

Few against Many:
The Reception of the Battle of Thermopylae in Popular Culture,
South Africa and Children's Literature

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Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, in the Graduate Programme in Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Classics in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Abstract

The Battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C. is an event of Greek history that has inspired numerous subsequent receptions. Many of these later ‘receptions’ of the battle have been studied in varying degrees of detail by scholars over the years, however certain periods, or modes of reception have been ignored or neglected in this scholarship.

In this dissertation I examine some of these neglected areas of research. These areas include: the uses and abuses of the Battle of Thermopylae in contemporary popular culture. In this section I focus primarily on Frank Miller’s graphic novel *300* (1998/9), as well as Zack Snyder’s 2006 film of the same name. Secondly I focus on a ‘national’ response to the ‘Thermopylae theme’, in which I consider its use in South Africa. I narrow my focus to examine its use as a motif in the poetry of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Finally I explore how the Battle of Thermopylae was employed by writers of children’s literature in the Victorian period, where I delimit my discussion to Caroline Dale Snedeker’s *The Coward of Thermopylae* (1911), as well as Andrew Lang’s short story: ‘The Spartan Three Hundred’ in *The True Story Book* (1893).

These categories cover films, graphic novels, poetry as well as fiction and non-fiction for children. Yet despite being disparate categories, each of these periods, places or genres maintains the ‘kernel’ of the story of Thermopylae: a few, brave Greeks who fought for freedom against the countless Persians invading their land. At the same time different

elements of the story are exploited to highlight various issues important in the different contexts and periods.

It is my hope that this thesis will not only play a role in researching these lesser known appropriations and adaptations of the Battle of Thermopylae, but that it will also ‘break boundaries’ in the field of reception studies within the discipline of Classics.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Linda Leenstra.

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Introduction

Theoretical Background

“The increasing prominence of reception studies in relation to Greek and Roman texts, images, ideas and material culture is a fairly recent development.”¹ Such was the claim of Lorna Hardwick in her seminal work on reception studies in 2003. Since then, however, much has been published in the field of reception studies within the discipline of Classics.² However, when considered against the more philological and traditional approaches to the subject, reception studies is still in its infancy. The term ‘reception studies’ does not present itself as a fully formed theory sprung out of a vacuum like Athena out of Zeus’ head. Rather we find precursors to it in German strands of academia in the fields of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, *Nachleben* and *Rezeptionsästhetik*, and in the Anglophone forerunner: the Classical Tradition. While each of these terms shares similarities as well as subtle differences from ‘reception studies’, examining each of them will increase our understanding of what ‘reception studies’ as a separate hermeneutical theory aims to achieve and also what it does not.

Harold Marcuse defines *Rezeptionsgeschichte* as follows:

¹ Hardwick 2003: 2.

² For an indication of this one just needs to browse: Hardwick & Stray (2008), Hilton & Gosling (2007) and Martindale & Richards (2006).

Reception history is the history of the meanings that have been imputed to historical events. This approach traces the different ways in which participants, observers, and historians and other retrospective interpreters have attempted to make sense of events, both as they unfolded, and over time since then, to make those events meaningful for the present in which they lived and live.³

Rezeptionsgeschichte is similar to its Anglophone counterpart - the Classical Tradition - in that in both of these sub-disciplines, with the use of the words ‘*Geschichte*’ and ‘tradition’, there is an implied handing down from a previous culture to the receiving one. Hardwick’s definition of the Classical Tradition helps to explain the significance of this emphasis: “This [that is, the Classical Tradition] studied the transmission and dissemination of classical culture through the ages, usually with the emphasis on the influence of classical writers, artists and thinkers on subsequent intellectual movements and individual works.”⁴ Thus what becomes problematic for the scholar involved in the endeavour of the reception of the classical world is the implied stance of ‘heritage’ or ‘legacy’. These terms bring with them the connotation of superiority and a linear progression of influence. Hardwick rightly points out another, more simple reason why these terms have been somewhat discarded. She states: “The notion of some great chain of influence which linked great works of the Greeks and Romans to their counterparts in

³ <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/receptionhist.htm>.

⁴ 2003: 2. For examples of this kind of study see: Hightet’s *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (1985), or more recently: Kallendorf’s *A Companion to the Classical Tradition* (2007).

Renaissance, Enlightenment, Victorian and modern ‘high culture’ has fallen out of fashion.”⁵

‘*Nachleben*’⁶ too is a problematic term. Steinmeyer states that the word brings with it, “the impression of a shadowy existence after the ‘real’ life is over”⁷. This then paints any subsequent reception of the ancient world as something not ‘real’, perhaps even as something inferior. Despite the problematic terminology and connotations that each of these terms bring with themselves, they each still do inform our understanding of what ‘reception studies’ aims to accomplish. The last term to discuss, and perhaps the most complicated one, is ‘*Rezeptionsästhetik*’ (or aesthetics of reception).

The main proponent of this theory was Hans Robert Jauss.⁸ Martindale claims April 1967 as a symbolically important date for any student of reception.⁹ It was on that date that Jauss delivered his inaugural lecture at the University of Konstanz in Germany. In this lecture he called for a new model in literary interpretation, one that would “acknowledge the historicity of texts, but also allow for the aesthetic response of readers in the present (any present of reading).”¹⁰ This I believe results not so much in the ‘death of the author’,

⁵ 2003: 2. Budelmann & Haubold (2008: 13-25) offer a third interestingly revisionist possibility of ‘reception’ and ‘tradition’ co-existing and enhancing each other.

⁶ Best translated as ‘afterlife’.

⁷ 2007b: 1.

⁸ Jauss, H. R (tr. Bahti, T. 1982). *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* is the seminal work on this topic. Jauss was the pupil of Hans-Gerog Gadamer, who is then perhaps the academic grandfather of *Rezeptionsästhetik*. For the influence of Gadamer’s work on Classics, see Hitchcock (2008).

⁹ 2006: 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

to borrow a phrase from Barthes¹¹, but rather in the ‘birth of a reader’, thus giving primacy to a reader’s reception of a text. Another key element of Jauss’ theory was his notion of a ‘horizon of expectations’ (*Erwartungshorizont*). This concept denotes the set of cultural norms, suppositions and criteria that a reader brings to a text in the process of his, or her, own interpretation of that text. And so, as Martindale claims, meaning is made at the ‘fusion of horizons’ between past and present and between the text and the interpreter.¹² Wolfgang Iser, another key figure in the Konstanz School and reception theory in general, makes a distinction of his own viewpoint from that of Jauss’. He claims that while Jauss is concerned with “real readers, whose reactions testify to certain historically conditioned experiences of literature,” his own concerns are more focused on the aesthetic *response* of an implied reader’s reaction to the impact of literature.¹³ Thus Jauss’ theory places its emphasis more on the real reader’s judgments of a text, while Iser’s focuses more on the implied reader of the text.

Influenced perhaps by all these assorted theorists and theories, as well as previous sub-disciplines, reception studies within the field of classical studies have nevertheless developed into its own sub-discipline or theoretical framework¹⁴, one that I now hope to define and limit within certain boundaries. Reception studies, as Hardwick states,

¹¹ ‘Death of the Author’ was the title of an essay published in: *Image, Music, Text* (1977) by Barthes which argued for the disregard of authorial biography in the process of meaning-making with regards to literary texts.

¹² 1993: 7.

¹³ Iser 2006: 57. This is comparable to the branch of literary theory labeled ‘reader-response criticism’ popular in North American academia. See Stanley Fish’s: *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980).

¹⁴ I am ambivalent in placing ‘reception studies’ into either category. Classicists today can be divided into two schools: those who see reception studies as a sub-discipline of Classics and others who see it as a

...participate in the continuous dialogue between the past and the present and also require some 'lateral' dialogue in which crossing boundaries of place or language or genre is as important as crossing those of time. Reception studies, therefore, are concerned not only with individual texts and their reception with one another but also the broader cultural processes which shape and make up those relationships.¹⁵

This will then shape the way we understand the ancient 'text(s)' as well as the 'modern' one(s), and will mean that a critical study of each text would have to be made. Not only will these texts have to be understood critically apart from one another, but also in relation to one another. They would be understood as having a dialectical or dialogic relationship between them. If this is understood properly then it will not only be the ancient text informing our reading of the modern one, but also the modern one may elucidate our understanding of the ancient one.¹⁶ Again not only will these two texts have to be examined, but also the wider cultural processes and contexts at work which inform our reading of these texts.

Even a cursory reading of this dissertation will reveal that I have at times referred to 'receptions', 'reception histories' as well as 'traditions', in each instance as the individual

theory of hermeneutics in the same way one would understand feminism, Marxism, or structuralism. See Martindale 2006: *passim*.

¹⁵ 2003: 4-5.

¹⁶ It is also important to remember that reception within antiquity occurred. Therefore the text has never had a fixed meaning, but rather it has been subjected to classical and postclassical receptions of itself.

term seemed appropriate. While I hold to the more ‘democratic’ term of ‘reception’ (which will become most clearly apparent in Chapter 2’s discussion about the relationship between Classics and popular culture), I have also used the term ‘tradition’ in reference to the influence of Thermopylae on Anglo-Zulu War poetry (Chapter 3) and Victorian children’s literature (Chapter 4). In these instances the term seemed more appropriate and better suited to the cultural contexts in which these texts were produced. To conclude then, my position within the mire of terminology associated with this theoretical approach to classical studies is similar to that expressed by Budelmann and Haubold. They assert that, “...because of their different vantage points, ‘tradition’ and ‘reception’ go together well and can mutually enhance one another.”¹⁷

Methodology

My first objective in this study is to understand the Battle of Thermopylae in its historical context. This will be achieved by a close reading of the ancient sources relevant to this battle, as well as paying attention to the individual aims and contexts of each source. I studied these sources in a philological manner as well as referring to the necessary scholarship in the large corpus of secondary literature written about the battle. My next aim, then, was to understand the way that these sources were drawn upon by each of the later writers, artists and intellectuals who produced the various receptions that I consider

¹⁷ 2008:23.

in this dissertation. In examining these later texts, while I use reception theory as my over-arching theoretical framework, I have also used assorted different theoretical frameworks under this umbrella theory to understand them as each text has required. So for example film theory, graphic novel theory as well as popular culture theory in general was employed in Chapter 2. However, in Chapters 3 and 4 it was more important to situate these texts within their historical contexts and so I surveyed relevant material on the broader cultural contexts within which these texts were produced. In all instances a strong hermeneutical approach to each of the texts was employed. The process of selecting the various reception texts was somewhat random. I decided on three broad areas of reception due to different criteria. Popular culture was chosen because of my interest in current debates about the classical ‘canon’ and ideas of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art receptions. South Africa was another interesting area to me, due largely to the fact that I am South African and wished to examine some of the effects that the classical world and classical studies have played in shaping my own country. The final focus area is that of children’s literature. Despite falling into this area randomly and with no prior background of research in this field, it proved one of the most interesting areas of study and aided me with one of my aims in this dissertation: namely to broaden the areas ‘acceptable’ to research within classical reception studies. The very reason that this is an under-researched field within classical receptions was perhaps the reason for its inclusion in this study. Despite being interested in other ‘Thermopylae’ receptions, for example, Heinrich Böll’s short story: *Wanderer, kommst Du nach Spa...* (1950), as well as A.E. Housman’s poem ‘The Oracles’ from his collection of poetry *Last Poems* (1922) and Günter Kunert’s novel *Im Namen der Hüte* (1967), these texts did not fit into the scope of my dissertation,

due to lack of space but also because of matters of cohesion of the contents. One other important reception that would not have been out of place in Chapter 2 was Steven Pressfield's popular novel *Gates of Fire* (1998). The choice to exclude it from this study was due largely to the appearance of Bridges' article which dealt with this particular reception in considerable detail.¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that the number of texts influenced by the Battle of Thermopylae is too numerous to be adequately covered in any single study.

