and Alter et al., these are visual cues audiences would pick up and interpret in one way – that anyone dark skinned or wearing black was to be seen as the villain.\footnote{Meier et al., 82.; Alter, 1660.} Miller had no interest in accurately portraying Persians and used their skin color as a visual trope to signify that they are bad guys.

In addition to depicting non-heteronormative relationships as belonging to the Other, Snyder also applies the same meaning to the physically disabled. After being turned away from service by Leonidas because of his physical deformity, Ephialtes, the hunchbacked son of a Spartan, takes his revenge by seeking out Xerxes and informing him of a goat path through the mountains that can be used to flank the remaining Spartans. Ephialtes makes his way through Xerxes’s camp with wide-eyed amazement as he looks at figures Snyder has included which appear meant to be seen as oddities by presenting these people through an ableist and prejudiced gaze as strange and unnatural. The figures range from what appears to be a man with the head of a goat playing a stringed instrument (see figure 6) to exotic, deformed women dancing with and kidding each other, to a concubine who lies seductively on a cushion, her limbs all amputated, before he comes to stand in front of Xerxes, who is framed as if he were a spider in the center of a vast and perverse web.\footnote{300, 1:15:48.} The individual with a goat’s head does not appear in the graphic novel, nor is there and mention of such a creature in the Histories – it is likely that Snyder was
eager to emphasize the alien nature of the Persians and Xerxes’s royal camp. Given the long association of the goat with the Devil and the similarity of this figure to the image often used by the Church of Satan (see figure 7), Snyder may have also been attempting to associate the Persians with Satan.

Xerxes is more than happy to accept the informer to his side and rewards Ephialtes with women and the promise of power and riches, if he but kneels and accepts Xerxes as his king.

When he approached Leonidas, Ephialtes was asked to stand and raise his shield, as Spartans were required to use their shields to defend their neighbor in battle; Ephialtes’s deformity prevented him from doing so, and Leonidas declined his aid.¹⁶⁸ In this meeting with Xerxes, all

¹⁶⁸ Miller, Chapter 3, page 9.
Ephialtes must do is kneel, taking the easy way out. Spartans, representing “the West,” stand and fight; Persians, representing “the East,” kneel and give up.

Snyder continues this negative portrayal of Persians when the Immortals appear. The Immortals depicted in 300 and its sequel are a mix of Asian/Eastern features wrapped around a monstrous package. Their heads are covered with turbans; their fights are choreographed like a kung fu film; their swords look like any one of a dozen curved Asian blades; and their masks are very similar to those worn by samurai from the Muromachi era up through the end of the Tokugawa era.  

Samurai who could afford such masks wore them in order to appear more ferocious in battle. Rather than presenting these Persians in an accurate and responsible manner, Snyder instead created a pan-Asian mélange for his villains, casting the entire continent in the role.

The Immortals were a handpicked force of elite Persians who were among the best trained of Xerxes’s army; according to Herodotus they numbered 10,000, and when one Immortal would die or retire, his position would be filled, always keeping the number of soldiers the same. A number of ancient sources detail the composition and equipment of the Persian army during this time. Herodotus, for example, describes not only the Persians and their felt caps and armor like fish scales, but the Assyrians with bronze helmets, Bactrians with caps and reed

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171 Herodotus 7.61.
bows, Arabs in long robes, Paphlagonians with plaited helmets and long boots, and more. The nations Xerxes assembled each had their own unique arms and armor representing diverse peoples across the region.

Instead, Snyder and Miller show the Immortals as swathed in heavy black uniforms with broad shoulders, wrapped headwear, and metal masks set in a stylized snarling human face (see figure 8). One Japanese mask in this style, known as somen, is dated to 1715 and crafted by Myōchin Muneakira (see figure 9); it is so similar to those worn by the Immortals that it could have been the inspiration for the design used in the graphic novel and later in the films.

During the initial encounter with the Spartans, the captain Dilios smashes an Immortal with his shield, sending their mask flying of and revealing a horrific visage underneath, one that is so shocking that causes the battle-hardened Spartan to briefly recoil. The Immortal’s face is barely human, creased with deep lines etched into grey skin, a mouth grimacing around inhuman

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172 Herodotus, 7.61-72.
fangs, and deeply pitted eye sockets in which a bright yellow eye gleams. The Immortal snarls at Dilios as it attacks, and at no point do the Immortals speak or make any sound associated with human beings; they are essentially animals. Snyder is going out of his way to make the Immortals seem as both inhuman and foreign as possible. He shows them as an evil invading force by using a negative depiction of several aspects of Asian culture to reinforce the theme that the West, bastion of light, democracy, and civilization, was under attack and facing imminent destruction from waves of alien Eastern invaders.

The latter saw the destruction of parts of Xerxes’s fleets, casting the Athenian leader Themistocles as the protagonist and the ethnically Greek Queen Artemisia as the primary antagonist. While the Persians are still depicted in the unfavorable light as seen in the first movie, it is specifically through the portrayal of Artemisia that we can see this negative depiction. Artemisia is cunning and deceptive, murdering her way to a position of power by isolating Xerxes and convincing him to war on Greece for the sake of her own vengeance.

Artemisia, sexually violated and abandoned as a young girl, was saved from death by the same Persian emissary who was treated to poor Spartan hospitality by Leonidas at the beginning of 300. Trained as a fearsome and deadly warrior, she became the favored warlord of Darius, Xerxes’s father, and she carried out his will with an effective and bloody determination.

Artemisia schemes to position Xerxes where she wants him. As he is inconsolable with grief it is Artemisia who shakes Xerxes from his stupor and convinces him that, if only the gods

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174 300, 1:04:38.
175 300: RoaE., 12:50.
can defeat the Greeks, it must mean that he is to become a god himself. Artemisia assassinates every one of Xerxes’s allies in order to alienate him and make him more dependent on her for council. As Xerxes receives adulation from his people, “Artemisia watched her flawless manipulation take shape.”

Artemisia’s perversions, her wantonness, her willingness to murder and manipulate, are by her own words the result of having been raised Persian. Her heart belongs to Persia, which has tainted and twisted her good Greek blood into something terrible. Her enthusiasm for displays of sexual deviancy mirror Xerxes’s camp in 300, where it appeared that any sexual desire can be fulfilled. Artemisia has been corrupted, not by her treatment at the hands of the Greeks who sexually assaulted her and left her to die, but by the Persians who raised her.

Decadence and Corruption

As in the graphic novel, the film version of 300 irresponsibly portrays the Persians as decadent monsters. The Great King shown here is a beautiful tyrant who hides a barely contained rage behind his makeup, jewelry, and gentility.

The decadent characteristic of the Persian king is reflected in way he approaches Leonidas and in his accoutrement. When Xerxes first appears on screen, he is carried into view on an enormous litter borne on the backs of hundreds of slaves. The throne gleams with gold and is decorated with enormous, gilded statues of lions ready to pounce. Two carved golden bull’s heads flank the Great King. He is nearly naked, his modesty protected only by an elaborately

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176 300: RoaE, 2:40.
embroidered waistcloth, and he is decorated with golden rings, collars, bracelets, piercings, and chains which crown his head. The Persian king is hairless and his skin glistens with a golden hue, as if he has been dusted with gold powder. The platform is vast and as Xerxes descends the stairs, he steps on the backs of his slaves to reach the ground. He is huge, at least a head taller than Leonidas; he looms over the Greek king and as he speaks, his voice is clearly modulated beyond what a human man’s voice can produce.

Xerxes’s camp at Thermopylae also stands in stark contrast to the Spartan’s camp. This scene is lit by fire but the women are easily visible, as are the amount of lush trapping and signs of conspicuous consumption which accompany Xerxes everywhere he goes, as Snyder is keen to show how decadent the Persian king is. Ephialtes’s entire visit to the camp is laden with signs of excess and debauchery – it is gaudy, rich, exotic, and disturbing.

