

Herodotean Influence on Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

In a 2001 interview, Neil Gaiman acknowledged the extent to which Herodotus' *Histories* influenced his writing of *American Gods* and informed the novel's ethnographies, battle scenes, and overall worldview (Dornemann et al. 2001). Yet no study has closely examined Gaiman's use of Herodotus in *American Gods*. This paper considers the Herodotean elements in Gaiman's novel, but with a particular focus on the programmatic statement, 'Call no man happy until he is dead' and what it really means in the context of *American Gods* (henceforth *AG*). Has Gaiman understood and used Herodotus correctly? And does it matter whether he has?

In *AG*, Gaiman explicitly references Herodotus' *Histories* at least half a dozen times and alludes to it dozens more. The 'call no man happy' sentiment, from the story of Solon's advice to Croesus (Herodotus 1.32), appears early in the novel: Shadow, having read a copy of Herodotus loaned to him by Low Key (Loki), cites the quote during a discussion of what will make him 'happy' after getting out of prison (Gaiman 2011, 5-6). Shadow's early citation of Solon's advice is ironic, since his own fortunes will change so drastically, as Loki knows—but Shadow and we, the readers, do not know, unless we have read Herodotus and consequently have our suspicions. In Herodotus, Solon did not specifically foresee the downfall of King Croesus, but Herodotus' *audience* certainly knew of it (historically, Croesus was conquered by the Persians in the sixth century B.C.E.). The introduction of this theme of 'happiness' in both works thus begins on an ironic note. In *AG*, as in the *Histories* itself, the sentiment is programmatic, introducing a theme crucial to both novels: reversal of fortune.

In Herodotus, however, the theme applies only to mortals, not to gods. The Greek *olbios*, routinely translated into English as 'happy,' incorporates a number of other concepts, including

‘fortunate/lucky’ and (in a related meaning) ‘blessed by the gods’ (Dewald 2011; Shapiro 1996). The term consequently cannot/does not apply to the gods themselves (not without sacrilege). Swanstrom, discussing Herodotus’ story of Solon and Croesus, mentions ‘happiness’ in relation to *AG* (2012, pp. 12-13), but doesn’t consider the nuances of the term as employed by Gaiman, who uses ‘happy’ in the sense of both ‘emotionally fulfilled’ and ‘fortunate,’ though *not* ‘blessed by the gods’—and for good reason: Gaiman’s innovation lies in his application of the theme to both mortals and *to the gods themselves*. At Wednesday’s (Odin’s) funeral, for example, Loki remarks, ‘Call no man happy, huh, kid’ (Gaiman 2011, 399). Reversal of fortune applies to all the gods in *AG* by the end of the novel, and Shadow himself understands the concept more clearly by then as well, due to his own death and resurrection (Gaiman 2011, 488).

In *AG*, happiness is allowed to become a state of mind, an emotion, rather than merely a quality conferred by how others remember you. This kind of happiness too, though, can result from a reversal of fortune—for the better, not for the worse. Does it matter that Gaiman reinterprets Herodotus’, or rather Solon’s’ famous sentiment, possibly misleading his audience as to its meaning in the original Greek text? Gaiman also does not mention that the sentiment is not confined to Herodotus—that at the end of Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, the chorus sums up Oedipus’ fate (his loss of family, fortune, reputation, and country) by singing, ‘We must call no man happy / until he has crossed life’s border’ (ll. 1528-1530). Fifth-century Greeks such as Sophocles and Herodotus, influenced by various catastrophic wars, were keenly aware of the ephemerality of ‘happiness’ and of life. Gaiman’s novel, with its epic war between Old and New, East and West, Nature and Culture, demonstrates both a similar awareness and different perspective. In *AG*, reversal of fortune is normal and expected; adaptation is necessary for survival. But this doesn’t mean we can’t also be happy in the moment.

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