Having now provided a rationale for my study, as well as outlining a theoretical background and methodology, I will proceed in the rest of this introduction to provide a brief overview of the relevant literature that one must take into account for a study of this nature. After that in Chapter 1 the ancient sources will be surveyed and summarised and a brief introduction to aspects of Spartan society important in a study of Thermopylae's reception will be supplied, for the very reason that it will provide a necessary background to subsequent discussions in later chapters.¹⁹ In Chapter 2, entitled 'Leonidas goes to Hollywood...Thermopylae in Popular Culture' I will narrow my focus to understanding Thermopylae's use in popular culture. I focus on Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* (1998/9) as well as Zack Snyder's 2006²⁰ film of the same name. To understand these texts within their contexts I also discuss the interaction of popular culture and Classics in this chapter. Chapter 3, entitled 'In Search of a South African Thermopylae: Its use in the

¹⁸ 2007: 405-421.

¹⁹ There are numerous articles and books on Spartan society in general. It is, however, beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a comprehensive overview of this complex society. For the best general introduction see: Cartledge 2003.

²⁰ Reference throughout will be to the American release date of the film 2006. I have seen it referenced as 2007, as this was its international release date.

Poetry of the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879', displays the results of my findings of a 'South African' Thermopylae, focusing particularly on the uses and abuses of the Thermopylae story in poetry associated with the Anglo-Zulu War. Chapter 4 entitled 'Once upon a time in Thermopylae...Children's Literature and the Classics', attempts to map out the terrain of Thermopylae's use in Victorian children's literature. I provide two case studies, one fiction: Caroline Dale Snedeker's *The Coward of Thermopylae* (1911) and one non-fiction: Andrew Lang's 'The Spartan Three Hundred' in his collection, *The True Story Book* (1893). After my Conclusion, I provide two appendices relating to Chapters 3 and 4 respectively, as well as my bibliography.

Literature Review

The Greco-Persian Wars of the 5th Century B.C. have always been a well studied and theorised area within the discipline of Classics. Many scholars have considered the significance of these wars in Greek and Western history. To mention all of the monographs, book chapters and articles that deal with different aspects of these wars would be an impossible task. Instead, here I hope to provide a short survey of some of the more important and widely known studies of these wars relevant to my dissertation. Hignett's *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece* (1963), Burn's *Persia and the Greeks: The Defence of the West 546-478 B.C.* (1968), Hammond's *The Expedition of Xerxes* (1988), Lazenby's *The Defence of Greece 490-479 B.C.* (1993) and Green's work *The Greco-*

Persian Wars (1996) are examples of these studies. Each of these books aims to provide scholarly and historical discussions of the wars as a whole. The Battle of Thermopylae within these wars has also been a point of much scholarly interest and attention. A number of these studies have focused particularly on Thermopylae as a part of a military history and its significance in Greek history. These include Pritchett's *Herodotus and his critics on Thermopylae* (1982), Hammond's 'Sparta at Thermopylae' (1996: 1-20), Szemler and Chorf's *Thermopylai. Myth and Reality in 480 B.C.* (1996), Flower's 'Simonides, Ephorus and Herodotus on the Battle of Thermopylae' (1998: 365-379), Strauss' 'Thermopylae. Death of a king, birth of a legend' (2004: 17-25) and the more popular (and perhaps most overarching) study: Cartledge's *Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the World* (2006). Most important for this dissertation, however, are the studies which have focused on Thermopylae's postclassical importance and which have often focused on specific key areas or periods of reception.

Firstly a very important and valuable study was done by Elizabeth Rawson. Her book *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (1969) was probably one of the first attempts at tracing the influence Sparta had on modern Europe. Although her focus was Sparta as a whole, Thermopylae was repeatedly mentioned. Two edited volumes also provide useful chapters on the 'transmission' of Sparta to the postclassical world, both edited by Powell & Hodkinson: *The Shadow of Sparta* (1994) and *Sparta: Beyond the Mirage* (2002). Other studies that deal with specific receptions of Thermopylae are, for example, Macgregor Morris' unpublished PhD thesis from the University of Manchester, entitled *The Age of Leonidas: The Legend of Thermopylae in British Political Culture, 1737-1821*

(2000a) as well as his article “‘To Make a New Thermopylae’: Hellenism, Greek Liberation, and the Battle of Thermopylae”.²¹ In this article he demonstrates how Thermopylae was used as a motif in the poetry of various pro-Greek, or ‘Phil-Hellenic’, poets such as Byron and Haygarth in the cause of Greek liberation against Turkey in the early part of the nineteenth century leading up to the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829). Another is Rebenich’s study of the uses and abuses of the Leonidas ‘myth’ in German historiography entitled “From Thermopylae to Stalingrad: The myth of Leonidas in German Historiography”.²² Kytzler’s “*Wanderer, kommst du...Ein Übersetzungsvergleich*”²³ deals with the appropriation of Simonides’ famous ‘Thermopylae’ epigram²⁴ by later classical and postclassical authors (particularly German ones). Most recently Albertz’s *Exemplarisches Heldentum: Rezeptionsgeschichte der Schlacht an den Thermopylen* (2006) traces the battle’s reception history through a number of different media and periods. Apart from its good general survey of the battle in ancient literature, this monograph has a strong focus on the battle’s reception in ‘modern’ Europe, particularly in France and Germany.

Yet despite the interest of scholars in postclassical adaptations of Thermopylae and more generally in the effects of Sparta and Spartan ideology on European tradition, comparatively little study has been undertaken of its use and understanding in contemporary popular culture, South Africa or in children’s literature. A few studies need to be identified in relation to these fields. An edited volume by Bridges, Hall and Rhodes:

²¹ 2000b: 211-230.

²² 2002: 323-349.

²³ 2004: 324-332.

²⁴ cf. Hdt. 7.228.

Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars appeared in 2007 and contains several useful chapters for a study in these areas of reception. Levene's article in the volume, "Xerxes goes to Hollywood"²⁵ provides a discussion of the 1962 film, *The 300 Spartans*, directed by Rudolph Maté, while Bridges' own contribution to the volume, 'The Guts and the Glory: Pressfield's Spartans at the *Gates of Fire*'²⁶ examines Sparta, and more specifically Thermopylae in relation to the genre of historical novels, focusing particularly on Steven Pressfield's 1998 popular novel *Gates of Fire*.²⁷ Bridges (under her maiden name Clough) has also written another article useful for the reception of Thermopylae. In Figueira's *Spartan Society* (2004: 363-384) her chapter entitled: "Loyalty and liberty: Thermopylae in western imagination" provides a thorough introduction to the topic, as well as three in-depth case study discussions of three separate appropriations of the battle, namely: Richard Glover's 1737 epic poem *Leonidas*, Jacques-Louis David's painting *Leonidas at Thermopylae* (produced in the early part of the nineteenth century) as well as Rudolph Maté's film *The 300 Spartans* (1962).²⁸

The research of this dissertation will hopefully build on these previous studies, not only by casting the net of scholarship further afield into lesser known receptions of Thermopylae (particularly in the case of South African uses of the battle, as well as its place in children's literature), but also by pushing reception studies within the discipline

²⁵ 2007: 383-403.

²⁶ 2007: 405-421.

²⁷ She includes with her bibliography a helpful list of historical novels dealing with Sparta.

²⁸ A study of the representation of Thermopylae in 'high art' receptions is perhaps also due. Apart from David, one also thinks of Oskar Kokoschka's 'Thermopylae triptych'. See the essay in his book *Schriften* (1956).

of classical studies into other areas such as popular culture, Africa and children's literature.

Chapter 1

Ancient Sources

The Battle of Thermopylae of 480 B.C. is an event of Greek history that has become mythologized by the Western world. It has influenced artists, writers and intellectuals alike, each of whom in their assorted media has appropriated different aspects of the battle for their own aims and artistic expressions. Not only have they actively manipulated the ‘Thermopylae story’ for their own aims, but passively their individual contexts – such as their historical subject positions – have shaped the differing emphases that have been placed on the battle and their understanding of it. On the historic battle itself, however, Lazenby notes how little we actually know of the specific details and yet how it has also become one of the most famous battles of antiquity.¹ It was one of the key encounters between the Greeks and Persians during the Persian Wars of the 5th century B.C., and yet unlike the battle of Marathon, Salamis and Plataea, Thermopylae was a defeat for the Greeks.

The basic events of the battle are as follows: in the summer of 480 B.C. Xerxes marched his army, comprised of the assorted peoples of his empire, across the Hellespont, down through the Tempe Valley and onto the pass at Thermopylae, so named for the hot springs found nearby.² It was at this pass that Greeks, made up of Spartans, Thespians

¹ 1985: 83.

² From the Greek, *thermos* (θερμός): ‘hot’ and *pulae* (πόλη): ‘gates’ resulting in the popular title of the pass as the “Hot Gates”, see Golding’s 1965 essay of the same name as an example.

and Thebans, and lead by Leonidas, the Spartan king, held off the Persian king and his army for two days until finally being betrayed on the third day by Ephialtes of Trachis, who revealed the Anopean path to Xerxes, and as a result the Greeks were defeated. All on the Greek side who remained died, except a few Thebans who are said to have surrendered.³

Our main source for the battle that comes from the 5th century B.C., a near contemporary, is the Greek historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The account of the Battle of Thermopylae found in book 7 of his *Histories* (7.175-239) has been by far the most influential ancient account of the battle for postclassical receptions of it. In fact, oft times whole lines have been lifted from the text of his *Histories* and been repeated verbatim in later adaptations. Within his work, Herodotus sets out to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, to record the wondrous deeds of both Barbarians and Greeks alike, and secondly, to show the reason for the conflict between them.⁴ He situates the Persian Wars within this narrative, and in fact they feature as the main event. The Battle of Thermopylae itself features as just one of the many battles of the greater war taking place. It is significant then to understand the battle in light of Herodotus' two main aims. It must be considered as an attempt to record wondrous deeds of Greeks and Barbarians, as well as another 'hotspot' in the long list of conflicts between East and West. In discussing the battle Herodotus accomplishes both of these objectives. He retells the conflict between the

³ Herodotus also mentions two Spartan survivors: Aristodemus (who will become important in Chapter 4) and Pantites, who was on an errand to Thessaly, cf. Hdt.7.229-232.

⁴ Hdt. *Proem*.

Greeks and Persians as well as giving honourable mention to certain participants on each side of the battle.

First among these is Leonidas. Herodotus comments that honour forbade him from retreating from the battle after realising that there would be no victory. The oracle that Herodotus records creates a heroic aura around Leonidas' death, showing him to have sacrificed himself for the good of all Sparta. It reads:

Ἕμῖν δ', ὦ Σπάρτης οἰκήτορες εὐρυχόροιο,
ἢ μέγα ἄστυ ἐρικυδὲς ὑπ' ἀνδράσι Περσεΐδησι
πέρθεται, ἢ τὸ μὲν οὐχί, ἀφ' Ἡρακλέους δὲ γενέθλης
πενθήσει βασιλῆ φθίμενον Λακεδαίμονος οὔρου
οὐ γὰρ τὸν ταύρων σχήσει μένος οὐδὲ λεόντων
ἀντιβίην Ζηνὸς γὰρ ἔχει μένος οὐδέ ἔφημι
σχήσεσθαι, πρὶν τῶνδ' ἕτερον διὰ πάντα δάσηται.

Hear your fate, O dwellers in Sparta of the wide spaces;
Either you famed, great town must be sacked by Perseus' sons,
Or, if that be not, the whole land of Lacedaemon
Shall mourn the death of a king of the house of Heracles,
For not the strength of lions or of bulls shall hold him,
Strength against strength; for he has the power of Zeus

And will not be checked till one of these two he has consumed.⁵

Herodotus then goes on to state his belief that this oracle, as well as Leonidas' wish to make Sparta famous is the reason why he sent away the other troops and remained with only his men, Thebans and Thespians. He states that Leonidas fell in the course of fighting, having fought like a noble man indeed (ἀνὴρ ἄριστος).⁶

Herodotus also comments that he acquainted himself with the names of all 300 men who fell, because their names deserve to be remembered.⁷ Another Greek to receive special mention by Herodotus is Dienece, made famous for his reply to a native of Trachis that when the Persian arrows block out the sun, the Greeks would fight in the shade.⁸ Three other Greeks are also mentioned by name: two Spartan brothers Alpheus and Maron, as well as a Thespian: Dithyrambus, the son of Harmatides.⁹ Megistias the seer of Acarnania is also given a special mention and receives his own epitaph in his honour because despite knowing the doomed outcome of the battle, he decided not to flee and instead chose to remain with the Spartans and die alongside them.¹⁰ Herodotus also, even-handedly, mentions Persians who fought with distinction, two of Xerxes' brothers: Habrocomes and Hyperanthes. These are those whom Herodotus honoured for their great deeds, but he also 'names and shames' others by including their names. Among these are

⁵ Hdt. 7.220. All translations of Herodotus throughout this dissertation, unless stated otherwise, follow Aubrey de Sélincourt's 1996 Penguin edition closely, however I have adapted the translation in various places as I have thought appropriate.