Where the Persians luxuriate around fires with music playing, hookahs in abundance, soft fabrics and cushions on which to lounge, and dozens of willing (or not) sexual partners, the Spartans have a different sort of nightlife. They are busy preparing for the next day’s battle. After the second day, while Ephialtes is meeting with Xerxes, Stelios is applying a glowing red iron to the arm of a wounded Spartan, who does not flinch but merely growls as the cut is cauterized. The other Spartans are impassively bandaging themselves or others, eating a sparse meal, or preparing their weapons for battle. The Spartans are warmed by a single fire and have no cushions, no blankets on which to rest, and no music plays. Snyder, and Miller before him, want their audiences to see this disparity in comfort. The Spartans did not need something as

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mundane as cushions, because where the men of the East were weak and decadent, these saviors of Western civilization were sleeping in the dirt.

The Greek-born Artemisia also demonstrates how Persia corrupted her by using displays a sexual portrayal by the filmmakers to intentionally cast her character as deviant or perverse because of her upbringing among Persians. This, according to Said, reflects the fact that “Every European traveler or resident in the Orient has had to protect himself from its unsettling influences.”\(^{178}\) Artemisia, as Westerner, failed to protect herself from those influences. As in the scene where she energetically pursues Themistocles, Artemisia fails to conform to the sexual mores established by Gorgo. Snyder, who wrote this film, is invested in hammering home the point that Artemisia is sexually deviant, and the difference between her and Gorgo is that Artemisia was raised by Persians, before the navies clash, she is interrogating a Greek sailor who had been captured. The Greek insults her and her men by insinuating that they are weak for obeying a woman, and when she says that Persians should not follow her because she is also Greek, she admits that “yes, my brother I am Greek by birth, and I have Greek blood running through my veins. But my heart… is Persian.”\(^{179}\) Upon making this pronouncement she deftly stabs and decapitates the helpless Greek sailor, holds his severed head aloft and gazes intently at it, then gives the head a deep kiss before pitching it overboard. The Greek men under her command are disgusted at this display, while the Persian sailors are unfazed. Again Snyder uses

\(^{178}\) Said, 166.  
\(^{179}\) 300: RoaE, 11:03.
Artemisia’s sexual deviance to draw a line between the “normal” Greeks and the perverse Persians, by using the reactions of the men as a guide for the viewer.

Similar to the manner in which Artemisia was corrupted by her upbringing among Persians, so too was Oliver Stone’s Alexander corrupted. For much of Alexander Darius III and the Persians are the antagonists, along with Alexander’s ambition to push ever onward through Achaemenid territory, but ultimately the villain of Alexander is the corrupting nature of the Persians, something that can be seen in 300 and Rise of an Empire. Aristotle, brought to Macedonia by Philip to tutor Alexander and his peers, is shown in the film warning Alexander and his classmates that “it is true that the Oriental races are known for their brutality and the slavish devotion of the senses. When discussing Flaubert and how he portrayed the Eastern world, Said noted that the Orient “seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire,” all of which Alexander will be warned about and which he will be successfully tempted by. Excess in all things is the undoing of men, that is why we Greeks are superiors, we practice control of our senses. Moderation, we hope.”

Midway through the film, Alexander enters Babylon with his army and is welcomed as a hero and accepted as king, and it is not long before he and his generals make their way through the palace to the king’s vast, lush bedchambers and his harem. Incense burners, bare-chested slaves with fans, chirping birds, pools, plants, beautiful lounging women, eunuchs, and more await Alexander there. Almost as one the women begin dancing, seemingly uncaring that a new

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180 Said, 188.
ruler has come to claim them. This is the moment that was presaged by Aristotle when he was tutoring young Alexander. Stone shows here that Persians, and Persia itself, are seductive and capable of overwhelming every sense a logical Greek man has. Alexander, like Ephialtes in 300 before him, finds himself captivated by the tempting delights of the East and begins to lose himself in excess and decadence.

For Alexander, the most tempting part of Babylon is the eunuch Bagoas, and the king is immediately smitten with him. The historical Bagoas remains an enigma to historians, but the Bagoas who Alexander meets here is lithe, scantily clad, and pretty. He has been gelded, Alexander is told, and just eighteen. The eunuch seduces Alexander by speaking Greek and when offered the chance to return to whatever home might be left for him in the north of Susa, the equally charmed Bagoas declines, offering to stay with the new Great King. Alexander’s interest in Bagoas is noted with jealousy by Hephaestion, Alexander’s some-time lover and companion, commented on by other Macedonians, and later scorned by his wife Roxana.

This relationship with Bagoas is one which Alexander was warned about by Aristotle. Asked by Cassander about the nature of two men being together, the old philosopher states that “when men lie together in lust it is a surrender to the passions and odes nothing for the excellence in us. Nor does any other excess, Cassander, jealousy among them. But when men lie together, and knowledge and virtue are passed between them that is pure and excellent. When they compete to bring out the good, the best in each other. This is the love between men that can build a city-state.” In Halperin’s model this is an example of pederasty, which refers to the “male sexual penetration of a subordinate male – subordinate in terms of age, social class, gender

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182 Alexander, 1:09:40.
183 Alexander, 1:21:06.
style, and/or sexual role.” Bagoas fulfills all of these qualifications, and as Alexander lusts for Bagoas, he surrenders his passion and no knowledge passes between them because he is neither man nor boy. Stone’s Bagoas represents the seductive nature of Persia, and the East.

At the end of the film Alexander dies in Babylon, proving Old Ptolemy correct when he said “in the end, I believe Babylon was a far easier mistress to enter than she was to leave.” Alexander dies in the bosom of his mistress Babylon, poisoned or sick or heartbroken over the loss of Hephaestion, and his fragile empire is pulled apart by his generals. Stone shows Alexander as broken and weak, unable to leave his son an empire where his father, Philip, was able to leave Alexander with a strong army, a united Greece, and skilled generals. The East corrupted Alexander and broke him.

Stone’s notion of a corrupting Persia is echoed in “D-Yikes.” Ms. Garrison is at the bar when word reaches the women that it is to be sold. Upon hearing to whom, she all but spits “Persians!?” in disgust. When explaining the problem she has with them, Ms. Garrison says “have you seen how Persians decorate? They will cover that bar in cheesy blue carpeting, white statues, and gold curtain rods to the point that you will want to puke.” During this scene, a generic Middle Eastern flute tune is played in the background, one that is reminiscent of other movies that take place in the ancient world. This description of Persians and their sense of style is Orientalist, as it fully embraces the trope of the exotic, decadent, Eastern Other. The white carpet, golden curtain rods, and marble statues are at odds with the current décor of Les Bos, which is very similar to a working-class bar.

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184 Halperin, 95.
185 Alexander, 1:10:45.
In every retelling of this story, the Persians sent messengers to the Greek city-states, arrogantly demanding their supplication to the Great King. When the messenger reached Sparta, Leonidas listened to him, then had the man thrown into a well – in Miller’s version, and later in Snyder’s, the Spartan king kicks the messenger into the well himself, bellowing “This…is…Sparta!” In South Park’s, the messenger is Amir Hadi who has heard that the women are upset about the change in ownership, and he was sent to make sure that they knew everyone would be welcome at the new Club Persh. In addition to this, he tells them that the new club will look great, with blue carpets and gold curtain rods. When Ms. Garrison asks if men will be allowed in, Amir Hadi is confused and says everyone will be, to which Ms. Garrison replies, “choose your next words wisely, Persian.”\textsuperscript{188} When Hadi tells Garrison that she is crazy, she says “no…this isn’t crazy…this is lesbos!” and kicks him in the groin.\textsuperscript{189}

This joke about Persian decorating is continued when the Persians are shown in their office, which is exactly as Ms. Garrison described, covered in blue carpet, gold statues and curtain rods, and white wallpaper. In a scene right out of 300, the Persians are then shown in a mob heading towards the bar, and instead of the weapons, they are wielding golden curtain rods, bolts of purple curtains, and rolls of white wallpaper. The women are waiting outside the bar and a scrum breaks out, with both sides pushing and shoving each other. At one point, Ms. Garrison calls one of the men an “Iranian faggot.”\textsuperscript{190} Eventually the fight ends, and the narrator says “finally the Persians grew tired! and many wanted to go shopping for more designer sunglasses. They retreated. The lesbos…had held.”\textsuperscript{191} This is a recurring joke throughout the episode, that

\textsuperscript{188} South Park, “D-Yikes!,” 12:12.
\textsuperscript{189} South Park, “D-Yikes!,” 12:22.; everyone else pronounces the bar “Le Bo,” while Ms. Garrison calls it “Lesbos.”
\textsuperscript{190} South Park, “D-Yikes!,” 14:43.
\textsuperscript{191} South Park, “D-Yikes!,” 14:52.
Persian men are vain, interested in designer labels, gold piercings, silk shirts, smartphone accessories, and the like.

