Into the Valley of Death?

By Karen Green

Friday December 3, 2010 06:00:00 am

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…rode the 600—oh, wait! That's the wrong suicidal military exercise!

Because I'm apparently incapable of talking about anything recent—so much catching up to do—this month we'll be taking a look at some 20th-century Frank Miller. I think you know where we're going with this…

After I came back from giving that talk in Mississippi, I had one night and one morning to turn around and get ready to fly out to Pittsburgh for talk number two. (In that 19-hour turnaround, I had the excruciating experience of dealing with Continental Airlines' baggage claim and their incredibly surly contractee, the ill-named Perfect Delivery Service. Word to the wise: do not EVER check a bag with Continental Airlines!)

I had been invited by Professor Bruce Venarde, of the University of Pittsburgh's Department of History. Bruce is a friend from my grad student days and he wanted me to address a graduate seminar he was co-teaching with Professor Evelyn Rawski called "Texts and Contexts." Evelyn works in Chinese history, Bruce is a fellow medievalist, and they were combining their expertise to teach a class that concentrated on primary source material from a broad range of places and times—the "texts"—and readings that sought to offer perspectives on those texts—the "contexts."
Bruce had contacted me a few months back asking if I would be interested in talking to the class for the week they read the portion of Herodotus' Histories devoted to Xerxes and the Persian wars, because one of the readings he wanted to use to explore its context was Frank Miller's 300. He asked me if I'd be willing to sit in on the class while they discussed Herodotus—along with an article that compared Herodotus, the father of western historiography, with Sima Qian, the father of Chinese historiography—and then talk a little about the medium of comics, why graphic novels are worth reading in an academic context (did they have all day??), and what Miller was trying to do in 300.

There were about a dozen students in the class, from first-year grad students to third-years, and a couple of them had been designated as presenters on the Histories. Have you ever read Herodotus? He's kind of adorable. He comes off as a little fussy, maybe a little judgmental, sometimes perhaps a little defensive. He loves describing clothing; seriously, he goes on for about twenty or thirty paragraphs describing the battle dress of all the nations comprising Xerxes' armies: the Persians had embroidered tunics with sleeves, mail coats, and trousers; the Indians wore cotton and carried cane bows and arrows; the Libyans wore leather; the Sarangians were "conspicuous for their brightly coloured clothes and high boots reaching to the knee." It's all very Joan-Rivers-on-Oscars-night: "Now tell me, who are you wearing?" He's dazzled by the gold decorating the Persian cohort: "every man glittered with the gold which he carried about his person in unlimited quantity."

But all that gold doesn't blind him to how batshit crazy Xerxes is. The young king gets into ridiculous fights with his uncle and adviser Artabanus. He punishes the water of the Hellespont after a storm destroys the bridges he's building there—yeah, the water: he lashes the surface three hundred times and brands it with hot irons. After a wealthy old man gives him a few million gold coins but asks that the youngest of his five sons be allowed to stay
back to act as his caretaker, Xerxes cuts the fifth son in half and has his army march between the two pieces of the body. Xerxes is marching on Sparta, by the way, because of a revolt that had occurred under his father, Darius. Sons do love finishing up the battles their fathers leave incomplete. He figures he'll crush the small band of Spartans with the power of his amazing army, powered especially by an elite fighting squad of 10,000 men known as the Immortals.

It already sounds very superhero-y, doesn't it? You've got a crazy supervillain, and his coolly-named cohort, taking on a small, freedom-loving group of heroes bound by law. Artabanus goes out of his way to make this latter point to Xerxes: "Fighting singly, [the Spartans] are as good as any, but fighting together they are the best soldiers in the world. They are free—yes—but not entirely free, for they have a master, and that master is Law, which they fear much more than your subjects fear you."

All of which is a lead up to the story of the battle, the confrontation at the narrow gates of Thermopylae, the strategic though Pyrrhic victory of Leonidas and the Spartans, and the long-term Greek triumph. Herodotus mentions columns erected at Thermopylae that bear the inscription:

*Go tell the Spartans, you who read:
We took their orders, and here lie dead.*

Man. What a story!

It's like something out of Hollywood, right? Hollywood thought so, too. They made a movie in 1962 called The 300 Spartans, which 5-year-old Frank Miller saw in the theater, and it had a powerful influence on him. As he remarked in an interview in *The Comics Journal #209* (December 1998): "What struck me when I saw it...was that it was the first time that I'd been exposed to a story where the notion of heroic sacrifice had ever been introduced....I'd never really encountered a story where someone did the right thing at the cost of his life."

So, back in the classroom in Pittsburgh: I turned to the students after a little setup on comics and academia and I asked cheerfully, "And what did you guys think of *300*?"
And the most articulate student in the bunch stated, without a moment's hesitation, "I hated it. I thought it was morally repugnant."

Yikes. Tough room.

Of course, he had a point. His main beef with Miller's story is the false, Manichaean dichotomy set up between the decadent Persians and the noble Spartans, which he feared would lead readers to a mistaken understanding of the nature of the conflict. More people, perhaps, would read Frank Miller's version of events than would read Herodotus'. I get that concern; absolutely. I felt the exact same way after sitting through "Braveheart;" fearful that people would think that William Wallace and Queen Isabella really were the illicit parents of a future English king, when I knew that the real Wallace was killed when the real Isabella was nine years old and still living in France. Miller acknowledges the messier reality in that 1998 interview, talking about his research on Sparta: "There were a number of things that I simply didn't use, because a modern audience would simply turn off; the Spartans had many slaves and their childhoods were even more brutal than what I had portrayed." Popular versions of history often simplify and distort; any version of history, really, can be shaped to fit the aims and prejudices of the historians and their contemporaries. Herodotus himself has a lengthy digression in which he defends his support of the Greeks, because by the time he was writing this story they were no longer the scrappy, sympathetic underdogs but a significant power. Not unlike a history of the freedom fighters of the American Revolution might offer a faintly defensive tone when written once the United States had become the dominant military power on the globe.