⁶ Hdt. 7.224.4.

⁷ Hdt. 7.224.

⁸ Hdt. 7.226.

⁹ Hdt. 7.227.

¹⁰ Hdt. 7.228.

Ephialtes, who betrayed the alternate route to the Persian king, and Aristodemus who deserted his fellow Spartans at Thermopylae.¹¹ What John Marincola concludes about Herodotus' presentation of the Persian Wars is also true of his presentation of the Battle of Thermopylae:

...conflict between freedom and slavery, between oriental and arbitrary despots on the one hand, and on the other hand free Greek communities in which men were required to persuade their fellow citizens and to be responsible for their own actions. In Herodotus the Persians are portrayed as driven on by the whip, while the Greeks fight for themselves. The portrait is subtle and without jingoism or malice...¹²

Ctesias of Cnidus is another of the historians whose work the *Persica*, while its sole focus is not the Persian Wars, does mention the Battle of Thermopylae. It is preserved only in summary form by Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople in the 9th century A.D. in his work the *Bibliotheca*, a great encyclopaedic work of classical authors in the form of abridgements and extracts. Ctesias was uniquely placed at the Persian court of Artaxerxes II Mnemon (as a physician) during the late 5th/ early 4th century B.C. This places him in a position of access to Persian records of the events of the Persian Wars. However his reception in antiquity and later has not been favourable.¹³ While he states that his history is based on what he saw in Persia, as well as what the Persians told him, it shares many

¹¹ Hdt. 7.229.

¹² 1996: xvii.

¹³ Ctesias' unpopularity was due largely to major blunders of fact. For example: he places the Battle of Plataea chronologically before the Battle of Salamis. See Bigwood 1978: 19.

similarities with Herodotus' account with regards to the Persian Wars in general.¹⁴ On Thermopylae (F 13.27), however, Ctesias diverges on a number of points from Herodotus' account. In summary they are as follows: firstly, a Thessalian Thorax is mentioned as accompanying Xerxes; secondly, his estimates of numbers is radically reduced from those presented in Herodotus; thirdly, he mentions a Persian general not known from Herodotus' account, named Artapanus; and finally he also suggests other betrayers, apart from Ephialtes, of the Anopean path: Calliades and Timaphernes.¹⁵ However as a source, Bigwood makes the following statement about Ctesias:

Whatever Ctesias' sources were, and whatever Photius' methods of summarizing, there is exceedingly little in this whole account of the Wars which could be right and nothing which suggests concern for the truth or careful investigation. Instead we have all the ingredients which one associates with Ctesias – reckless army statistics, misidentified characters, simplifications, astounding confusions, chronology which is muddled, some degree of anachronism, and a certain amount of bias. Finally there is the quality which is such a marked feature of the late accounts of the Persian Wars, sensationalism, which did not begin with Ephorus. It is already present in Ctesias. Hignett's low opinion of the post-Herodotean versions is, in the case of this one, amply justified.¹⁶

¹⁴ Bigwood 1978: 22.

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of these divergences see Bigwood 1978: 25-28.

¹⁶ Bigwood 1978: 36.

Opinion of Ephorus of Cyme, a Greek historian from the 4th Century B.C., as another major source of the Persian Wars, and more specifically of Thermopylae, is negative due to two main facts: firstly because his work is mediated through the work of Diodorus Siculus (11.8.4-11.10.4) and secondly because of the influence rhetoric had on his work, due largely to him being a pupil of Isocrates.¹⁷ Diodorus' account of the Battle of Thermopylae is remarkably different from that of Herodotus'. It is accepted that his main source for books 11-16 of his *Bibliothēke* is Ephorus. It is therefore uncertain what is Ephorus' and what is Diodorus'. In the Diodorus/Ephorus account the most striking difference with that of Herodotus' narrative of events is that Leonidas is warned by a certain Cymaean, Tyrrhastidas, who as Diodorus tells us was "honourable and upright in his ways" of the path's betrayal and Xerxes' coming approach from the rear.¹⁸ We are also told in Diodorus' narrative that in response to this information, Leonidas readied himself and his troops for a night attack on Xerxes' camp.¹⁹ This event is nowhere recorded in Herodotus' account and most historians dismiss it as pure fiction, citing that the figure Tyrrhastidas was Cymaean, and so too was Ephorus. On other aspects of Thermopylae, the Diodorus/Ephorus narrative is deemed superior to that of Herodotus', specifically with regards to numbers and sizes of armies as well as the question of the allegiance of Thebans fighting on Leonidas' side.²⁰ Flower states that Ephorus' version of the events of the Persian Wars ultimately was influenced by poetic tradition, in the form of Aeschylus' *Persae* and the 'Thermopylae' poetry of Simonides. And that his

¹⁷ See: Flower 1998: 365-379, who attempts to rehabilitate him from this bias.

¹⁸ 11.8 (tr. Oldfather, 1961).

¹⁹ See: 11.10. Diodorus is not the only post-Herodotean writer to postulate the night-attack theory. It is mentioned also in Justin (2.11.12-18) as well as Plutarch (*de Malignitate Herodoti* 866a).

²⁰ For an in depth discussion of these points see: Flower 1998: *passim*.

distinction between ‘poetic’ truth and ‘historical’ truth were not necessarily as rigid as our own notions of truth that sharply distinguish these categories.²¹

Information about Thermopylae comes to us also not only in the form of historiography but also poetry. Simonides of Ceos, a Greek lyric poet, composed numerous epigrams and lyric poems for many of the battles of the Persian Wars, and also specifically for Thermopylae itself.²² Poems about Thermopylae specifically include an epigram composed for all the Greeks who fell at Thermopylae, as well as a specific epigram for the Spartans who died there, and one for the seer, Megistias, who accompanied them into battle.²³ Didodorus Siculus also records a portion of a longer lyric poem by Simonides in his history for those who died at Thermopylae.²⁴ While Simonides’ poems cannot provide as much of the detail around events as a work like Herodotus’ can, they do provide for the historian a view into the legend that was building up around the Spartan defeat at Thermopylae, as well as giving insight into public feelings about the event. It is through works like the poems of Simonides and Aeschylus’ tragedy *Persae*, a dramatization of the Battle of Salamis, that historians can reconstruct the cultural impact of the Persian Wars.²⁵

In this chapter so far I have endeavoured to mention the main Greek sources for the Battle of Thermopylae. In the subsequent chapters I will use them when necessary to

²¹ 1998: 378-379.

²² For detailed discussions of Simonides’ poems on the Persian Wars in general, as well as Thermopylae in particular, see: Bowra 1933, Podlecki 1968, Flower 1998. The influence of Simonides’ ‘Thermopylae poem’ is discussed in Chapter 3.

²³ See: Hdt. 7.228; *Anth. Pal.* 7.248, 249 & 7.677.

²⁴ See: Diod. Sic. 11.11.6; Frg. 5 Diehl, 26/531 Page.

²⁵ For a survey of the cultural impact of the Persian Wars, see: Bridges, Hall & Rhodes (2007).

discussion of the assorted receptions of the battle. Any Roman ‘sources’ of the battle are sufficiently far enough away from the actual event that they must be considered receptions rather than historical sources proper.²⁶

It is also necessary, when attempting to understand the cultural impact of the Battle of Thermopylae, to understand something of the uniqueness of Spartan society. This is due primarily to Thermopylae being so intertwined with what has become known as ‘the Spartan mirage’.²⁷ To provide even a brief introduction to Spartan society as a whole, would be way beyond the scope of this dissertation. And so for the rest of this chapter I will provide a brief introduction to just two of the aspects of Spartan society that feature prominently in receptions of Thermopylae.²⁸

The first aspect of Spartan society which has become intertwined with their legend is the militaristic nature of their society. This martial ethos in their society was trained into the young Spartan men from an early age. Each male child was separated from his parents and trained and educated in the *agoge* (ἀγωγή).²⁹ This system instilled in the Spartan men discipline and conformity and equipped them to be physically and morally suited for the Spartan army. The second aspect of their society that uniquely characterised some of the events of Thermopylae was their obedience to law and hierarchy. Lycurgus, a semi-mythical law-giver, is credited with reorganizing Spartan society from the 7th century

²⁶ Some of the Roman reception of Thermopylae is dealt with briefly in Chapter 3.

²⁷ See: Ollier, F. 1933. *Le mirage spartiate*, the work that coined this phrase.

²⁸ Other aspects of Spartan society (for example, ‘women’) will be referred to subsequently when they are appropriate to the discussion of a particular ‘reception’.

²⁹ This was Sparta’s rigorous training regime for Spartan males.

B.C. onwards. The hierarchy of the society was restructured so that the citizen body was overseen by elected Ephors, the *gerousia* (γερούσία), that is a council of elders, and a diarchy. This created a system with checks and balances and in effect no-one was able to have a monopoly on control of the state. Each of these distinct groups of leadership, however, was more importantly subject to Sparta's laws, what became known as the 'Great Rhetra'.³⁰ It is for this 'law' that the Spartans willingly sacrificed their own lives at Thermopylae. Paul Cartledge summarises Sparta's achievement as a society and its enduring legacy as follows:

While Athens is justly credited with phenomenal achievements in visual art, architecture, theatre, philosophy and democratic politics, the ideals and traditions of its greatest rival, Sparta, are equally potent and enduring: duty, discipline, the nobility of arms in a cause worth dying for, the sacrifice of the individual for the greater good of the community and the triumph of will over seemingly insuperable obstacles.³¹

Nowhere is this legacy and ethos more apparent than at the Battle of Thermopylae.

³⁰ Plu. *Lyc.* 6.

³¹ 2003: 25.

CHAPTER 2

Leonidas goes to Hollywood... Thermopylae in Popular Culture

The study of the classical world has always been cloaked in an atmosphere of superiority. It has been reserved mainly for the educated and upper classes. Engagement with classical antiquity has always been limited to the minority of the educated few. However with the advent of what has been termed ‘mass culture’¹ and particularly mass-media like film, greater numbers of people are now able to engage with classical cultures. Steinmeyer therefore states: “What had been reserved over a long time for a small group of people has become accessible to the average and ordinary person in the street. Therefore the aura in which Greek and Roman culture was shrouded (even up to the present) has become less elitist and more popular.”² The influence, as well as the uses and abuses of classical culture in the modern world is something hard to quantify, however one just need look at the success at the box office that classically-inspired films such as *Gladiator* (2000), *Alexander* (2004), *Troy* (2004) and *300* (2006) have made.³ These successes clearly demonstrate widespread popular engagement with the Classics, something never achieved in previous eras.

¹ See Storey 2001: 8-10 for a discussion of ‘mass culture’ in relation to ‘popular culture’.

² 2007a: 317. See also Edith Hall’s ‘Putting the Class into Classical Reception’ (386-397) in Hardwick & Stray (2008) for an illuminating discussion of some of these issues.

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/jan/28/film.filmnews>.