Eventually the show introduces the owner of the club, Mr. Xerxes, who is essentially a carbon copy of the Xerxes from 300, except he is wearing a Bluetooth earpiece and designer clothes. He arrives much in the same way as he did in the movie and graphic novel, and the narrator says, “He sat atop a gold hummer, with customized Gucci accessories, which only a Persian would think was cool.”192 His entourage quickly kneel in front of the car so that he can walk down, a scene ripped from 300, and which would be shown again later.

To further reinforce this trope about Persians, Ms. Garrison enlists some unemployed Mexican laborers to spy on Xerxes and the Persians. When one of her companions complains that they do not look Persian, Ms. Garrison disagrees and gives a laborer a quick makeover, putting gel in his hair, giving him a silk shirt, some gold chains, and “tons of cologne.”193 When she is finished, Ms. Garrison turns to her companions and simply says “Persian.”194 It is telling that what Parker and Stone chose to highlight from 300 was the overt portrayal of Persians as decadent, rich interlopers who are trying to interfere with another culture. Parker and Stone, in this episode, are quick to embrace the stereotype shown in other forms of media that the Persians in general and Xerxes in particular were decadent, morally corrupt and only interested in excess and self-indulgence.

Recent decades have seen a rise in the appearance of Spartans in popular culture and media. While they have always been known in the modern Western world, with the publication of Frank Miller’s graphic novel *300* there has been a surge of interest in Sparta and especially their involvement in the Greco-Persian wars, and even more so since the film adaptation was released in 2007. Spartans and their legacy can be seen in the health and wellness industry, political movements, and film and television.

In 2007, shortly after *300* was released, fitness enthusiast Joe De Sena organized a series of Organized Course Racing (OCR) events, where participants tackle a series of endurance obstacles varying from carrying cement blocks to climbing ropes over walls to throwing spears at targets across a three- to five-mile-long course. By 2010 De Sena had established The Spartan Race, which as of 2021 can be found in more than 40 countries, and hosts over two hundred fifty events annually.\(^\text{195}\) The Spartan Race website describes the origins of the race as occurring when “Spartan founder, Joe De Sena, became increasingly aware that humans are missing a critical component in the modern world. As we took steps forward technologically, holistic health took a step backward. Life is getting “easier”, but as a result, people are becoming overweight, depressed, lonely and less self-sufficient.”\(^\text{196}\)

It is not a coincidence that the Spartan Race was founded the same year *300* appeared on screens, with dozens of bare-chested, oiled up men in peak physical condition performing

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\(^\text{196}\) “About Spartan Race.”
Herculean physical tasks. Almost immediately after the movie premiered, fitness websites and magazines began touting the workout plans employed by the actors, with Gerard Butler, who played Leonidas, on the cover of more than one magazine.\(^{197}\) The Spartan Race is no exception to this, with their website hosting a variety of exercise plans and diets intended to help the user get into Spartan shape.\(^{198}\)

Sparta, and the Spartans, is simply the method by which De Sena decided to brand and promote his business. Every webpage of the site is splashed with a stylized Corinthian helmet so closely associated with Spartans, as are the branded merchandise that is offered for sale. His view of Spartans is deliberately cultivated to fit his needs as a lifestyle brand, as we can see from statements like “Eat more real, whole foods. Less processed foods, focus on what you need rather than what you want. Eat like the Spartans did back in 431 BC. If you can’t find it in nature, you shouldn’t be eating it.”\(^{199}\) Adherents of the Spartan Race lifestyle are encouraged to work on “steadily eliminating processed foods (bread, cereals, cookies, pastas, frozen dinners, alcohol, and the like),” even though Spartans ate bread and drank alcohol.\(^{200}\) It may be more interesting to consider how the Spartan Race squares their belief in the elimination of processed foods and a desire to eat a Spartan diet while selling nutritional products like collagen protein powder and mitochondrial supplements.\(^{201}\)

\(^{200}\) “About Spartan Race.”; Herodotus 6.84 – for more on the ancient Greek/Spartan diet, see Wilkins and Nadeau’s A Companion to Food in the Ancient World.
De Sena’s admiration (and capitalization on) Spartan interest later pivoted to deification. In September 2022, De Sena announced that he was going to be building “a 35-foot-tall metal statue of an ancient Spartan helmet” in the modern Greek city of Sparta.\textsuperscript{202} The purpose of such a monument, according to De Sena, is to commemorate the sacrifice of the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae who “put everything on the line in the fight for good against evil.”\textsuperscript{203} Where much of the language used by De Sena around his site and the products he offered tended to focus more on nutrition, physical exercise, and vague Stoic philosophy, with this announcement he leapt directly into the familiar framing wherein the Spartans were good, and anyone they fought was evil. De Sena’s goal is to sell fifteen thousand bricks around the statue with the goal being that “15,000 Spartan racers are holding up the spirit, the passion, and the determination that the ancient Spartans modeled 2,500 years ago.”\textsuperscript{204} Again, De Sena explains this in terms of good versus evil – the purpose of so many bricks is to hold up the 300, and he says “We're honoring them. We're honoring this idea of good against evil, of one against many.”\textsuperscript{205} The early focus of the Spartan Race was more on nutrition and exercise based around what De Sena thought he knew about the historical Spartans – this statue, and the language around it based on good versus evil, demonstrate a move towards embracing the rhetoric used by so many historians and seen in so many films.

The interest in Spartans has been embraced by the people behind the Spartan Race and other fitness and lifestyle publications as a means of promoting their brand – workout like a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[203] Spartan Race, “Statue.”
\item[204] Spartan Race, “Statue.”
\item[205] Spartan Race, “Statue.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Spartan, get in shape like a Spartan. The fitness magazine *Men’s Health*, shortly after the release of *300*, ran several articles about the exercise program behind the chiseled physiques seen in the movie. Similar articles and exercise regimens can be found across the internet and in a variety of health and fitness publications. Others, however, have embraced a different aspect of the Spartans, one that is potentially much more harmful and dangerous.

While some admire the Spartans for their bodies, others are more interested in what they see as the Spartans’ unflinching defiance of grasping authority. According to Plutarch, before the final clash between Persians and Spartans, the Great King appealed to Leonidas that he should spare his men’s lives and have them hand over their arms. Leonidas’s reply was simply

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**Figure 8** T-shirt with the motto “molon labe” framing crossed assault rifles. [“Molon Labe ‘Come And Take It’ Pro Gun Rights T Shirt.” Accessed March 7, 2024.](https://explicitshirtstore.com/molon-labe-come-and-take-it-pro-gun-rights-t-shirt.)

**Figure 9** Pistol engraved with “molon labe” and a Corinthian helmet. [Missouri Guns & Ammo. “Sig Sauer P238 Spartan Bronze PVD 2.7” 7+1 380 ACP MPN: 238-380-SPARTAN UPC: 798681512799.” Accessed April 12, 2021.](https://missouriguns.net/product/sig-sauer-p238-spartan-bronze-pvd-2-7-71-380-acp-mpn-238-380-spartan-upc-798681512799/.)

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"Come and take them." This phrase, *molon labe* in Greek, has been adopted by American gun enthusiasts and the political Right in response to what they see as an encroachment by the federal government on gun rights and the individual liberties of Americans (see figures 8 and 9).