So, given the problematic nature of the story Miller was telling, what was left to discuss? A critical analysis of why Miller might tell the story the way he does, of course! Not to mention, a discussion of the visual elements, which were all the more notable to me fresh from my Mississippi discussion of the building blocks of panel and page.
In the back pages at the end of *300*, there is a list of other works by Miller: *Ronin*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Sin City*. These act as signposts to an understanding of Miller's worldview. A tale of a masterless samurai spirit inhabiting a deformed young man in a dystopian New York City, *Ronin* was influenced by the legendary manga *Lone Wolf and Cub*; Miller had drawn the covers for the first American editions and knew it well. There are hints of a Japanese influence throughout *300* in fact, whether in the echo of Hokusai's famous wave in the storm that destroys the Persian fleet or the fleeting mirror of the final scene of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* in a panel late in the battle at the Hot Gates.

Miller's Batman, re-imagined as a tortured, anti-heroic "dark knight," and the film noir fantasy of *Sin City*, likewise point to an interest in doomed missions, flawed heroes who fight as much because they must as because they can. These earlier stories cast light on Miller's worldview and his code, as do the chapter titles in *300*: Honor, Duty, Glory, Combat, Victory. Miller retells the story of the Persians and the Greeks through the lens of his own values and interests, which every storyteller does. After all, Miller is not an historian nor is he setting himself up as one. What is of interest, then, is how well he tells his story—and, perhaps, how well he uses his sources and his influences.
Preparing for the talk, I had been struck by Miller's visual storytelling skills. Panels layered over other panels, conveying layers of time and space. Small touches, such as the narrowing of the panel itself where the wolf hunted by a youthful Leonidas is trapped in a rock crevice—setting up the Thermopylae strategy to come—or of the steep, high outcropping on which the priests' temple is located. The bristle of the brush atop Leonidas' helmet becomes part of the horizon of bristling spears held by the Spartan troops. The focus on the gold Leonidas pays the corrupt priests, in order to get a favorable reading, foreshadows the gold of the Persians: gold as metaphor and reality. The sweep of Leonidas' cape, seen from above as he crouches, surrounded by the scabby-footed, faceless holy men, evokes the Caped Crusader—and harks back to the panel in *The Dark Knight Returns* where a weary Bruce Wayne looks down on a cloth-shrouded Bat Cave. Miller seems to have absorbed Herodotus' vivid description of Persian gold—it seems as if every soldier in the Persian ranks bears some sort of staff topped with golden fruit—and poured it into the first view he offers of Xerxes, virtually a living golden god. The Spartans are manly, dangerous, armed with muscles and skill. The Persians are decadent, kinkly, effeminate.
Miller talks a lot about film in his interviews; he mentions D.W. Griffith, Hitchcock, Kubrick, and one feels that cinematic influence, not in the storyboarding but in small possible homages. The impaled Leonidas, and other Spartans, evoke "Throne of Blood," but the panels filled with a worm's-eye view of flying spears also nod, perhaps, to the arrows of Olivier's Agincourt in his 1944 "Henry V" (seen, briefly, here, at the 9:35 mark). The size of the graphic novel, and the awareness of colorist Lynn Varley's technique, allowed him to employ a more cinematic sweep to the pages than one had, perhaps, seen in his earlier work: "There are obvious ways it changes [my method of composing]. All of a sudden, I'll introduce a vast empty space, knowing that it will become a sky….the concentration has to be a bit more on the draftsmanship and less on the lighting, because so much of that is done by her."

I've not seen the 1962 film—although I see that Netflix has it, so clearly now I have to—so I don't know how much Miller pulled from that memory, how much he pulled from Herodotus…or how much he pulled from The Hot Gates, a book of essays by William Golding, the author of Lord of the Flies. I see Herodotus turned inside out, to some extent—the historian is describing the Persians' buildup to war, not the Spartans'—and certain elements incorporated: the gold, the Persian demand for a tribute of earth and water, the massive Persian army drinking rivers dry, the inauspicious storm. Miller's bias may be more thematic than ideological, but it is a bias. Of course, as Bruce observed in class, Herodotus makes the case that Persia failed because they over-reached, and because the Spartans were free: an attractive bias, he noted, but a bias nonetheless. All history is biased. All history must be read critically.

I'm not sure I changed the opinion of the student who found 300 to be morally repugnant. (He also didn't like the touches of humor in the dialogue, which struck him as hokey, but Miller comments, "People…explained to me certain things about Mediterranean culture, what verbal swords smiths they are. Part of what was fun about writing it, once I got into that rather combative way of joking back and forth, were the constant barbs and insults.") It's not
enough, however, for a student of history to say "this is bad" or "this is wrong." When we read a history, we read for the narrative but also for the inclinations. People like to say that history is written by the winners, but that's not always true—sometimes it's the writing of history that allows historians to figure out who the winners are.

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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