Popular culture as Storey points out is “in effect an *empty* conceptual category, one which can be filled in a wide variety of ways, depending on the context of use.”⁴ Thus for the purpose of this dissertation it is necessary to create a working definition of ‘popular culture’ as I understand it. ‘Popular’ denotes being of or by the people⁵, while ‘culture’, is perhaps harder to define, and a much contested word, deriving from the Latin *colere* meaning ‘to cultivate, or to worship’.⁶ Storey outlines three major definitions of ‘culture’, first that ‘culture’ refers to “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”, secondly as “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group” and finally it can be used “to refer to the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.”⁷ ‘Popular culture’ then must be understood as the everyday thoughts, practices and produce of a people, period or a group. This would then encompass cultural texts such as films and comics as particular media and exempla of *popular* culture. Therefore popular culture is by definition easily accessible to the majority of people. It is also important to keep some key ideas in one’s mind when thinking about ‘popular culture’. For example it is often linked with notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, thus it has been suggested that it is “the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture.”⁸ This suggestion relegates it to a culture of inferior status. Also the term cannot be separated from ‘mass culture’ which by definition is mass produced for mass consumption and carries with it ideas of commercial enterprise.

⁴ 2001: 1.

⁵ cf. L. *populāris*, and adjective meaning ‘of the people’. For the etymology of the English word see: *OED* online s.v. ‘popular’.

⁶ See: *OED* online s.v. ‘culture’.

⁷ All three definitions quoted by Storey 2001: 1-2 are taken from Williams 1983: 87 *Keywords*.

⁸ Storey 2001: 6.

Popular culture's relationship with the Classics is a shaky one. A quote by Charles Martindale will suffice to illustrate this point:

I fear too that, if we abandon a serious commitment to the value of the texts we choose for our attention and those of our students, we may end up trivializing reception within the discipline; already a classics student is far more likely to spend time analyzing *Gladiator* than the *Commedia* of Dante. I find this worrying. This is not to decry the study of a wide range of cultural artefacts (there are many more good things in the world than the canon knows), and certainly not to criticise the study of film or even of popular culture. It is simply to say that we form ourselves by the company we keep, and that in general, material of a high quality is better company for our intellects and hearts than the banal or the quotidian.⁹

Classicists, it seems, are afraid to widen 'their' canon to include more popular culture engagements with antiquity for fear that these texts lack value.¹⁰ However, if in the discipline of reception studies, we approach all texts in an egalitarian manner, as already argued in the Introduction of this dissertation, the subjective notion of value has no place and therefore the long held chasm between high culture and low culture must be bridged. By researching the relationship between the Classics and popular culture I seek to play a role in achieving this.

⁹ 2006: 11.

¹⁰ This is obviously a generalising (and not wholly true) statement. In recent years classicists' engagement with popular culture has increased, for examples of these studies see: Wyke 1997, Winkler 2001, Cyrino 2005, Steinmeyer 2007, Nisbet 2007, and Pomeroy 2008; also see my review: *Scholia* 18 (2009) 12.

It is worth noting also that the relationship that ancient Greece has with popular culture is not an immediately straightforward one.¹¹ Gideon Nisbet in his 2008 book *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* highlights some of the complications around this relationship. He highlights three possible reasons to explain this problematic relationship: Cities, Sex and So-crates.¹² He states, “Greece has no distinctive ‘urban image’. For all its efforts in self-promotion, from classical antiquity onwards, Athens is not synonymous with Greece; and Athens itself is no Rome, no Babylon.”¹³ In this regard he also states, “Greece’s physical and political geography are inconveniently fiddly – dozens of islands, several distinct ethnicities, hundreds of independent and frequently warring city-based states. Its history is correspondingly complicated and its politics even worse... For a mainstream audience this is too much like hard work.”¹⁴ In terms of ‘Sex’, Nisbet contrasts popular culture portrayals of Roman sex.¹⁵ For him this is characterized by orgies, gladiators and dancing girls for the more liberal tastes, while all the time being undercut by Christian morality for the more conservative audiences. Greece on the other hand demonstrates the ‘wrong’ types of sex: male same-sex love (and *even* with young boys!) The final area where Greece’s relationship with popular culture proves to be problematic is what Nisbet labels: ‘So-crates’. He states; “Audiences are resistant to a Greece closely associated with the history of ideas. Throw us an establishing shot of the

¹¹ This, Nisbet argues, is in contrast to Rome, which enjoys a strong and unproblematic relationship with popular culture (2008: *passim*).

¹² This book was originally published in 2006, but an updated edition was produced in 2008, and it is this edition which I have consulted. The hyphenated spelling of Socrates’ name relates to a film in Nisbet’s chapter ‘Socrates’ Excellent Adventure’ (2008: 1-44), where the name is changed to rhyme with ‘mates’.

¹³ 2008:37.

¹⁴ 2008: 7.

¹⁵ 2008:37.

Acropolis, and we think Philosophy, Art, Democracy – and switch off.”¹⁶ Audiences out for mainstream entertainment are confronted with films in which they might actually have to engage their brains, or at least this is the perception, according to Nisbet. Yet despite Nisbet’s claim, most recently Hollywood and the general public seem to have embraced Greece in the form of *300*. In the rest of this chapter I seek to understand this film, through the graphic novel which inspired it, and which in turn was based on an earlier film, in an attempt to better understand the relationship between Classics and popular culture.

A graphic retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae: Frank Miller’s *300*

In 1962 Rudolph Maté’s *The 300 Spartans* appeared on the big screen. The film portrayed the Battle of Thermopylae in true Hollywood sword-and-sandal film style, with Leonidas being played by Richard Egan, Ralph Richardson as Themistocles and David Farrar in the role of Xerxes. It included also a fictional romantic element as a sub-plot to the battle in the form of two lovers: Ellas (played by Diane Baker) and Phylon (portrayed by Barry Coe). This film was a major break with tradition for the American film industry. At the time of its production *The 300 Spartans* was the only film depicting Greek history of the 5th century B.C. and more particularly the Battle of Thermopylae.¹⁷ Levene in his

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ There was only one other Italian film produced around the same time dealing with another battle of the Persian Wars: *The Giant of Marathon/La Battaglia di Maratona* (Jacques Tourneur, 1960).

article 'Xerxes goes to Hollywood' claims: "Greek history (unlike Greek mythology or Roman history) has received very little coverage in American (and indeed world) cinema."¹⁸ And thus in 1962 with the appearance of Maté's film, new ground was being covered in American (and world) cinema. In locating this film in cinematic history, Clough however, despite the dearth in films dealing with Greek history of the 5th century, does appeal to the familiar motif of 'few against many' common in much contemporary cinema. She records at least four examples of this theme either contemporary or prior to the release of the 1962 Thermopylae film. These include: *Wake Island* (1942), *Bataan* (1943), *The Alamo* (1960), as well as *Zulu* (1964). Each of these films featured a small band of troops sacrificing their lives when faced with a large opposition force.¹⁹

As anyone can judge from the date of this movie, it was produced during the height of the Cold War. Both of the most recent articles dealing with this film by classicists - Clough's 'Loyalty and liberty: Thermopylae in the western imagination', as well as Levene's 'Xerxes Goes to Hollywood' - have appealed to these broader, contemporary world events in elucidating an understanding of the film.²⁰ For example Levene notes that Spartan politics might not necessarily be immediately amenable to Democracy-loving-American audiences of the 1960s (audiences, one must remember, that were in the height of the Cold War) and thus inevitably certain features of Spartan life had to disappear from any retelling of the battle. Levene lists the following as being absent from *The 300*

¹⁸ Levene 2007:383.

¹⁹ 2004: 375.

²⁰ Clough 2004: 363-384; Levene 2007: 383-403.

Spartans: the helots, *syssitia*,²¹ *agoge*,²² *krypteia*,²³ *xenelasia*,²⁴ as well as there being not even a hint of pederasty.²⁵ All Spartan institutions that were in anyway similar to Communist practices or in opposition to middle-class moral America had to be removed from the film. In her evaluation of the film Clough states:

The opening statement by the film’s narrator sets the stage for what is surely intended to be a stirring assertion of the blessings of liberty in the western world as a whole: ‘Across the hush of twenty-four centuries, this is the story of a turning point in history, of a blazing day when three hundred Greek warriors fought here to hold with their lives their freedom and ours.’...The implication is that today’s world would have been very different were it not for Leonidas and his three hundred. The international situation at the time of the film’s production had suggested a contemporary set of circumstances upon which the Thermopylae theme could be used to shed light.²⁶

And she concludes: “The Persian-Greek war on the screen acts as a symbol of the conflict between East and West which was then being played out on the world stage.”²⁷

²¹ *συσσίτια*: The communal mess.

²² *ἀγωγή*: The public system of Spartan upbringing and military training.

²³ *κρυπτεία*: A form of secret intelligence service.

²⁴ *ξενηλασία*: The periodic expulsion of foreigners.

²⁵ Levene 2007: 387. Frank Miller in his graphic novel also steered clear of some of Sparta’s less-desirable elements. In one interview he states: “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 portrayed.” (George 2003:65).

²⁶ 2004: 375.

²⁷ 2004: 376.

It was to this film primarily that Frank Miller turned as the inspiration for his graphic novel *300* (1998/9). Miller had seen the film as a child, and it had left a lasting impression on his young mind, one that created the impetus for his own retelling of the battle. In an interview Miller states: “It started with the love of the story itself. I was five years old when I saw the 1962 movie that was an absolute inspiration to me. The story of the Spartans and their sacrifice made a very deep, life-long impression.”²⁸ What intrigued Miller even more was the fact that the heroes of this story were heroes for the very fact that it cost them their lives. He states:

[*The 300 Spartans*] was the first time that I’d been exposed to a story where the notion of heroic sacrifice had ever been introduced. Heroes had always been people who did the right thing and then got a medal and a round of applause. I’d never really encountered a story where someone did the right thing at the cost of his own life.²⁹

Miller is a celebrated graphic novelist and cartoonist.³⁰ He has produced numerous works for the large publishing houses DC Comics, Marvel and Dark Horse. Some of his graphic novels/comics have been made into blockbuster films, and in fact he has also worked on films himself, most notably on *Sin City* (2005). Popular titles produced by Miller include his *Batman* series, as well as the *Daredevil/Elektra* cycle and *300*. He has achieved

²⁸ George 2003: 65. Apart from the film, Millers’ other sources of information on the battle are uncertain. At the end of his graphic novel he lists the following as suggested further reading: William Golding’s *The Hot Gates* (1965), Herodotus’ *The Histories*, *Thermopylae: The Battle for the West* (2004) by Ernie Bradford, as well as Victor Davis Hanson’s *The Western Way of War* (1989).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ He has won the most prestigious prize in the industry, the Eisner award.

something of cult-hero status with his fans and continues in producing his somewhat film-noir inspired comics and graphic novels.

It is, however, Miller's *300* that concerns this dissertation.³¹ In this graphic novel, Miller aims at retelling the heroic stand of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans against the full might of the Persian forces in the Greco-Persian Wars of the 5th Century B.C. It was initially published as a five part series every month by Dark Horse Publishers, first appearing in May 1998. Each of the respective issues was published under a separate title: *Honor*, *Duty*, *Glory*, *Combat* and *Victory*. Since then, all five issues were published in a single volume, simply titled *300*, with each chapter division keeping its original title.

In the first chapter *Honor*, we are introduced to the world of Sparta. The graphic novel begins with the 300 marching from Sparta. Initially the reasons for the marching are given only as "for honor's sake...for glory's sake".³² We are told that they have been marching for three days, that the heat is merciless and that they are thirsty. And yet the marching continues. Spartan values of endurance and stoic resolve in trying circumstances are already being cued to the reader. At the evening's camp the character Dilios is introduced to the reader. His character is central to the graphic novel, because it is he, as 'chief storyteller', who will be able to relate the sacrifice made by Leonidas and his 300 men after Thermopylae.

³¹ Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to Miller only in relation to the graphic novel; however it was a collaborative work with colourist Lynn Varley.

³² The graphic novel has no page numbers; however my discussion of it is fairly systematic as I proceed chapter by chapter.

The first story Dilios tells is an important narrative technique, a sort of allegory that foreshadows the coming events of the battle. The story is of a boy, who during his initiation, cold, alone and hungry is set upon by a wolf. Being defenceless, he uses his quick wit and lures the wolf into a narrow pass that he is able to manipulate to his advantage. As the wolf strikes, it is caught between the narrow rocks and the boy is able to spear it with his stick. Dilios relates that the boy returns to Sparta as a king. The anecdote is about Leonidas, and it serves the reader by establishing his character. He is obviously a resourceful and clever leader, one who is able to use situations to his own advantage. The reader is left with Leonidas' musings as the rest of the Spartans sleep: "Now, as then, a beast approaches, patient, confident, savouring the meal to come. But this beast is made of men and horses and spears and swords. It is an army, vast beyond imagining, ready to devour tiny Greece – to snuff out the world's one hope for reason and justice."