Alongside this association with Second Amendment rights, the Spartans have become seen as a kind of champion for freedom from tyranny, almost entirely due to their role at Thermopylae. Much of this association has arisen since the release of *300*.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) labels itself “the premier firearms education organization in the world,” but is also heavily invested in seeing restrictions on gun ownership loosened. The NRA has used imagery and language directly influenced by *300* in their advertising (see figure 10). One of these ads has “Come and Take Them!” emblazoned at the top of an image containing a picture of a Spartan statue bearing a spear and shield. On the shield, instead of the standard lambda decoration which Spartan shields are known to have had, they have superimposed the NRA’s own logo of an eagle bearing two rifles. In the background of the advertisement, we can see the painting "Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC" by Massimo Taparelli, which depicts the Spartans standing at a cliff at Thermopylae. The bottom caption at the bottom of the picture reads “In 480 B.C., King Leonidas of Sparta defended what he valued with everything he had. To preserve out God-given rights, Americans need to do the same today.

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208 The Second Amendment of the United States Constitution states that “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

by supporting the NRA in every way possible!" This ad is a direct appeal to NRA supporters using Spartan imagery to link their organization to the Spartans, who have been depicted as standing up to tyranny.

To the NRA, the events of Thermopylae represent a challenge to tyranny and a full-throated defense of the right to bear arms. This belief is echoed by others in the gun rights movement. The Three Percenters, a hate group and militia movement established in 2008, also makes use of Spartan imagery, frequently displaying the Corinthian helmet on patches, stickers, decals, bracelets, tattoos, and dozens of other products, often colored red, white, and blue, or super-imposed over an American flag.

Other elements of the American political Right have embraced Spartan imagery; during the attempted insurrection of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, a man was seen wearing Spartan-influenced armor that had been painted red, white, and blue, and had “Trump 2020”

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painted on the helmet (see figure 13), while another insurrectionist sported a bronze colored helmet and black and red body armor with the phrase “USA Patriot” across the chest.\(^{212}\) The Proud Boys, a white supremacist group founded in 2016, frequently reference the Spartans.\(^{213}\) Proud Boys have embraced both the violence surrounding Spartans in popular culture and what they interpret as the Spartans’ role in preserving ‘Western Civilization.’

A common perception of the Spartans among these groups is that they stood for freedom, which is ironic considering the facts of Sparta. Sparta during the Greco-Persian wars was a monarchy with not one but two kings, government-mandated education for youths, a requirement for men to serve in the military for forty years and highly prescribed behavior, and a vast population of enslaved Greeks. The population of Messenia was conquered and enslaved from about 750 to 600 BCE; owned not by individual Spartans but by the State, these helots performed

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a significant part of the agricultural labor required to keep Sparta fed and were monitored by a secret society known as the *krypтеіa.*

The Right-wing fascination with the Classical Greek world reared its head again in early 2022, this time in Canada, as a convoy of truck drivers and others protested Covid-19 vaccine mandates across the country. These mandates, put in place to stem Covid-19 deaths, have been seen by the political Right in Western countries as intrusive, tyrannical government overreach, and Canada was no exception. In January of 2022 this convoy toured Canada with the goal of reaching Ottowa, the capital, and forcing the government to remove these mandates. Those involved in the convoy displayed flags and imagery that was in the same vein as the insurrectionists of January 6, 2020 – *molon labe* flags, Confederate flags, and Nazi paraphernalia. A deeper look into the financial backing of the convoy, however, yields more evidence of the Classical world among this Right-wing population.

The organizers of the convoy set up a GoFundMe so that people who sympathized with the convoy’s goals could contribute financially. This data was leaked, and the information provided by donors revealed that admiration for and appropriation of the Classical world was something that many donors shared. Comments and usernames include references to *300, Leonidas, Seneca, St. Augustine, Spartacus, Gladiator, The Iliad,* and more. Many of them emphasize the fact that the Classics are firmly entrenched in these anti-government, pro-personal freedom movements that are found in Right-wing parties across the Western world.

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217 *Pharos,* “Freedom Convoy.”
The political Right in North America has increasingly embraced aspects of the Classical world in attempts to define and express their beliefs, seeing in ancient Greece elements of a culture that has values that are appealing. White supremacy, which is abundant on the Right, leans heavily on misconstrued understandings of the ancient world, especially Greece and Rome. Frequently white supremacists view these cultures as European and White, and especially in the case of Greece and Sparta, defenders of both of those qualities. Portrayals of Spartans as heroes are not limited to political groups. They have been cast as the hero in video games, movies, and as mascots for various sports teams. The popular video game franchise “Halo” sees players take on the role of Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, a supersoldier who fights against Earth’s enemies in the future. Master Chief is a product of a special genetic and training program known as SPARTAN-II, one of dozens of genetically engineered soldiers developed by Earth’s government.\textsuperscript{218} The SPARTANs, and primarily Master Chief, defend humanity from the alien coalition known as The Covenant, and later the inhuman threat called The Flood. The Halo franchise leans heavily into the Spartan ideal (not thrilled with this word choice) – Master Chief and the other SPARTANs are genetically superiors and better trained than other soldiers, there were three hundred of them at the beginning of the program, they fight against impossible odds to hold back an inhuman threat poised to wipe out civilization.\textsuperscript{219} Both The Covenant and The Flood echo previous portrayals of Persians and their forces – The Covenant is a theocratic hegemony made up of several different species brought together to conquer space, and The Flood are mindless, ravening monsters consuming anything in their way.\textsuperscript{220} Master Chief, a SPARTAN, is humanity’s only hope to avoid destruction.

\textsuperscript{219} Thorpe, 66-67.
\textsuperscript{220} Thorpe, 188; 400.
There are other instances of a Spartan in one form or another being a hero. In the 1993 science fiction film *Demolition Man*, Sylvester Stallone plays John Spartan, a police officer suspended in time only to be revived in the future to stop a violent criminal.\(^{221}\) Spartan, in the year 2032, is a brute compared to what the police of the day have become, and it is only through his familiarity and comfort with violence that the bad guys are stopped. Here, the comparison is obvious – the Spartan, stronger and braver than other men, must fight alone in order to save civilization and stop it from falling into the hands of a maniac.

Spartans are not confined to movies and video games. In the United States, there are at least three hundred and thirty-four high school, college, and professional sports teams with a Spartan mascot, to say nothing of thousands of businesses with the word Sparta in their name.\(^{222}\)

**Critical Response**

Pressfield’s book has been continuously in print since it was first released in 1998 and has remained relatively popular. On Goodreads, Gates of Fire currently has a rating of 4.39 out of 5 stars on the basis of more than thirty-four thousand ratings with more than two thousand written reviews, many of which loudly praise the themes running through the text.\(^{223}\)

It has proven so popular among readers in the military that it appears on the Marine Corps Commandant’s Professional Reading List, a selection of texts on military matters and

leadership recommended for both officers and enlisted Marines.\textsuperscript{224} This fact is heavily advertised on Pressfield’s website, along with a picture of Marines on deployment in Iraq reading the book while off duty.\textsuperscript{225} Given the number of books sold and the frequency with which they end up in the hands of servicemembers, it is troubling that Pressfield spends so much time casting the Persians as villains, aliens, and cruel tyrants who lust for conquest yet are simultaneously weak, effeminate, and homosexual. The biased view presented in \textit{Gates of Fire} is tacitly endorsed by the United States Government and the leadership of the Marine Corps. This flawed book, which perpetuates an ahistorical and problematic depiction “the East,” is consumed by Marines who are stationed in the Middle East and who would, in theory, be engaged with Persians in the event that war was to break out with Iran. This leaves us with the potentially dangerous situation that American troops would enter combat with an intentionally flawed view of their enemy fueled by Pressfield’s ahistorical book.

