

Déjà Vu?: Inversion in Herodotus' Stories of Croesus and Astyages
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Although many scholars have examined Herodotus' Croesus story (notably Segal 1971; Stahl 1975; Evans 1978; Shapiro 1994; Chiasson 2003) and many have stressed the importance of repetition in Herodotus (e.g. Immerwahr 1966), no one has examined in detail the curious interplay between the Croesus story and the Astyages story. There are remarkable similarities between the two tales: each of the kings has a predictive dream about a descendant and vainly tries to fight destiny; each ensures his own undoing by delegating some of the work of fighting fate; each is lulled into a false sense of security about his empire by misinterpreting a sign. Beneath these similarities, however, lies a crucial difference: Astyages' struggle against fate is more sinister in that he tries to kill his grandson, whereas Croesus tries to save his son. In his discussion of Astyages' dreams, Pelling (1996) argues that this difference is not so significant as it might seem, since it is Astyages' soft-heartedness, his interest in sparing the feelings of his daughter, that foils his plan. In my view, however, previously unnoticed parallels in the scenes depicting the kings' respective defeats support the interpretation of Astyages as a dark inversion of Croesus and the Astyages story as a whole as a black retelling of the Croesus tale. The interaction between Astyages and Harpagus after the Medes' defeat (1.129) echoes the interaction between Croesus and Cyrus after the sack of Sardis (1.88-89) and in so doing throws the moral corruption of Astyages and Harpagus into relief.

Harpagus' behavior in the second scene parodies Cyrus' in the first. Although both characters are onlookers moved by the spectacle of a fallen king, their emotional responses are different. Cyrus marvels at Croesus and, inspired by a sense of his nobility, removes his chains, the physical symbol of his new, low social position. When Harpagus, on the other hand, comes to see the defeated Astyages, he revels in the hapless king's social degradation. Intertextual connections between the former scene and *Iliad* 24 (480-670), where Achilles marvels at Priam, further accentuate the distinction between the actions of Cyrus and Harpagus. Whereas the Cyrus-Croesus scene recalls the noble interactions of its Homeric predecessor, the Astyages-Harpagus scene comes across as a dark, anti-heroic inversion of both. Astyages' actions likewise parody Croesus'. Astyages offers advice to Harpagus, as Croesus does to Cyrus. In both cases, the fallen-king-turned-advisor reveals to the conqueror a surprising, ironic truth: although a conqueror, he is also a victim. Cyrus is subject to his own soldiers' deprivations as they rob a city that is now his. Harpagus, as a Mede, will now fall victim to ruling Persians. But the spirit of the advice is different. Croesus' advice has value, since he offers constructive suggestions for the present. Astyages' advice is merely spiteful—telling Harpagus what he should have done and dwelling on his stupidity. Contrasted with Croesus, Astyages is an empty advisor whose words have the formal characteristics of advice but none of the usefulness or goodwill.

What is the function of this repetition and inversion? First, Herodotus uses the inversion as a tool for strengthening his characterization: characters take on personalities by contrast (cf. Christ 1994). Second, the parallels reinforce Herodotus' major theme—the impermanence of human prosperity. Although many scholars treat this as a moral law (cf. Lateiner 1982), many of Herodotus' most condensed statements of the law are remarkable for their lack of concern for morality (cf. Munson 2001): often he states that men are ruined because of divine jealousy, not punished because of divine indignation. The moral contrast between Croesus and Astyages in the scenes following their captures serves to heighten the reader's sense of the ineluctability and amorality of this natural law: a noble king and a wicked one have been cast into the same situation.

Bibliography

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