The scene then jumps to one where Persian ambassadors from Xerxes have come to meet with Leonidas at Sparta to offer terms of surrender to Greece. Miller's history here is somewhat mixed up. Persia did indeed send ambassadors to Greece to discuss terms of surrender to the Persian Empire. Prior to the Battle of Marathon, Darius sent ambassadors, who were killed by the Athenians and Spartans, thus in the subsequent attacks beginning with Thermopylae, Xerxes did not send any ambassadors to Athens or Sparta.³³ In this scene the Persian dress is contrasted with the Spartan one. The

³³ Hdt. 7.133 mentions that Xerxes did not send messengers to Athens or Sparta before his invasion. This is due primarily to the previous treatment of Darius' messengers: at Athens they were forced into a pit, while at Sparta, they were pushed into a well, and were told to find the earth and water that they demanded there.

ambassadors are shown heavily and ornately dressed as opposed to the simple near nakedness of the Spartans. Leonidas' response to the Persian ambassadors is sardonic and humorous. He also indicates that one reason for the Spartans' refusal to submit to Persia was due to their reputation as Spartans. Stating that he has already heard that the Athenian 'boy-lovers' have turned Persia down, he concludes that as Spartans, they should definitely do likewise.³⁴ This chapter ends with the now infamous scene of Leonidas kicking the ambassador into a pit, or a well, while shouting "This is Sparta!"³⁵

The section *Duty* begins with Leonidas' visit to the Ephors, the five elected officials of Sparta.³⁶ This sequence seems to betray an anti-religious agenda by Miller. Not only does he criticise the corrupt money-hungry religious leaders, but he refers to their religion in negative terms: calling the Ephors 'inbred' and relating them to the 'old gods'. Their objection to Leonidas' plans is due to the Carneia festival. This was one of Sparta's most sacred festivals, held in honour of Apollo Carneios.³⁷ At their mention of the Carneia, however, Leonidas states that he would prefer the priests to trust their reason. The comment is provided in the graphic novel that these religious institutions were from a time before Sparta's ascent from darkness, with the coming of Lycurgus, the Spartan law-giver, and his reforms. It is also stated importantly that "No Spartan – slave or citizen or

³⁴ The reference to Athenians as 'boy-lovers' is ironic, as the Spartans are well known to have practiced institutionalised pederasty as well. I think by using the other Greeks and particularly the Athenians as a foil to the Spartans, Miller hopes to enhance their 'toughness' to a modern audience, an image that simply would not work with the effeminacy that moderns associate with homoerotic love.

³⁵ This has been a much parodied scene in internet clips and later spoofs of the *300* film. The ambassador, before he is kicked into the pit states, "This is blasphemy." This is due to the sacrosanct nature of messengers in the ancient world; something which Leonidas seems not to worry about and yet later he does adhere to the religious 'rules' of the Ephors.

³⁶ Leonidas' interaction with the Ephors is based on Diodorus' account (11.4).

³⁷ Historically this is the reason Herodotus mentions as well (7.206). The Olympic Games are mentioned as to the reason that the rest of the other allied Greeks also did not send forces.

king – is above the Law”. The choice of a beautiful woman as the oracle, is again more reason for Leonidas/Miller to suspect corruption on the part of the priests – citing their “Men’s needs...as black as Hell”. This scene from the graphic novel is picked up strongly in the film where the lecherous Ephors are depicted as sexually perverted old men preying on the young priestess. The priestess of the Oracle utters the following prophecy: “Pray to the Winds. Sparta will fall. All Greece will fall. Trust not in men. Honor the gods. Honor the Carneia.”³⁸ After Leonidas has left, the full corruption of the Ephors is laid bare. A Persian is shown giving lots of gold to them, and thanking them for their allegiance to Xerxes. The section ends with the Spartans’ continued march to the ‘Hot Gates’, now accompanied by more Greeks. The next sequence of images display to the reader that a fierce storm ravages the Persian ships off the Greek coastline. The Greeks exult in this small mercy.

Glory begins with the reader’s introduction to the character of Ephialtes. In Miller’s graphic novel, Ephialtes is a misshapen and deformed Spartan, who, despite his deformities, was not killed at birth in Sparta’s fierce policy of eugenics, but was protected by his father from exposure on Mount Taygetus. In this regard Miller has deviated from the presentation of Ephialtes in Herodotus, as well as the one presented in the film of his inspiration.³⁹ In *The 300 Spartans*, Ephialtes is a lone farm hand, whose betrayal of the pass is spurred on by his jealousy of the lovers Phylon and Ellas. In Miller, it is due

³⁸ At Hdt 7.178 we are told that the people of Delphi, fearing Greece’s safety, inquired of the Oracle for advice. Herodotus states that the people must pray to the winds because they would be good allies to Greece’s safety.

³⁹ cf. Hdt. 7.213. Herodotus labels him Ephialtes of Trachis and states that he was the son of Eurydemus of Malis, and mentions also that he was rewarded by the Persians for his betrayal of the Anopean path, but later killed by the Greek Athenades of Trachis for unrelated reasons. No mention of his physical appearance is stated.

primarily to Leonidas' (and Sparta's) rejection of him, because of his deformities.⁴⁰ Leonidas explains that because of them, he would become a weak-link in their phalanx. The images vacillate between the all-muscled Spartans training and Ephialtes muttering to himself of Sparta's 'greatness' when compared to the Persian hordes approaching in the next frame. Then a Persian ambassador is shown approaching the Spartan camp. Carried on a litter he drives his men forward with a whip. In his exchange with the Spartans the major contrast between these two people groups is highlighted: the Persians are slaves, while the Spartans are free men. It is during this exchange that the well known and often quoted line from Herodotus is stated: the Persian ambassador states that the Persians are so numerous that their arrows would blot out the sun, and in true laconic fashion, a young Spartan, Stelios, replies that then they will fight in the shade.⁴¹ This chapter ends with the Persian advance against the Spartans, and with Leonidas' final words before the battle: "Come and get it".⁴²

The fourth chapter, *Combat*, devotes most of its pages to the battle itself. Amongst these battle scenes, including the attack of the Immortals, Xerxes' personal bodyguard, is a meeting between Leonidas and Xerxes. The discussion that ensues between them highlights the major ideology behind the clash between Persia and Greece: Greece will not enslave itself to anyone. To the Greeks slavery of a Greek citizen to another man is deplorable. This is the ideology that Miller has most emphasised throughout the graphic novel. The Greeks represent reason, justice, logic and most importantly freedom, while in

⁴⁰ Ephialtes is unable to raise his shield shoulder high.

⁴¹ Herodotus put this well known response in the mouth of Dieneceus, stated also to be the bravest of all the Greeks (Hdt. 7. 226), while in Miller this quip is uttered by a fictional character.

⁴² Cf. 'molōn labe' (μολών λαβέ), *Plutarch. Apophthegmata Laconica*, 225c.11.

direct contrast the Persians are religious, irrational and slaves. The simple egalitarian notion of each Spartan man being the same before the law, even the king, is something to be praised in Miller's eyes, so much so that Xerxes' main flaw, one that would be apparent to any Classical Greek, was his pride, thinking of himself as a god and better than other men, in other words his *hubris* (ὕβρις). Miller plays on this idea of Xerxes' godhood, when after seeing the destruction of his men by the Greeks, Xerxes is stated as having "a very *human* chill crawl up his spine."⁴³

The final chapter, *Victory*, opens with more battle scenes. We are then, as readers, escorted into a meeting between Xerxes and Ephialtes. His rejection by Leonidas and the Spartans has led him to betray the goat path to Xerxes, who rewards him with the assorted pleasures of women and wealth. News reaches Leonidas of the path's betrayal, and he immediately sets about making preparations for Sparta's glorious last stand. He dispatches Dilios, the story-teller, one of whose eyes has been damaged in the fighting, to go and recount the events of the battle to the rest of Greece.⁴⁴ Apart from the familiar ending, Miller adds one more act of defiance by Leonidas, one that again emphasizes the god-king's mortality. Leonidas, with the help of Stelios, aims and throws his spear directly at Xerxes, the point of which only nicks his face slightly, just enough to let some blood gush out and reveal Xerxes' humanity. The inevitable ending comes and all the Spartans are killed by Persian troops. The graphic novel is closed by Dilios ending his re-

⁴³ Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ The fact of his blindness in one eye must be loosely based on the anecdotes of two Spartans suffering from ophthalmia in Herodotus' account; one who would not quit the fighting and the other who fled the battle, but suffered severe shame on his return to Sparta. cf. Hdt. 7. 229-231. See Chapter 4 where this story is dealt with in more detail.

telling of the battle, with the famous Simonidean epigram on the eve of the Battle of Plataea.⁴⁵

Throughout the graphic novel Miller is at pains to present the Spartans and Leonidas as the heroes, and to contrast them with the Persians and the Ephors. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview with Miller:

The Comics Journal: I'm curious as to that point of view, too, because it seems to me that, with specific reference to *300*, part of you sees certain qualities of the Spartan effort as heroic, and their ability to stand in the face of adversity, or to articulate some very clear set of moral and philosophical values, in contrast to the decadence of the other societies. But at the same time, from some of the stuff that you told me earlier, it seems that you have a little bit of skepticism towards them as well. For example, like the slave-owning, perhaps some of the –

Miller: It's not so much skepticism in this case. Although I do love to – in another story, not *300*, because it's the kind of story it is – in another story I might have enjoyed creating an ambiguous reaction in a reader, or trying to generate one. But not in this one. .. I've always found it fascinating that a free society relies on its own built-in tyrannies to protect it. That is, when we're endangered, we don't send the U.S. Congress, we send the Navy Seals or the Marines, who are trained and regimented, like people in

⁴⁵ “Go tell the Spartans passerby: that here, by Spartan law, we lie”; Hdt 7.228 (the translation here is Miller's rendering).

a totalitarian state. But they're our line of defense; we need them. That is one of the most paradoxical aspects of the story that I like so much, it's that it's the least democratic of the Greeks that were defending democracy.⁴⁶

To come to some sort of interpretation of Miller's graphic novel and to decode it on its own terms we must appeal to the way comic books work and to understand something of comic book theory. Scott McCloud in one of the seminal works on the topic: *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art* states the following, "Comics were those bright, colorful magazines filled with bad art, stupid stories and guys in tights."⁴⁷ This is perhaps a common perception towards comic books, and yet despite Miller's Spartans wearing tights, *300* cannot simply be written off as 'bad art' and a 'stupid story'. The images are sophisticated and the colouring enhances the reader's interpretation of the narrative. The use of colour in this way is signalled by McCloud who comments, "Suddenly it seemed possible for color to take on a central role. Colors could express a dominant mood. Tones and modeling could add depth."⁴⁸ Lynn Varley's use of dark moody colours often coincides with the mood of the narrative. The colouring is in no way attempting to be realistic. Nowhere do we see the bright sunny yellows or deep blues that are popularly associated with Greece, more often than not promulgated by tourist postcards. Another feature is the Spartans' crimson robes echoing the bloody battle itself. It is clearly not bad art. The story surely cannot be designated as 'stupid' either just because it is in the guise

⁴⁶ George 2003: 73.

⁴⁷ 1994: 2.