Throughout \textit{Gates of Fire}, Pressfield has made liberal use of the historical facts of the time period in which his book is set; an interview he did provides an insight as to the reasoning behind this decision. In 2009 he conducted an interview with John Trikeriotis at 300spartanwarriors.com, a website dedicated to providing information about the Spartan stand at Thermopylae, in which the author answered a number of questions about several of his books, most prominent of which was \textit{Gates of Fire}. The interviewer’s first question was regarding the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{224} “Commandant’s Professional Reading List (Foundational) - MCA.” Accessed July 12, 2022. https://www.mca-marines.org/resource/commandants-professional-reading-list/.
\end{itemize}
difference in writing about ancient history as opposed to more recent periods in time, and

Pressfield’s answer is illuminating.\textsuperscript{226} The difference, he said, is that

You can actually cheat a little on the ancient stuff, just because no one can check up on you. That doesn’t mean I don’t do exhaustive research. I do. But many facts about the ancient world, philosophical and personal as well as historical, have been lost over time. For Sparta in particular, we know practically nothing.\textsuperscript{227}

Pressfield, having admitted here that he can fabricate stories because “no one can check up on you,” decided that

Spartans have historically gotten a bad rap; they’ve been portrayed as bullies and brutes, mindlessly militaristic, etc., while all the glory of Greece has been bestowed on Athens. I thought: Why not tell a story from the Spartan side, show their sense of humor, their warrior virtues – but from a human and personal perspective.\textsuperscript{228}

Spurious claims about the Spartans being cast as bullies aside, Pressfield openly admits on the fictive nature of his work. No one can check up on his story because there is a dearth of information about the Spartans, so he felt comfortable giving them keen senses of humor, a deep philosophical bent, and characters who are warmly avuncular. Pressfield engages in wholesale propaganda throughout \textit{Gates of Fire}, ignoring or explaining away Spartan cruelty.

In this same interview, Pressfield also discussed his interest in ancient Greece and how he had enjoyed reading classics like Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plato, explaining to Trikeriotis that “I’ve always been a buff for Greek history.”\textsuperscript{229} During one reading of Herodotus, Pressfield was struck by the casual manner of Dienekes, a Spartan officer, who was unfazed at the thought that

\begin{addendum}[1]\item This interview was conducted in 2009, when Pressfield’s most recent work was “Killing Rommel,” which takes place during the Second World War.\item 300spartanwarriors.com. Archived at \url{https://web.archive.org/web/20090227183945/http://www.300spartanwarriors.com/questionsanswers/qastevenpressfield.html}.\item 300spartanwarriors.com. Archived at archive.org.\item 300spartanwarriors.com. Archived at archive.org.\end{addendum}
Xerxes had so many archers that their arrows would blot out the sun, and said “they would fight them in the shade.” This story about Dienekes encapsulates Pressfield’s philosophy regarding the Spartans and how he should write about them. Dienekes appears in Herodotus just once, for the aforementioned quote and a brief mention of his bravery, and never again. Pressfield felt, and openly admitted to the fact, that he had the freedom to craft a story around the events leading up to Thermopylae as he saw fit and ignored the facts when it suited him. Just as he created the person of Dienekes and made him a philosophizing older mentor to a number of younger Spartans, so too did he feel justified in eliminating the fact of Spartan homosexuality and pederasty, and the nature of an enslaved nation serving the Spartans.

300, first released in the United States in March of 2007, grossed more than 210 million dollars, sold thirty million tickets, and was the seventh-highest grossing movie of the year. While the movie was generally seen as middling or mediocre by critics, it was received much more positively by general audiences. This positive reception by general viewers highlights the fact that Snyder’s homophobia, racism, Orientalism, and overall bias against the Persians were either unnoticed or not deemed of concern by audiences, demonstrating that these biases were not unusual for American audiences.

Rotten Tomatoes is a website that gathers both professional and audience reviews for movies and television shows and assigns a binary designation to the collected opinions. When a

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230 Herodotus, 7.266.
show or movie has at least sixty percent positive reviews, it is deemed “Fresh,” while those with a lower score are “Rotten.” Among the critics are some designated as “Top Critics,” a label based primarily on the publication for whom the critic works. While the Critic scores for 300 are high enough to give the film a Fresh rating, among the Top Critics 300 falls short of that mark, with only forty-three percent of those critics giving it a positive review. Roger Ebert, probably the best-known movie critic in America, of one of these Top Critics. In his review for 300, Ebert gave the movie two out of four stars, offering some praise for Snyder’s ability to adhere closely to Miller’s source material, but criticized the acting, the sets, the dialogue, and most of all what he saw as gratuitous violence. Ebert briefly mentions Leonidas’s contempt of Athenians for being “boy-lovers,” and the appearance of Xerxes with his jewelry and makeup, but he does not delve into those topics any further. He does not notice Leonidas’s, and Snyder’s, hypocrisy about same-sex relations, nor the Orientalist nature of the portrayal of Xerxes and the Persians. A few of the Top Critic negative reviews mention the bias found throughout, but most of them criticize those same aspects Ebert found unappealing – the violence and gore, the flat characters, the cheesy dialogue, with many critics negatively comparing the movie to a video game. The Orientalist depiction of the Persians in 300 is essentially ignored by popular audiences.

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Where the Rotten Tomatoes’ Critics have collectively assigned 300 a score of sixty-one out of one hundred, the Audience rating is much higher, at eighty-nine percent positive, on more than 250,000 reviews, and that approval is readily apparent in the reviews. A five-star review of the film written by Mark W. stands as a rather typical positive Audience review, with Mark saying that:

One of my all time favourite films, I’ve seen this 30+ times and still love watching it. Its a classic good versus evil tale of 300 Spartan soldiers taking on the invading Persian army. Shot in a comic book style, its full of violence guts and gore. No Oscar winning performances but who cares with a body count like this. Gerard Butler is the ultimate hero as king Leonidas, who’s motivational speeches to his soldiers would make me pick up a sword and kick some Persian ass.  

Mark captures the general sentiment of those who enjoyed the film, with many commenting positively on the action, the violence, the physiques of the Spartans, and the quality of direction. Virtually none of the positive reviews mentioned the negative portrayal of the Persians, homophobia, or anything similar.

The few negative reviews are along the lines of this review by Jen M., who said “It’s sometimes pretty good looking, but always totally mindless.” A few mentioned homoeroticism, though just as many used the opportunity to engage with their own homophobia, like Marvin N. did when he wrote “i was duped. i watched to the end and then realized the movie was sooooooo gay.” Generally the negative reviews mentioned the computer-generated imagery (CGI), the violence, and the dialogue. As with the Critic reviews, mentions of

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237 https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/300/reviews?type=user
Orientalism, negative portrayals of Persians, racism, or anything is far and away the exception, rather than the rule.

The critical focus of 300, both positive and negative, has been primarily on the overall crafting of the movie – the writing, the direction, the use of CGI, the violence, the costuming. Few critics, either professional or general audience, felt the need to address any of the other issues embedded within the movie. This demonstrates that Orientalism – this collection of negative stereotypes about the Middle East – is removed from the conversation when it comes to a film’s reception. The audience for films like 300 consume these portrayals without being aware of their historical accuracy, or the biased depictions of Persians and Middle Easterners.

Rotten Tomatoes also collected reviews of the 2014 sequel 300: Rise of an Empire, and those reviews show a step down in terms of favorability, from the critics and users alike. The consensus seems to be that Rise of an Empire was an unnecessary sequel, plagued by many of the negative aspects of the first move and few of the positives – it added nothing new, seemed repetitive, was forgettable, and lacked a coherent script. Users viewed it as a lesser 300, lacking the originality and flair that made the first film stand out.

The popularity of 300 is obvious in a number of different ways. In 2008 Meet the Spartans was released – a broad parody lampooning 300 and other contemporary works, it was immediately lambasted by critics and audiences alike. 240 As terrible as Meet the Spartans is, it demonstrates that 300 was a large enough success that it was judged worthy of having a parody rushed into production in an attempt to capitalize on its popularity.

