

Herodotus and Narrative Desire

Desire is the driving force narrative; narrative is “a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text,” asserts Peter Brooks in his 1984 work of critical theory, *Reading for the Plot* (37). Following Brooks, scholars of classical literature have recently explored the relationship between desire and narrative in the Homeric epics (e.g. Lesser 2022) and the Greek novels (e.g. Whitmarsh 2011, Elmer 2022). The characters in these mythological and fictional works feel desire (for vengeance, for homecoming, for their vanished beloved). As Brooks (drawing on Freud, Lacan, and Barthes, among others) argues, the characters’ desire resonates with the desire of the reader/listener to discover what happens next, complicated by an equal and opposite desire for the story not to end.

This paper examines a third type of narrative desire present in the work of Herodotus: the desire of the narrative *itself* to be told (or not to be told), manifesting as a compulsion acting on the author as much as on the reader. I conceive of narrative compulsion as a form of *eros*: as Herodotus’ contemporary Gorgias wrote in his *Encomium to Helen*, the persuasive power of *logos* is on par with both *eros* and force. Rosaria Munson has shown that the concept of compulsion (*anankē*) appears less frequently in Herodotus than in Thucydides, but there are a few occasions where Herodotus describes the *logos* itself as compelling him to either speak or be silent. In 2.3, for example, he says that does not desire (οὐκ εἰμι πρόθυμος) to disclose what he learned about Egyptian divinities; he will reveal only what the *logos* compels him to reveal (τὰ δ’ ἂν ἐπιμνησθέω αὐτῶν, ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου ἐξαναγκαζόμενος ἐπιμνησθήσομαι). The compulsion of the *logos* does not seem to force Herodotus to reveal what he does not want to reveal: his own desire and that of the *logos* are separate, but allied forces. At 7.99, he notes that he is not

compelled (οὐκ ἀναγκαζόμενος) to mention the other Persian taxiarchs, but nevertheless he will tell of Artemisia because of her extraordinary accomplishments. Here, it is Artemisia's own resistance to a widow's narrative (she ruled her country and led the army despite being under no compulsion to do so: οὐδεμιῆς οἱ ἐούσης ἀναγκαίης) that drives Herodotus to make special note of his marvelous countrywoman.

As many have noted, Herodotus' relationship with his own work is far from straightforward: his work has a physicality, a forcefulness that exists outside of its author's control. Caroline Dewald conceives of Herodotus as wrestling with his narratives; she describes "his exploits in capturing the *logoi* and his struggles to pin them down and make them speak to him the truths that they contain" (1987: 147). Clem Wood analyzes "Herodotus' presentation of the first half of the *Histories* as a narrative journey through the *logoi* that he gathered on his travels," tracing his "movement through both space and narrative" (2016: 15). And Egbert Bakker (2000) demonstrates that Herodotus positions his work as an *mega ergon* in its own right, on par with the monuments and great deeds that his work records. As David Sansone (2016) has argued, lust is one of the central, driving forces in Herodotus' work, from the proem's exchange of women to the historical theme of conquest. I argue in this paper that *eros* operates on the narrative level as well, making Herodotus' work a story insisting to be told just as it insists to be read.

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