⁴⁸ 1994: 190.

of a comic book. The story has been employed in numerous other media: films, operas, novels and poems, each of these designated 'high' art mediums. It would therefore be wrong to dismiss the graphic novel as a form not worthy of serious attention. In fact McCloud claims that, "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning', an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't."⁴⁹ In this way, Miller's graphic novel should amplify the 'message' of Thermopylae more than Herodotus' account ever could. While I think this might be an oversimplification, I do believe that Miller's graphic novel highlights its 'message' clearly for any reader to comprehend with very little effort. The images, or 'icons', in the graphic novel come to represent certain ideas.⁵⁰ For example, the Spartans come to represent 'freedom', while the Persians represent 'slavery'. The Ephors could represent 'religion' (in a negative way) while Leonidas stands for 'rational thought'. Or again the Greeks could represent 'simplicity', or 'modesty' and the Persian 'luxurious decadence'. Each icon is imbued with an idea or message to the reader. In this way *300* simplifies the message of Thermopylae to a simple set of binary oppositions: Good versus Bad, Freedom versus Slavery, and East versus West, a binary that is not too dissimilar to Herodotus' own presentation of the battle. However in Miller, none of the nuances or subtleties present in the historical account are apparent. This highlights one of the main shortcomings of the medium of graphic novel when compared with historiography: space. In the space provided though, Miller's graphic novel presents for his reader the main components of the Battle of Thermopylae story.

⁴⁹ 1994: 30.

⁵⁰ McCloud uses the word 'icon' to represent a person, place, thing or idea (1994: 27).

Greeks and Freaks: Representations of Greeks and Persians in Zack Snyder's *300*

Film studies and Classical studies have in recent years crossed paths. Ever increasing are the Classical studies course modules on antiquity in film. Numerous books and scholarly articles have been published in this area and the recent productions of classically inspired films and television programmes have not only prompted research of these films and their relationship to the ancient world but also of earlier adaptations too.⁵¹ There has been a noted bias however towards Roman representations on television and the silver screen.⁵² Recent scholarly works demonstrate this, such as Maria Wyke's *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (1997), which, as the title suggests, only focuses on films dealing with Ancient Rome as does Cyrino's *Big Screen Rome* (2005). Interest in the ancient world in cinema, as a scholarly pursuit, must begin with Jon Solomon's 1978 work *The Ancient World in the Cinema*.⁵³ Despite Solomon demonstrating to classicists that the study of Classics and cinema is a scholarly pursuit, it was not until Martin Winkler's 1991 *Classic and Cinema* that the field gained its impetus.⁵⁴ Since the 1990s the field has not stopped expanding and more and more articles and books are published each year, so much so that now there are whole volumes devoted to single films or television programs.⁵⁵

⁵¹ The films and television productions dealing with the ancient world in any manner or form are too numerous to list here. A fairly comprehensive list up to the production of *Gladiator* in 2000 can be found in Solomon 2001:327-332. Or for an example from television see the more recent HBO *Rome* series which has proved to be very popular, see Cyrino 2008.

⁵² See for example, Sharland. *Scholia Reviews* ns 16 (2007) 27.

⁵³ It has since been revised and expanded in 2001.

⁵⁴ Winkler's book was updated and reproduced as, *Classical Myth and Culture in Cinema* in 2001.

⁵⁵ For example see Winkler's *Gladiator: Film and History* 2004, *Spartacus: Film and History* 2007 and Cyrino's *Rome Season One: History Makes Television* 2008. The journal *Arethusa* devoted an entire volume to classical antiquity in modern cinema, see: 41.1.2008. Recent works, such as Nisbet's *Ancient*

Solomon states:

Since the popularization of theatrical film in the first decade of the twentieth century, the wide-reaching world of the cinema has incorporated many different artistic genres, geographical localities, and historical eras, none of which have been any more recurrent, significant, or innovative than the genre of films set in the ancient Greco-Roman and biblical worlds.⁵⁶

This trend has continued into the 21st Century. So far already in this century we have seen the production of Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), Peterson's *Troy* (2004), Stone's *Alexander* (2004), HBO's television series *Rome* (begun in 2005), and Snyder's *300* (2006). These films and television programmes represent only the most popular and widely known screen adaptations of the Greco-Roman world.⁵⁷ Countless other films and television shows have appropriated, adapted or used the classical world as an intertext for their own productions.

Greece in Film and Popular Culture, as well as Pomeroy's *'Then it was Destroyed by the Volcano' Ancient Greece in Film and Television*, both provide discussions of lesser known films and television programmes dealing with the ancient world.

⁵⁶ 2001: 1.

⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that out of the films mentioned, *Gladiator* and *300* proved more successful than *Troy* or *Alexander* (one just need peruse the box office numbers and critical reviews of the films). A possibility for this may be the fact that both of these films seek to recall a small and specific event or story, unlike the other films which have grander aims. The 'meta-narratives' of these films – vast stories, with intricate plots, of European conquest and war - were rejected by audiences, at least on a commercial level.

300 falls into this long cinematic tradition of sword-and-sandal films, and yet it also presents a break with tradition. While the subject of the film is ‘historical’ like, for example, *Alexander*, its stylistic production is dramatically different from earlier films in the genre, like *Ben Hur* (1959), *Quo Vadis?* (1951) or *Troy* (2004). One reason for the motley grouping of these films together is due to a lack of a defined terminology. In the introduction of a recently produced edited book on historical films dealing with Ancient Greece, the editors write,

Particular attention among scholars has tended to focus on the problems involved in defining the boundaries of genre (or genres). To some degree these problems are created by the use of the same terms to refer to productions that are anything but uniform, among them: epic, sword and sandal, peplum, colossal, toga movie, etc. the films grouped together under these headings are frequently very different indeed. To what extent can we really compare for instance Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), Cacoyannis’ *Electra* (1962), Mankiewicz’ *Cleopatra* (1963), Ferroni’s *Le baccanti* (1960), Wyler’s *Ben Hur* (1959), Leone’s *Il colosso di Rodi* (1960), Kawalerowicz’ *Faraon* (1966) and the recent version of Miller’s comic *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006)? The fact that they are all set in the ancient world tends to mask the significant differences between them in terms of the periods and contexts in which they were produced, the

budgets available, the technical sophistication of these films and, of course, the choice of subjects.⁵⁸

Technical sophistication, in particular, played a major role in *300*'s production and stylistic success. With the development of computer graphics or CGI effects, film makers have been able to create spectacular visual effects, making once-difficult-to-make-sets a reality. The visuality of the film is clearly one of the main reasons for its success. And with regards to box office success *300* is one of the most popular films ever made.⁵⁹ It is an adaptation of the cult-comic writer Frank Miller's 1998 graphic novel of the same name, which focuses on the Battle of Thermopylae. The story follows the clash of two civilizations, the out-numbered Greeks, fighting for their freedom, against the mighty forces of the Persian Empire, bent on world domination. In the film a very distinct boundary is set up between these two civilizations and they are represented in strikingly different ways.

The main representations of the Greeks are the 300 Spartan warriors led by their king Leonidas, who is played by Gerard Butler. They are shown dressed with red woollen cloaks, leather sandals, leather jocks and bronze helmets. Carrying swords and spears as weapons and shields marked out with the customary lambda (Λ) on them to make sure that no viewer is mistaken as to their identity. They are perfect Greek male (semi) nudes

⁵⁸ Berti & Morcillo 2008: 9.

⁵⁹ For some of the statistics surrounding its success see: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com>. Its popular 'success' must also, surely, be judged by the numerous spoofs and parodies produced of the film. Apart from the film parody *Meet the Spartans* (2008, Jason Friedberg) and television's *South Park* (episode 'D-Yikes'), a simple search of *Youtube* will produce numerous internet memes.

all depicted exuding a hyper-masculinity, particularly in their relations and interactions towards one another. Their bodies are models of perfection, each with defined bulging muscles and six-packs, all the while baring as much skin as possible. They are the male form at its best.

The 300 Spartans though are not the only Greeks on display. Like their male counterparts Spartan Greek women too are shown leaving much skin bare. Perhaps the paragon example is Gorgo, Leonidas' queen played by Lena Headey. She is shown wearing assorted garments. In some instances she is shown wearing a white woollen dress, girdled with a leather belt just below her breasts, at other times girdled around her waist. She is also depicted in the Spartan Council wearing a scarlet robe. These garments are probably based on the *chiton* (χιτών), a large rectangular piece of either linen or wool worn by Greek men and women. Our literary sources for the 'slit mini-chiton', and even total nudity in public, are confirmed by bronzes from mostly the sixth century B.C.⁶⁰ Sarah Pomeroy states, "*Doriazein* (δοριάζειν) means 'to dress like a Spartan girl' and connotes nudity or semi-nudity."⁶¹ She also continues by stating that lack of clothing marked the difference between Spartan and other Greek women. In fact Pomeroy states, "Dorian women, in contrast to Ionian women, enjoyed many freedoms, and among the Dorians the Spartans were the most liberated of all."⁶² The approach to represent Gorgo and the other Spartan women as nude is one closely followed by Snyder. Spartan women are shown, correctly, to have an elevated status compared to their other Greek counterparts.

⁶⁰ See Cartledge 1981: 91-92.

⁶¹ Pomeroy 2002: 134.

⁶² Pomeroy 1976: 42.

An important scene in the film illustrating this point is when the Persian ambassador is shocked that a woman is even present at his meeting with Leonidas, who lends his full support to his wife's presence there, even looking to her for approval when he kills the ambassador by kicking him into the pit.⁶³ The film presents an egalitarian relationship between Spartan men and women. This is something attested to in some ancient sources, for example, Plutarch records Gorgo as stating that only Spartan women give birth to real men, in reply to a foreigner's inquiry about how Spartan women seem to rule their men.⁶⁴

In fact the powerful and clever Gorgo of *300* is in keeping with Herodotus' characterisation of her.⁶⁵ Each time she is mentioned in Herodotus' narrative she is shown to be a remarkable woman. In the first instance Gorgo is present, as a little girl of eight or nine years old, when Aristagoras of Miletus attempts to persuade her father, Cleomenes, to support him in the Ionian Revolt. She is mentioned by Herodotus as advising her father not to trust this foreign diplomat.⁶⁶ In another mention of her, Herodotus displays her wisdom: he records that the exiled king Demaratus, wishing to inform Sparta of Xerxes' expedition against it, but fearful of being found out, devised a clever way of passing the message on without being caught. He wrote the message on the wooden part of wax tablets, underneath the wax. Thereby anyone looking at the tablets would assume that they were blank. These he then sent to the confused Spartans.

⁶³ This scene is different to the graphic novel, where Gorgo is not present.

⁶⁴ Plutarch. *Lycurgus*. 14.4.

⁶⁵ Gorgo first features in Herodotus' narrative at 5.51. She is then obviously also mentioned in connection with Leonidas and Thermopylae in book 7.

⁶⁶ Hdt.5.48-51.

Herodotus records that no-one was able to guess the secret, until Gorgo commanded them to scrape off the wax and read the message underneath.⁶⁷

While the Greek characters in the film are represented in general as a homogenous group, the Persians, and the peoples subjugated within their empire, are represented as a motley group. Firstly Xerxes is remarkably different from even the general Persians represented within the film. In fact he is represented vastly different from any other previous depiction of him, whether antique or modern. One of the few visual representations we have of Xerxes can be seen on the Persepolis relief.⁶⁸ In these depictions we see Xerxes represented as a typical Persian male, fully clothed, bearded and with little physical adornment. Contrast this with the Xerxes of *300*, portrayed by Rodrigo Santoro. He is similar to the Spartans with regards to being semi-nude, but is represented wholly differently visually. The Xerxes of *300* is large, colossal even, when compared next to Leonidas, and is ostentatiously adorned with gold jewellery and piercings.⁶⁹ His physique is perfect in form, but unlike the perfect male forms of the Spartan warriors, he is heavily painted with make-up. There is nothing natural about his perfection as there is with the Spartans. His head is also shaved, unadorned with the usually ubiquitous felt caps of other Persians, as well as lacking a beard. The Xerxes of *300* is wholly unconventional in

⁶⁷ Hdt.7.239.

⁶⁸ See Appendix 1, figures 1 & 2. Herodotus does not provide a physical description of Xerxes in his *Histories*. The only physical description known to me in literature, that is a near contemporary, is to be found in Aeschylus' *The Persians*. It is however only a reference to his clothing, Atossa laments: "...but this misfortune stings me most of all, to hear of the dishonour that attends my son, in having to wear about his person tattered clothes." (Translation Podlecki 1970. Lines 846-848).