240 https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/meet_the_spartans
The aggregate reviews for *Alexander* are worse than both *300* and *300: Rise of an Empire*. Critics and audience members alike criticized the film for its pacing, casting decisions, narrative choices, the cast’s accents, and ultimately for being boring. Giovanni M. provides us with a fairly coherent and representative one and a half star rating and audience review, saying “Oh my god, this movie is so boring. Problems? It's long, poorly-acted, poorly-directed, glacially paced, and completely unfocused.”²⁴¹ A good number mentioned Stone’s attempt to address Alexander’s sexuality, with many of the unfavorable reviews negatively referring to Alexander’s scenes with Hephaestion and Bagoas – user Plain C. eloquently said of the film,

What a piece of shit. 3 and a half hours of shit film. the first battle was tight but then all it had was buming, a lot of buming. I called it the greek broke back mountain. bummers buming all through the film. it was unnecessarily long. really was spread out too thin, i don't mind buming but not all the time. alexander was brad pitt (shit).²⁴²

Per Gunnar J had shared similar sentiments, saying “My wife picked this one up together with the weekly TV magazine. Luckily we didn't pay full price. I hoped for a film about one of the greatest warlord of all time but what I got was something about a crying homosexual wimp.”²⁴³

Positive reviews are relatively few and far between. In his five-star review, Jared R. compares it favorably to other Hollywood epics: “A misunderstood epic that hark-in's back to the days of such great epics including The Ten Commandments, Spartacus, and Ben-Hur. Its hard not to admire Stone's work on this gigantic of a film.”²⁴⁴ Joshua R. also enjoyed the movie, commenting that it was “A brilliant, fascinating & haunting portrait of the young Macedonian King who conquered 90% of the known world before his death at the age of 32. A fantastic and

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²⁴¹ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/user/id/940850022.
²⁴³ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/user/id/915708163
²⁴⁴ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/user/id/908235268
near flawless script combined with Oliver Stones' expert direction make this one of the very best films of the 21st century so far. A-.”

South Park and Damage

One aspect of these pop culture properties that has been overlooked is the potential for damage done against vulnerable groups in the LGBTQ+ community. Certainly films like 300, which is loaded with themes threatening sexual violence against straight men by a non-hetero character, and television shows like South Park, whose characters hurl homophobic slurs regularly and queer characters are relegated to the role of a joke or stereotype, have been called out for their negative portrayals. Criticism of those and other properties often stop there, with attention being brought to the fact that they are homophobic or otherwise biased. While it is important that we critically evaluate these shows and films, we must also consider the potential long-term effects irresponsible portrayals of history can have on their audience. In this final section I will address the impact that homophobic slurs can have on an audience and why it is important that other cultures, as in the case of Persians, are depicted responsibly and without a negative, Orientalist bias.

It must be asked if it matters whether homophobic slurs are used in these properties, and if they have any kind of impact on the audience. Does South Park, a show that has been on the air for twenty-four years, twenty-three seasons, and over three hundred episodes, potentially cause damage to members of the LGBTQ+ community? Fortunately, there are several studies which have attempted to quantify how slurs can cause lasting harm to those at whom the slurs

245 https://www.rottentomatoes.com/user/id/905868445
are directed.

Birkett et al. studied the effects of homophobic bullying among middle school students and how those students felt after a number of months. Multiple studies cited by the authors report that not only do most LGBT students at this stage endure some form of bullying, those students also frequently have higher rates of depression and anxiety. Tragically, this can also lead to increased rates of suicide and suicide attempts among that same group. Birkett’s team studied more than seven thousand middle schoolers across fourteen school districts and twenty-seven middle schools, and asked whether those students were subjected to homophobic teasing and slurs, whether they felt depressed or suicidal, and whether or not they felt victimized by their peers, among other questions. Birkett’s findings indicate that students who were questioning their sexuality or were perceived by their peers to be non-heteronormative, and subjected to homophobic slurs had higher rates of depression, alcohol and drug use, truancy, and suicidal tendencies.

Ten years after Birkett’s study, Dawn DeLay et al. conducted a longitudinal study assessing the damage homophobic name calling can have on adolescents transitioning to larger middle school environments. Like Birkett, DeLay noted how pivotal adolescence can be in developing the well-being of a person, given that it is a “period of rapid developmental, social, and ecological changes” that affects people physically and can see changes to self-concept and

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247 Birkett, 995.; “Most” is reported at eighty-two percent, which honestly seems low.
248 Middle school in the United States is usually grades 7 and 8, although it is not uncommon for school districts to have students enter at 6th grade or leave at 9th.
249 Birkett, 997.
personal identity.\textsuperscript{250} Students were assessed during the school year, six months apart, and used surveys to gather information about their overall self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and instances of homophobic name calling. After analyzing the data, the authors determined that “experiencing homophobic name calling was a significant predictor of changes in depressive symptoms and self-esteem over the 6\textsuperscript{th} grade academic year.”\textsuperscript{251} This data also indicated that the more frequent name calling a child was subjected to, the greater the damage to their self-esteem. Damage from name calling and other elements of anti-LGBTQ+ behavior frequently leads to those young adults engaging in self-harm. According to the Trevor Project, in 2018 almost two million young LGBTQ+ young adults seriously contemplated taking their own lives, and one tries almost every forty-five seconds.\textsuperscript{252} More, LGBTQ+ youth are four times as likely than their peers to attempt suicide, due to a combination of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, lack of access to healthcare, fear of parental response, and other factors.\textsuperscript{253} Unfortunately, persecution of the LGBTQ+ community does damage beyond the young adult years, and can be seen in other aspects of society, including the law.

In discussing anti-gay bias on verdicts and sentences for gay defendants, and even those perceived to be gay, Mirabito and Lecci found that such a bias likely does exist. Juries, who are

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\textsuperscript{251} DeLay, 960.
\textsuperscript{252} The Trevor Project is “the world’s largest suicide prevention and mental health organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LGBTQ) young people” https://www.thetrevorproject.org/blog/the-trevor-project-celebrates-passage-of-the-respect-for-marriage-act/; https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/facts-about-lgbtq-youth-suicide/.
\end{flushright}
just as prone to anti-gay views as the rest of American society, were more likely to render guilty verdicts to a defendant they believed to be gay, and were more likely to judge one guilty and with longer sentences for crimes that were perceived to be “gay” crimes, such as possessing child pornography.\(^{254}\) The authors note also that while Americans claim to be in favor of equal rights for gay Americans, “anti-LGBTQ hate crimes are on the rise since the 2016 presidential election.”\(^{255}\)

Not only are members of the LGBTQ+ community bullied by their peers, are at higher risks of anxiety and depression, and are more likely to be convicted of crimes, but they are also misrepresented in the media by harmful stereotypes and the victims of harmful slurs. Rose and Freidman examined the role media plays in disseminating information and portrayals of LGBTQ+ people, and how those media messages are understood and interpreted by young gay men. At the outset of their paper they noted that “Mass media have the ability to socially frame messages, thereby influencing the attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of their audience,” a fact which public health officials understand as being important when it comes to the dissemination of information like safe sex practices, HIV prevention, and the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals.\(^{256}\) The young men who took part in this study reported that they frequently turned to “websites they used to access information about gender identity and sexual orientation and HIV prevention including YouTube, Google, and Downelink. One participant…commented ‘I get most of my information about sexual orientation from the Internet. I usually just Google

\(^{255}\) Mirabito, 33.  
\(^{256}\) India D Rose and Friedman, Daniela B. "Framing Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: Media Influence on Young Men Who Have Sex with Men's Health." *Sex Education* 19, no. 5 (2019): 614-26.
everything that I need to know especially about HIV and STDs and stuff.”” Others used television when they lacked internet access.

This report, while focusing primarily on young Black men and HIV education, included these men who felt that “the media presented negative messages and frames about gender identity and sexual orientation and provided inaccurate images of African American gay men,” with more than one participant claiming that the media always preferred to display negative messages about being gay. Ultimately, Rose et al. argued that the media plays a powerful role in framing education and perceptions around the perception of being gay. This negative framing of queerness observed by the young men, and others in the LGBTQA+ community, is one that has been consistently offered in media, from 300 to its sequel to Miller’s graphic novel and Pressfield’s fictional history. It is also a framing that is repeatedly in the popular adult animated series, South Park.

Anti-gay and homophobic messaging in the media can be found in every format, and cartoons are no exception. South Park, which has been on the air since 1997, has been consistently one of the most-viewed animated comedies on cable. The show, which tells the stories of four boys and the dysfunctional small Colorado town in which they live, has often been praised or cited as an example of satire. The internet is littered with lists of top satirical South Park episodes, film journals dedicate pages to justifying the nature of South Park’s satire, and the show’s fans spend untold hours in forums and videos defending the humor and satire.259

257 Rose, 619. The mean age of the participants was 19.4 years.
258 Rose, 620-621.
Certainly the satirical nature of the show is not in doubt – Merriam-Webster’s terse definition of satire tells us that satire “is a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn.”  

