

Brandon W. Bollom  
CC 342 - Ancient Greece  
July 2, 2003

“300”

During the course of our readings of The Histories by Herodotus, we read one story that struck me as familiar from other readings I had done through the years. Herodotus told the tale of the Battle of Thermopylae where three hundred Spartans lead by King Leonidas held off Xerxes’ Persian army which was thousands, if not millions, strong. These brave Spartans were able to hold their position by good military positioning and sheer force of will for three days; long enough for the Greeks to the south to prepare for the Persian invasion. It was not until I read this piece of history told by Herodotus that I remembered another version of the same told in a very different format. Frank Miller was the writer and artist for a comic book version of the Battle of Thermopylae which he simply called *300*.

Though Miller’s retelling of this ancient war story has been shown to be less than historically accurate on some levels, it is a version that places Greek history into the hands of many who would not otherwise read it. The most important factor is that the story he told captured the essence of what it was like to be a Greek at that point in history. *300* is a tale of kleos and the sacrifice required to gain immortality. To me, this becomes another take on the tradition of passing stories down through the generations. Even though these stories have been recorded for history by Herodotus and others, if an entire generation was to stop reading them, they could become lost. Miller has made the effort of going against the norm in the comic book industry and attempts to tell a story that could prove meaningful to a large portion of the world’s population. For his efforts, the comic book series was nominated for numerous awards and even won two Harvey Awards from the comic book industry.

This recreation was not just a retelling of what was written by Herodotus with art added to make it more interesting, but a complete immersion in the subject matter by Miller in order to establish the look and feel of Ancient Greece. He made a pilgrimage to the site of the Battle

of Thermopylae, taking in the ruins, monuments and memorials which remain. Miller said in one interview that he took many reference photographs even though the site looked much different than it would have in 480 B.C. because of an earthquake that moved the battlefield and a highway that now divides it. He absorbed everything around him while on this pilgrimage and was even able to incorporate some Spartan sayings that he translated from the original Greek off of memorials. This attention to detail is much like what would have been accomplished by the Greek poets working throughout history.

Some unique elements were included to both add realism and tie the story to Herodotus' original writings in The Histories. A "storyteller" named Delios was added to keep with accuracy of the times. Delios was mostly a bit player, staying with the Spartans to provide entertainment during the evenings. His true purpose becomes unmistakable in the final pages of *300* as he is sent by Leonidas to tell the story of this battle to the remaining Greeks to the south. Delios' mission is to ensure the kleos of these warriors, to be told for generations and allow them a heroic immortality.

Another detail which seems minor on the surface but adds to the historical authenticity of Miller's *300* is the Spartan's "combing of the hair." Herodotus wrote, "It is their custom to do their hair when they are about to risk their lives." This scene is played out before the final stand of the Spartans as Miller portrays the soldiers gathering around campfires combing out their long locks. This type of minute detailing would not make or break a retelling of this story, but it adds a hint of realism that would possibly be overlooked by someone who was uninterested in his work.

Miller was very interested in allowing the Spartans to say the things in their own voice. His pilgrimage to the battlefield allowed him to collect quotes off of memorials to incorporate into the dialog of *300*. Among the many "Spartan-isms" are, "our arrows will blot out the sun," "come and get it," and the ever important line, "Go tell the Spartans, passerby, that here by Spartan law we die." This truth of speech made the written portions of *300* more genuine to what you would have actually heard if you went up against an army of ancient Spartans.

Though Miller did strive for a historically accurate representation of the Battle of Thermopylae, he also allowed himself the luxury of creative license in his version of the story. One of the first and most striking of these changes to the story comes when Xerxes sends a group of messengers to speak to Leonidas. He breaks one major rule of war by killing the messengers, which typically would not happen in Ancient Greece. Though these two groups were at war, they would still follow some basic rules and that was one that rarely was abandoned.

The oversimplification of good versus evil was also a detriment to this version of the tale. To fit the comic book world, Miller removed much of the “gray area” when it came to differences between the Persians and the Greeks. Persians were the personification of evil while Greeks were almost always seen as being heroic. This makes for very black and white storytelling where everything was one way or the other with no room for middle ground. This is fine for a basic story, but if it had been written from the Persian perspective instead of the Greek, the roles could have easily been reversed.

In Miller’s version of the story, the traitor who sells out the Spartans and informs the Persians of their weaknesses is an ugly hunchback named Ephialtes. Herodotus did not mention this man, though I have heard that he is told of other versions of the story. In those versions, he is neither ugly nor hunchback, and his reasons for turning on his Spartan brethren were different than shown here. In *300*, Ephialtes is not allowed to participate in the battle formation by Leonidas because he cannot hold his shield up high enough to protect his comrades. Because of this rejection, he attempts to kill himself by jumping off of a cliff and even manages to fail at that. After this attempt, he decides to turn against his Spartans and become a Persian informant. In other versions, he is less sympathetic than shown here.

The most graphic liberty that Miller takes is in the appearance of the Persians. They are depicted as multi-pierced, Gen-X looking, dark-skinned warriors when most authorities say that both the Greeks and Persians were fair-skinned. The piercings become distracting as especially Xerxes is shown with many gold rings protruding from various portions of his face and body. Most likely, Miller adopted this look to add a graphic variance between the Greeks and the

Persians, making them instantly distinguishable. It seems that this same effect could have been accomplished by utilizing less jarring details. It would also have made the appearance of the Persians more congruent with how they are represented in other similar stories.

Though this is not the first and will probably not be the last retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae outside of Herodotus, it is by far my favorite. Many have said that The Hot Gates by William Golding is the most accurate representation, but there is something quite unique about seeing the war visually depicted alongside the words taken straight from Sparta. Miller's *300* is a visually stunning representation that stays accurate to the original text for the most important portions and gives the feel of what it might have been like to be at war in 480 B.C. better than anything I have seen before. It becomes another means for these brave men from both Persia and Greece to achieve their kleos and allows generations of people a new and distinct way of enjoying this classic legend. It also drives home the life lesson that "occasionally one has to lose in order to win."