⁶⁹ See Appendix 1, figure 3.

his presentation. His demeanour in the film too is characteristically androgynous, perhaps even homoerotic at times, particularly in his ‘handling’ of Leonidas.⁷⁰

Monica Cyrino in her review of the film highlights the film-makers’ attempt to widen the audience of the film from merely the conventional white, Western, youthful male, which films of this sort attract.⁷¹ Commenting on statements by other reviewers of the film, Cyrino makes the point that the well-built Spartans were one way of attracting anyone other than heterosexual males to the film.⁷² Similarly the sub-plot of an intelligent and powerful woman, in the form of Queen Gorgo, also hoped to draw in an even more diverse audience.

The Immortals too have a rather unique appearance in the film.⁷³ They are shown wearing Japanese-inspired styled silver *Kabuki* masks, and are completely robed in black, carrying both curved swords and spears. Their chests are heavily protected by metal breast plates. The general Medes and Persians fighting in the army are represented in typically what we might expect, all largely covered with assorted armour, leather and robes and mostly all wearing a headdress of some kind.⁷⁴ They are each equipped with

⁷⁰ See Appendix 1, figure 3.

⁷¹ Cyrino (2007) Amphora 6.1, www.apaclassics.org.

⁷² The interaction between two of the young Spartans, Stelios and Astinos, in the film does perhaps play with ideas of a homoerotic relationship.

⁷³ See Appendix 1, figure 4. The Immortals (ἄθάνατοι) were led by Hydarnes and were in effect the elite corps of the Persian army as well as functioning as the royal guard. They always totalled at 10 000 handpicked men (Hdt 7. 83).

⁷⁴ For this depiction see Appendix 1, figure 5. With the exception of Xerxes and assorted characters within his tent in the orgy scene, all Persians are clothed, covering as much skin as possible, in contrast to the semi-nude Greeks. Herodotus (1.10) states: παρὰ γὰρ τοῖσι Λυδοῖσι, σχεδὸν δὲ καὶ παρὰ τοῖσι ἄλλοισι βαρβάροισι, καὶ ἄνδρα ὀφθῆναι γυμνὸν ἐς αἰσχύνην μεγάλην φέρει.

For with the Lydians, as with most barbarian races, it is thought highly indecent even for a man to be seen naked.

either spears or swords and in most cases shields. Herodotus describes the Persians' dress as follows:

Οἱ δὲ στρατευόμενοι οἶδε ἦσαν. Πέρσαι μὲν ᾧδε ἐσκευασμένοι· περὶ μὲν τῆσι κεφαλῆσι εἶχον τιάρας καλεομένους πῖλους ἀπαγέας, περὶ δὲ τὸ σῶμα κιθῶνας χειριδωτοὺς ποικίλους, ... λεπίδος σιδηρῆς ὄψιν ἰχθυοειδέος, περὶ δὲ τὰ σκέλεα ἀναξυρίδας, ἀντὶ δὲ ἀσπίδων γέρρα· ὑπὸ δὲ φαρετρεῶνες ἐκρέμαντο· αἰχμᾶς δὲ βραχέας εἶχον, τόξα δὲ μεγάλα, οἰστοὺς δὲ καλαμίνους, πρὸς δὲ ἐγχειρίδια παρὰ τὸν δεξιὸν μηρὸν παραιωρέομενα ἐκ τῆς ζώνης.

And those in the army were as follows. First the Persians; around their heads they had a soft felt cap, called a tiara, and about their bodies a multi-coloured and sleeveless tunic, covered with iron scales looking like fish-scales, trousers around the legs, and for a shield a wicker one; and suspended below a quiver; and they had short spears, and a large bow, and arrows made of reeds, and a dagger along the right thigh hanging from a belt.⁷⁵

Herodotus describes the composition of the Persian entourage as follows:

⁷⁵ Hdt 7.61.

Κόσμον δὲ πλείστον παρείχοντο διὰ πάντων Πέρσαι καὶ αὐτοὶ ἄριστοι ἦσαν. Σκευὴν μὲν τοιαύτην εἶχον ἢ περ εἴρηται, χωρὶς δὲ χρυσόν τε πολλὸν καὶ ἄφθονον ἔχοντες ἐνέπρεπον. Ἄρμαμάξας τε ἅμα ἤγοντο, ἐν δὲ παλλακὰς καὶ θεραπήην πολλήν τε καὶ εὖ ἐσκευασμένην. Σίτα δὲ σφι, χωρὶς τῶν ἄλλων στρατιωτέων, κάμηλοὶ τε καὶ ὑποζύγια ἤγον.

But of all the peoples it was the Persians who were the greatest, having the most order. They were prepared as I have already said, but were separate by having much gold. They also took carriages and concubines and many well-prepared servants. And food, separate from the rest, was brought for them with both camels and mules.⁷⁶

The full range of ethnicities and nations within Xerxes' army is portrayed in the film.⁷⁷ Unlike the commonplace depictions of Medes and Persians, viewers are also shown a range of weird and wonderful groups, whose ethnicity is left unexplained. With these groups we are shown animals also, rhinoceroses as well as elephants. This variety adds an exotic flavour to the Persian army's depiction.

⁷⁶ Hdt 7.83.

⁷⁷ Herodotus gives an extensive list of the make-up of Xerxes' troops. See: Hdt 7.61-99.

Like the graphic novel, the Ephors in the film are depicted as lecherous old men, with a perverted interest in the young Spartan girl who is their oracle.⁷⁸ They are viewed negatively by Leonidas who sees them merely as “inbred old mystics”. In effect they are contrasted with Leonidas, who is presented as non-religious, denouncing the ‘old gods’ as mere superstitions. He is seen to be rational and clear thinking, while they are without reason and greedy for gold alone. They will not allow Leonidas to commit Sparta to war against Persia because it coincides with the Carneia, a sacred Spartan religious festival.⁷⁹ This then is presented as holding a long out-dated mysticism over Sparta’s more rational need in the face of the looming Persian invasion. Leonidas can do nothing but comply, because even as king, no Spartan is above the law.⁸⁰ While Herodotus does make mention of the fact that the full strength of Sparta was not sent to Thermopylae because of the Carneia, nothing akin to the detail presented in the film is mentioned and nowhere does he present the Ephors in a negative light.⁸¹

Ephialtes is perhaps one of the only other characters in the film whose depictions bear mentioning.⁸² In the film he is shown to be deformed and misshapen, not at all similar to his fellow Greeks. This depiction of him is entirely fictionalised by Miller in the graphic novel and taken over whole-heartedly by Snyder in the film. Supposedly this depiction of Ephialtes gives him motive to betray the Anopaeon path to the Persians. The Ephialtes of film and graphic novel is motivated by his anger at rejection by his fellow Greeks, and

⁷⁸ This whole scene in the film is perhaps partly inspired by popular notions of the Oracle at Delphi. However these two separate institutions should not be confused. For Herodotus on the Oracle at Delphi see: 7.104-3.

⁷⁹ cf. p.34.

⁸⁰ Xen. *Lac.* 15.7.

⁸¹ Hdt 7.206.

⁸² See Appendix 1, figure 6.

particularly Leonidas, and a desire to prove to them his worth. He is accepted into the Persian camp, and when compared with those within Xerxes' tent, his is literally one of them. No characterisation of Ephialtes like this is found anywhere in Herodotus' account.

Having described the depictions of Greeks and Persians in *300*, and seeing that at times these depictions are wholly different to the sources for the battle, one must question the function that these depictions serve within the film. In summary, by-and-large the Greeks are depicted as the noble heroes, perfect in form, bearing much skin and are shown to be the champions of freedom and rational thought. In stark contrast to this the Persians are represented as exotic and foreign, with much of their physical bodies being covered by all manner of accoutrements, not fighting for any noble causes but simply as slaves to a tyrannical king of a totalitarian regime. This is even echoed in the landscape scene depicted in the film. Pomeroy shows how the cornfields surrounding Sparta hearken back to *Gladiator* (2000) as a sort of pastoral utopia. He states, "This conservative rural paradise can be seen even in *300* (2006), where scenes of golden cornfields in Laconia reflect a simple, rural lifestyle in contrast to Persian luxury and decadence."⁸³ In a sense appearance equals morality in *300*. As viewers of the film, we are swayed by the agenda of the filmmaker/s (and Miller before him/them) to side with the Greeks and see our 'sameness' with them. Once this has been established we immediately view the Persians as 'Other', a notion familiar to any reader of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

⁸³ Pomeroy 2008: 99.

Said's thesis promulgated the idea that the West views the East as 'Other' and principally therefore as culturally inferior. Said states that the "Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."⁸⁴ However in *300*, cultural inferiority is not seemingly the worst evil brought about by this binary, but rather a Good/Bad dichotomy. Therefore the Persians are not just inferior to the Greeks, they are also inherently bad, or in effect they represent 'evil', while the Greeks represent the complete opposite: 'good'. What then should we make of the 300 Spartans' fellow Greeks, characters like the Ephors and Ephialtes? These characters are in no way meant to be seen as heroes or 'good guys' in the film. And this is cued to the audience by representing them each as misshaped, deformed or 'Other' in some way. Theron, a fictionalised character played by Dominic West in the film, the rogue Greek councillor, who has sided with the Persians and been bought with their gold, problematises this seemingly simple binary, on account of the fact that he is neither deformed nor good. He in fact could be seen as the real enemy to Leonidas and his Spartans, as opposed to the terrifying might of Xerxes.⁸⁵

The tradition of this reception of the West as good and the East as bad is one that has always been rooted in depictions of the East, whether in literature or art, by the West. Harrison states, "Running from its mid-sixth-century foundation under Cyrus the Great to its demise at the hands of Alexander, the history of the Persian empire (and of its reception) is a history in which the Greeks are always present both as arbiters and as

⁸⁴ 1978: 1-2.

⁸⁵ Perhaps Snyder is toying with the idea that the real enemy is not the one 'at the gates' as with Xerxes, but rather the unnoticed enemy within. This presents an alternate view to Herodotus' and is nowhere supported by the ancient sources.

foils.”⁸⁶ So not only are the Greeks binary opposites of the Persians, but they are also mediators of them to others (and in effect us also).⁸⁷

While the filmmakers have unequivocally denied any political subtext in the film, often citing the graphic novel’s pre-September 11th production, it has come under much scrutiny by mainly Iranian journalists as having a strong anti-Middle Eastern agenda, as well as propounding a sort of psychological warfare. In one article, Afrasiabi states,

It would be one thing if Miller’s Westernist bias had remained his private predilection, not dominating his intellectual output, but that the exact opposite is the case can be seen in his overtly racist, vicious stereotyping of Persians and “Asian hordes” in his cartoon novel, as well as in the film that adapted his narrative. Fantasy is an insidious mechanism of exclusion, and the appellation “comic” for Miller’s peculiar depiction of the ancient battles between his Greek favourites and their Persian enemies is, in fact, a misnomer: it serves as an authorial self-defence, camouflaging the intense, self-righteous ideology that exalts a golden age in which Western heroes stood up to the Eastern forces of barbarism.⁸⁸

Arthur Pomeroy states, “Since present-day audiences readily draw parallels with modern ventures in the Middle East, any positive treatment of the struggle between West and East

⁸⁶ 2008: 50.

⁸⁷ One just need remember that the principal source for the Greco-Persian Wars, Herodotus, is a Greek.

⁸⁸ 2007. Persians and Greeks: Hollywood and the Clash of Civilizations. <http://www.payvand.com>.

that concludes with the victory of the former is likely to be even more offensive to many than the tale of heroic defence of freedom in the face of barbarian hordes that is *300*.”⁸⁹ In a post-September 11th world, reviewers and critics of the film could not help but point to the obvious binaries that it encourages: East is Bad, West is Good. Despite its development in filmic techniques and the film’s innovation within its own genre, as well as some subtleties of representation, it will probably be remembered as a simple ‘action flick’ reduced to this simplistic message.

⁸⁹ 2008: 103.