Britannica offers a more substantial definition, stating that satire is an “artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform.” Without a doubt, South Park is a satire, given its long tradition of ridiculing virtually every group of people on the planet.

This label of satire, however, has become a shield used to defend the show against frequent claims of offensive language, situations, and depictions. The creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, have frequently defended the show’s offensive nature, claiming that there is no line they would not be willing to cross, that anyone and anything is fair game for the show. When speaking to The Evening Standard, for example, Parker said that “Our ethos has always been: if it’s funny it’s funny. Everyone can be made fun of, and everything should be made fun of if you do it in the right way.”

Much like the word faggot, Stone and Parker are comfortable using the work “dyke” with

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262 Some groups and institutions lampooned by South Park include the Catholic church, Muslims, the LGBTQ+ community, red heads, women, liberals, conservatives, dog owners, Canadians, Mormons, Jews, Blacks, Mexicans, Scientologists, and veterans.; Sienkiewcz, Matt, and Nick Marx. “Beyond a Cutout World: Ethnic Humor and Discursive Integration in South Park.” Journal of Film and Video 61, no. 2 (2009): 5–18.
impunity, ignoring the fact that many consider it a slur and that if the word is to be reclaimed, it is not their role to do so.

Take, for example, an episode that is one of the most offensive Parker and Stone have created – “The F Word.” Comedy Central, which airs *South Park*, describes the episode:

“Everyone agrees they've had enough of the loud and obnoxious bikers that have arrived in South Park. The boys are taking on the Harley riders. They throw down the F word, and the game is on.”

The titular “F word” is the slur fag, or faggot, which the boys toss around with no compunction. The boys insist, though, that they are not using the word as a slur against homosexuals but rather as a descriptor for someone who “is an inconsiderate douchebag.” As the boys are brought in front of various authority figures, they continue to insist that they are not being homophobic, but that the meanings of words can change over time. To illustrate this point, Parker and Stone show the bikers in a library, looking up the definition of “faggot,” and reading the various meanings of the word, with one of the bikers complaining that “That word just keeps changing its meaning!”

Parker and Stone even have the two most prominent gay characters chime in, showing them agreeing with the boys, saying “We are no longer the most hated people on the planet” and join in the efforts to change the meaning of the word. The people in charge of the dictionary come to town so that the definition of the word might finally be changed; before this can happen, the bikers show up and attack everyone, until they are stopped by Big Gay Al and others. At the end, the bikers admit that they are “fags,” and that when people see Harley

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265 *South Park*, season 13, episode 12. 11:36.

266 Big Gay Al and Mr. Slave. Big Gay Al is a caricature of a flamboyant gay man, while Mr. Slave is always depicted wearing leather bondage gear and is reminiscent of a Tom of Finland drawing. *South Park*, season 13 episode 12. 13:19.
riders, they should feel free to address them as such. The last image before the end credits is an updated dictionary definition of the word, changed to define it as a person who rides a Harley Davidson.

The “F-word” is used in this episode twenty-two-minute-long episode eighty-eight times, either spoken by a character or displayed on a sign, flag, or as graffiti, which means some variation of the word was on screen or spoken almost four times a minute.²⁶⁷ Predictably, this episode came under fire as soon as it aired; GLAAD issued a statement about the episode which took aim at both the intention of the show and the satire behind it:

Though this seems to represent a well-intentioned effort by the creators of South Park to delegitimize a vulgar anti-gay slur, the fact is that the word is and remains a hateful slur that is often part of the harassment, bullying and violence that gay people, and gay youth in particular, experience on a daily basis in this country. It is an epithet that has real consequences for real people’s lives. Just this year, an 11-year-old Massachusetts student named Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, unable to endure the unrelenting anti-gay bullying and name-calling he experienced at school, committed suicide.

The creators of South Park are right on one important point: more and more people are using the F-word as an all-purpose insult. However, it is irresponsible and wrong to suggest that it is a benign insult or that promoting its use has no consequences for those who are the targets of anti-gay bullying and violence. This is a slur whose meaning remains rooted in homophobia. And while many South Park viewers will understand the sophisticated satire and critique in last night’s episode, others won’t – and if even a small number of those take from this a message that using the “F-word” is OK, it worsens the hostile climate that many in our community continue to face.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ You’ll have to trust my count on this – I watched the episode twice so that you would not have to subject yourself to it. If we count from the first time the slur is used to the last, the word is used almost five times a minute.
GLAAD made two important statements here – that the “F-word” is a slur, and that while the issue may be presented in a satirical manner, there are going to be some in the audience who will not understand or care what the message buried behind the slur is saying. There is also the issue that it is not Parker and Stone’s place to make attempts to reclaim a word that is often used as a slur against a community to which they do not belong.  

Homophobic slurs, among many other types of insults, are incredibly common in South Park and the audience is subjected to them in virtually every scene. This brings up the issue of South Park’s audience – who is watching these episodes? South Park is rated TV-MA, which means Mature Audience Only. Shows with this rating are “specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program may contain one or more of the following: crude indecent language (L), explicit sexual activity (S), or graphic violence (V).” This of course does not prevent children under 17 from watching, but merely serves as a guide for parents or other adults to determine what is appropriate for their children. Viewership ratings are notoriously difficult to access. Nielsen, the largest agency which tracks such ratings, keeps their data closely guarded and is usually only available to their clients.

Some numbers are available, as can be seen in a press release from Comedy Central detailing the size of the audience for South Park’s September 30th season premier. That episode was the “#1 scripted cable telecast of 2020…[with] 4.05 million total viewers across the night.” According to the press release, the 4.05 million number includes Nielsen ratings for the 18-49 demographic,

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269 Consider also the episode “With Apologies to Jesse Jackson,” South Park season 11, episode 1.


271 Nielsen Media Research is a firm that collects viewership data from around the world and disseminates that data to their clients. They are a private company and closely guard the information they collect, releasing it in detail only to their clients.

although Nielsen does have the ability to monitor and record the viewing habits of viewers who are under eighteen. However, it is almost a certainty that children under eighteen watched this episode, as they certainly watch other episodes.

_South Park_ is widely available to consumers. It airs frequently on Comedy Central, can be streamed via a number of different services, clips can be watched on YouTube, and there are multiple video games produced by Parker and Stone. Fans can buy South Park merchandise, including clothes and action figures, some of which are intended for younger fans. This, coupled with the fact that the show itself is animated and stars four young boys can make it both appealing to kids and difficult for some parents to accurately assess if it is appropriate for their children or not. It is well within the realm of possibility that children have seen this episode of South Park, not understood the intended satire, such as it is, and left with the impression that it is funny and acceptable to call people a fag.

“The F Word” first aired seven months after Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, the young boy mentioned in GLAAD’s response to the episode, died by suicide due because he was being mercilessly teased with homophobic slurs. It is impossible to know how many times that episode has aired, to say nothing of the hundreds of other South Park episodes that contain ‘satirical’ homophobic content. As the studies detailed above indicate, the slurs used in this and other episodes can influence juries, harm the self-esteem of gay young adults, and as we have seen with the tragic example of Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, inflict lasting damage on middle school-aged children.273

273 There has been an ongoing debate regarding how much influence media can have on an audience, and whether or not consuming violent content will make the viewer or player more violent. For more on this debate and how certain shows or IPs affect viewers, see Gordon Dahl and Stefano DellaVigna. “Does Movie Violence Increase Violent Crime?” _The Quarterly_
Conclusion

The battle at Thermopylae and the events surrounding it have loomed in the memory of the West for almost twenty-five hundred years, thanks in large part to the work of Herodotus. His role as the “Father of History” gives enormous weight to what he said and the fact that *The Histories* is so available means that his words are ready-made for consumption and interpretation. Herodotus’s descriptions of Persians, their habits, and their culture, whether it was his intention or not, have been the fuel for misunderstandings of and bias against them. He is not alone in this either, as fellow ancient authors joined him in writing about Persians; Aeschylus and Livy both commented on the Greco-Persian wars and the Persians themselves, further buttressing Herodotus. This narrative has been dominant since those authors set pen to page, so much so that their accounts are by and large the only ones that casual readers will encounter, Herodotus in particular.

Modern historians of this era have often hewed closely to Herodotus’s chronicle. Many have taken him entirely at his word and consider it to be largely accurate, and heavily refer to *The Histories* in their academic work. Others, writing casual history and less academic texts, take this even further, as Ernle Bradford did in his book, *Thermopylae: The Battle for the West*, where he demonstrates a clear bias for the Greeks in general and the Spartans specifically. Scholars like Frye and Green are somewhat more diplomatic in their assessment of these events and the participants, but nevertheless reveal a strident preference for the Greeks.

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274 From the nineteenth century onward.
Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, demonstrated how the Western world has constructed a negative view of the Eastern world and has since the nineteenth century curated a perspective of the East that they are the mirror opposite of the West. Where the West is hard working, the East is slothful. The West is logical, the East is superstitious. The West is virtuous, the East is profane. The West is masculine, the East is feminine. This dichotomous thinking has colored the relationship between these two entities for two hundred years, according to Said. In this thesis I have used his theory of Orientalism applied in an ahistorical manner to demonstrate that such thinking is not confined to the modern world, but in fact can be seen in the writings of ancient historians, and that a bias against the East has existed not for two hundred years, but for more than two thousand.

These authors, namely Herodotus, have been very influential when it comes to popular culture. The books, novels, graphic novels, movies, television shows, and videogames of the last twenty-five plus years have had a Greek-facing protagonist or viewpoint. What this means is that the audience for these properties, however they choose to consume their media, are seeing an overwhelmingly pro-Greek, and more importantly anti-Persian, message. One of the primary Orientalist portrayals common in these media is that Europeans (Greeks in these cases) are masculine, and the Asians (Persians) are feminine. This is a concept that modern authors have latched onto by updating the masculine/feminine binary Said saw in the writings of European colonial officers into a depiction of the heterosexual West and homosexual East. As I have shown in this thesis, each of these books and movies conflates homosexuality with the Persians in a negative light – in *300*, Xerxes looms over Leonidas with an unspoken threat of sexual violence. In *Alexander*, the king is seduced by a Persian eunuch as part of a greater symbolism of the corrupting nature of the Eastern world. In *Gates of Fire*, the Greek forces use homophobic
slurs when referring to Persian forces. This is a direct result of the bias against the East and Persians as found in The Histories and continued by twentieth century historians like Bradford, Green, and Frye.

As these stories have increased in popularity in recent years, so too has there been an increase in admiration of Spartan ideals – or rather, what people assume are Spartan ideals. Modern audiences see the glistening, sculpted bare chests of the men in 300 and its sequel, hear Leonidas talk about freedom, and want to emulate them. After 300 came out, men’s magazines detailed the workouts required by the cast to acquire those sculpted bodies, a series of obstacle courses was developed and named the Spartan Run. A more concerning aspect of this admiration of all things Spartan has been the manner in which it has been embraced by the political Right in North America. Much has been made of the Spartan’s supposed stand for freedom – a consistent myth that has endured is one where Spartans made their stand at Thermopylae for the sake of freedom from the tyranny and oppression of the Persian. As I have demonstrated, however, Sparta was a far cry from a state dedicated to freedom. Sparta was a monarchy which mandated military service for all men, separated husbands and wives, and enslaved the population of a neighboring polis in order to free up their own population from non-military work.

Nevertheless, Leonidas’s proclamation of “come and take them!” – supposedly given to Xerxes’s messenger as a reply to the request that they lay down their arms – has become a catchphrase heard among right-wing anti-government individuals and groups who in part see the federal government as an overreaching entity trying to grab their guns. Subsequently, Spartan imagery and slogans (molon labe specifically) are used by this community to reinforce their beliefs and declare their positions. Such imagery has been readily observed among the rioters at the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol and during the protests in Canada.
A more wide-ranging use of the bias directed against Persians, which originated from Herodotus, lies in the sphere of pop culture. Beginning with the graphic novel 300, the film adaptation, and its sequel, Spartans as heroes exploded into the imagination of consumers. Such was the popularity of these that they spread into other shows and movies; 300 spawned the parody Meet the Spartans, a lowbrow spoof following the same general plot and littered with lazy pop culture references of its own. The television show South Park quickly produced an episode based on 300 shortly after the movie was released, leaning heavily into the Persian-as-invaders trope, with Mrs. Garrison taking the place of Leonidas. The issue with this portrayal is not that the producers are influenced by a work of Herodotus – it is the fact that what Stone and Parker took from the movie was a condescending attitude towards Persians, a freedom to mock their culture, and the idea that Xerxes was a hulking androgynous freak. That is the problem with portrayals like the one in 300; they are uncritically viewed and passed on to be absorbed for other forms of media, spreading the misconceptions even further.

Steven Pressfield took Spartan deification to another level – they are clearly the heroes of his novel The Hot Gates, and through them his bias against the Persians is obvious. Throughout the book every negative trope assigned to the Persians are on display: they are corrupt, referred to as sexual deviants, women, and homosexuals, and monsters. The Spartans, on the other hand, are cast as noble heroes and warrior-philosophers, fighting for democracy and freedom, willing to sacrifice themselves to save the West from the ravening hordes of the East. Pressfield’s book is an engaging, fast-paced book that pulls the reader in, and uncritically passes on information from Herodotus to a readership that may be uninterested in the bias on display. Further troubling is the endorsement of the United States government, as the Marine Corps has listed the book on its required reading list for both enlisted and commissioned Marines.
Alexander, Oliver Stone’s biopic of Alexander III of Macedon, was more in the vein of the old Hollywood sand and sandals epics, a sprawling examination of the young king’s short but impactful life. This film demonstrates well the trope that Persians and their culture were decadent and corrupt, a concept that is spoken outright by several characters. As a child, Alexander’s tutor and wrestling teacher both warn him of the nature of his enemy and how the Persians are slaves to their senses, overly passionate, and cowards, their kings afraid to lead from the front. Stone depicts Alexander falling into these traps as he becomes more and more like a corrupt Eastern king, rather than staying true to his rational Greek roots. In doing so Stone clearly points the blame of Alexander’s early death and the splintering of his nascent empire on Persian influences.

When these sources become parts of popular culture and enter the mainstream consciousness they can spread incredibly quickly. A few short months after the film adaptation of 300 was released, South Park parodied it. Meet the Spartans was released less than a year later. Within a year, Joe De Sena had founded the Spartan Race. Molon labe began to be used more and more frequently within right wing circles and especially among Second Amendment advocates, in addition to an increase in appreciation for what was perceived to be Spartan values. As I demonstrated with South Park, the effects can be harmful to some groups of people.

The South Park episode “D-Yikes” was heavily inspired by 300, which in turn was an adaptation of the graphic novel of the same name, which was inspired by Herodotus’s The Histories. In it, Parker and Stone latched on to Snyder’s heavy-handed depiction of Persians as perverted invaders and ran with it, while at the same time making sure they included their own brand of racism. The homophobia and transphobia found in this episode, seen in Snyder’s work, is a hallmark of the animated series. In the episode ‘The F Word” the titular word (fag/faggot)
was uttered by characters or displayed onscreen eighty-eight times during the twenty-two minutes of the show. Using such a charged word so frequently on a show readily available to children can only have a deleterious effect on other young people in the LGBTQ+ community; shows like these two (and the hundreds of others produced by Stone and Parker) normalize the use of such slurs. Young LGBTQ+ people are perilously at risk of self-harm and suicide, due in large part to bullying and name-calling from peers and others.

The ancient Orientalism in Herodotus and other historians from the ancient world has been combined with the prejudiced writings of modern historians of the ancient world, many of whom have leaned heavily on those past authors. Taken together, this Orientalist bias against the East has resulted in harmful portrayals in modern popular culture of Persians and others from the Middle East and Asia. These biases contain damaging rhetoric that is then directed at vulnerable members of our society.
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