CHAPTER 3

In Search of a South African Thermopylae:

Its Use in the Poetry of the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879

Attempting to research the reception of a battle, or more precisely, the ideas, or story of a battle in another country, one separated by twenty-five centuries, language and culture, is perhaps an impossible task. What I do hope to achieve in this chapter, however, despite the enormity of the task, is to focus on one key area of reception within South Africa, the Anglo-Zulu War fought between the British Empire and the Zulu kingdom in South Africa in 1879.¹ Before focusing exclusively on this ‘reception’ however, I will endeavour to mention a few possible other ‘receptions’ of the Thermopylae theme in South Africa, to lay something of a foundation to this field of study as well as present introductions to possible further areas of study.

John Hilton, in a study on the influence of classical ideas on the anti-slavery debate at the Cape of Good Hope, in South Africa from the eighteenth century onwards, records impressions of these southern African parts by early travellers and visitors.² One particular impression concerns one here: that of John Barrow, the secretary of the first British governor of the Cape. Hilton states, “The preface to his book paraphrases Pliny’s adaptation of Aristotle’s proverb concerning Libya as *Africa semper aliquid novi offert*

¹ I refer to ‘South Africa’; this is in fact a misnomer. The Union of South Africa only came into being on the 31st of May 1910. At the time of the Anglo-Zulu War, what is now South Africa consisted of the Cape and Natal colonies as well as Boer republics.

² Hilton (forthcoming).

‘Africa always brings up something new’ (*HN* 8.42), he compares mating elephants to the piling of Mt. Pelion on Mt. Ossa, judges, by the ancient theory of physiognomy, that the Blacks of South Africa could ‘not be pronounced deficient in talent’, labels the coastal road around False Bay ‘the Thermopylae of the Cape’, calls the Boers ‘Arcadian shepherds’, and so on.’³ This quotation alerts one to the fact that, from the beginning, explorers to South Africa appealed to their own prior knowledge of Europe and European history in assimilating and accommodating their new surroundings and experiences in Africa. It would only be natural therefore for a classically educated person to resort to that education for a point of reference in mapping out their new experiences.⁴ And so, like Barrow, it is a totally naturally reaction, that when travelling the narrow coastal road around False Bay, and presented with sheer mountain cliffs on one side and the cold Atlantic Ocean on the other, one might immediately think of the narrow mountain pass of Thermopylae, made famous in the lines of Herodotus’ history. In other cases however, events cause naming to take place that in fact have no significant relationship to the ideas behind the name, and thus prove arbitrary. So for example, again in the Cape, there is a local surfing spot, near Mouille Point called Thermopylae, or ‘Thermos’ by the locals, due to the name of a British steamship that ran aground there on September 12th, 1899.⁵ The wreck of the ship caused a lefthander wave break, producing good surfing. In this instance, one can see that the naming is arbitrary and conjures up nothing of comparison with the ancient battle for the surfers who frequent that spot today.

³ Hilton (forthcoming) 3.

⁴ See Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion of one aspect of classical education in the Victorian period, namely in the area of children’s literature.

⁵ ‘British Steamship Wrecked’, *The New York Times*, September 13, 1899.

Another popular culture reference produced by Thermopylae in South Africa is to be found in a pop song written by well known South African songwriter, Christopher Torr, in his song “Hot Gates”, sung by his wife, local cabaret artist Laurika Rauch. The strong onomastic quality of the song has produced interest in a scholar writing for *Nomina Africa: Journal of the Names Society of Southern Africa*. In his article “Connotative Toponyms: Christopher Torr’s ‘Hot Gates’”, S. J. Neethling argues that the toponyms in the lyrics of the song (58 in total) feature semiotically.⁶ He states, “Songwriters from the earliest times undoubtedly realised that there is more semantic potential in toponyms besides the function of merely denoting geographical entities.”⁷ He continues to discuss a concept labelled: ‘descriptive backing’ which can be understood as the collective conventional beliefs and connotations that a name evokes, or is associated with. He believes that the word ‘Thermopylae’ immediately evokes for the reader (or listener) all the historical significance of the battle in 480 B.C. Using T.S. Eliot’s poem “Geronition”, which mentions the ‘hot gates’ he continues to build his argument. Ultimately he links these ideas together to reveal that meaning is made in the lyrics of the song, by the associations that the assorted ‘hot spots’ of history mentioned by place names in the song evoke. In this way the simple word ‘Thermopylae’ begins to be imbued with all of the historical and conventional meanings previously attached to it, and does not function merely as a geographical locator.

⁶ 1995: 56-67.

⁷ 1995: 58.

One final ‘reception’ of Thermopylae in South Africa bears mention, this time to be found in the poetry of Durban born poet Douglas Livingstone.⁸ In an unpublished conference paper, ‘Born of Adamastor: the classical heritage in the works of South African poet, Douglas Livingstone (1932-1996)’, Kathleen Coleman discussed the influence of the classical tradition on the poetical works of Douglas Livingstone.⁹ In a poem entitled: ‘After Thermopylae’, one of Livingstone’s previously unpublished poems now appearing in the recent collected poems, the poet deals with a meeting of two old war veterans.¹⁰ One, a “Spartan” and “sergeant who had broken”, and the other “Old Kyklopes”.¹¹ The poem does not overtly refer to any specific event or incident at Thermopylae. Coleman states: “We are left to guess whether the sergeant who deserted was the traitor who would betray the Greeks to the Persians by revealing the existence of another route over the pass; and whether the narrator is the sole survivor, who Herodotus says committed suicide at the battle of Plataea.”¹² Instead Coleman reads the title and the poem as a sort of tribute (and intertext to the Simonidean epigram) by Livingstone to Constantine P. Cavafy’s Thermopylae poem. She points out Livingstone’s admiration for the modern Greek Alexandrian-born poet by referencing a quote Livingstone made calling Cavafy his “favourite poet”.¹³

⁸ I must thank Prof. Kathleen Coleman (Harvard) for this reference, and for making the manuscript of her conference paper available to me.

⁹ Unpublished conference paper, delivered at the 27th biennial International Conference of the Classical Association of South Africa at the University of Cape Town in July, 2007, entitled: ‘Aspects of Empire’.

¹⁰ See: *A Ruthless Fidelity. The Collected Poems of Douglas Livingstone* (2004) Hacksley & Maclellan (eds.). For easy access this poem is reproduced in Appendix 2.

¹¹ The narrator of the poem refers to himself thus, due to “a closed eye” blinded possibly due to a wound suffered in war.

¹² Coleman 2007 (unpublished).

¹³ *Ibid.* For another recent ‘Thermopylae’ poem by a South African poet imitating Cavafy see: N.C.T. Meihuizen’s poem ‘Thermopylae (after Cavafy)’ printed in: *Literator* 27(1), April 2006. 268.

Each of these ‘receptions’ reveals the fact that Thermopylae has infiltrated the public consciousness of South Africans in some shape or form. Each of these ‘receptions’ deserves fuller exploration also. Unfortunately, because my space is limited here, I will instead turn my focus to the use of Thermopylae in commemorating the Anglo-Zulu War.

A traveller to the battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu War in Northern KwaZulu-Natal will come across, at Isandlwana¹⁴, a memorial to the Natal Carbineers, an infantry regiment that served on the side of the British during the war.¹⁵ It is situated on the site where the Carbineers made their last stand in the Battle of Isandlwana, as well as where Lieutenant Colonel Durnford, commander of the No.2 Column and one of the most experienced officers in the battle, is said to have fallen. The granite obelisk of the memorial stands at a height of roughly twenty feet above the ground. On it are inscribed the following words:

ISANDHLWANA

Not Theirs To Save The Day

But Where They Stood,

Falling To Dye The Earth

With Brave Men’s Blood

For England’s Sake And Duty

- Be Their Name Sacred

Among Us – Neither

¹⁴ The spelling of Isandlwana varies. Throughout this dissertation I have spelt it without the ‘h’.

¹⁵ I must thank Dr. Mairéad McAuley (Cambridge) for pointing out a reference to this inscription to me.

Praise Nor Blame
Add To Their Epitaph –
But Let It Be Simple As That Which
Marked Thermopylae.
Tell It In England Those
That Pass Us By,
Here, Faithful To Their Charge,
Her Soldiers Lie.¹⁶

In this poem, celebrating the Carbineers' bravery, a clear reference to the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C. is made. The expressed wish contained in these lines is that the epitaph should be simple, like the one which marked Thermopylae. The epitaph it refers to is one that was composed by the Greek lyric poet Simonides of Ceos (c. 556-468 B.C.). In fact the last four lines of the inscription mimic this famous epigram for the Spartan dead at Thermopylae, simply substituting 'England' for 'Sparta'. This inscription is not the only poem in which the Battle of Thermopylae in relation to the Battle at Isandlwana is referred to either. In the *Natal Witness* newspaper on the 9th of August 1879, a report appeared describing a public luncheon held in Pietermaritzburg to honour those Natal Carbineers who had returned from the war. Alongside the article a poem was included, composed in Latin and accompanied by an English translation by the poet, styled simply by his or her initials C.D., entitled: "IN REDITUM VOLUNTARIORUM MILITUM CARMEN ALCAICUM" in Latin and "An Alcaic Ode on the Return of the

¹⁶ See Appendix 2 for pictures of this memorial and of this inscription.

Volunteers” in English.¹⁷ This poem is composed in Alcaic metre supposedly invented by the Greek lyric poet Alcaeus of Mytilene, as the title suggests. The accompanying English translation of the Latin poem is a somewhat free translation of the Latin, but is perhaps rendered in this fashion to preserve its poetic metre. In the poem the end of the war is celebrated, as is the return of husbands, brothers and sons from the war and the bravery and valour which the Natal Carbineers were said to have demonstrated on the battlefield at Isandlwana. In the poem, a traveller passing by is addressed and asked to remember the sacrifice made by these men for their country during the war. Reading both of these poems begs the question: why did those commemorating the dead at the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879 choose to compare them to those who died at Thermopylae over two thousand years before?

Since Homer’s *Iliad*, war and poetry have shared a fraternal bond. Poetry often is used to express public, and private, sentiment during and post wartime. One of the most employed genres of poetry during wartime is the epitaph. This genre is, as Anne Carson rightly affirms, a genre of verse that profoundly concerns itself with “seeing what is not there” and it attempts to “insert a dead and vanished past into the living present”.¹⁸ She also notes that, since at least from Homer onwards, an epitaph has been used as a way to alert someone passing by to stop and remark on it.¹⁹ The Greco-Persian Wars of the 5th Century B.C., also inspired many epitaphs, like other wars, and provided for Simonides, the unofficial poet of these wars, a subject for numerous lines of poetry. Simonides was

¹⁷ Poems not presented in full in this chapter are reproduced in Appendix 2.

¹⁸ 1999: 73.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Also see: *Iliad* 7.81-91.

the most prolific composer of epitaphs in antiquity and in fact set the conventions of the genre.²⁰ He is attested to have composed poems or epigrams concerning all of the major battles of the Greco-Persian Wars: Plataea, Artemisium and Salamis.²¹ It is his poems about Thermopylae, however, that won him the most fame in the minds of the West and perhaps more importantly won immediate fame for the Spartan dead. Herodotus records three epigrams, which he attributes to Simonides, for the dead at Thermopylae.²² The first epigram was composed for all the Peloponnesian Greeks who fell at Thermopylae. It reads:

Μυριάσιν ποτὲ τᾶδε τριακοσίαις ἐμάχοντο
ἐκ Πελοποννάσου χιλιάδες τέτορες.

Four thousand from the Peloponnese once here fought
Against three hundred myriads.

Secondly, one specifically for the Spartans:

²⁰ Carson 1999: 73. It is also fitting that Simonides often used the elegiac couplet for his epigrams, for this metre is associated with mourning and loss.

²¹ For Plataea see: POxy 3965, see also: Boedeker 1996:223-242. There are two possible poems ascribed to Simonides for the Battle of Artemisium, see: Podlecki 1968: 262-266. For the Battle of Salamis, see: Fr. 65 D quoted in Plutarch's *De malignitate Herodoti*.

²² Hdt. 7.228. For a discussion on whether all three epigrams are the work of Simonides or only the final one concerning Megistias, see: Podlecki 1968: 257-275. For the purposes of this dissertation I have assumed single authorship. An interesting side note for the reception of the Thermopylae epitaph within antiquity is to be seen in a comparison of Simonides' epigram with that of the one set up for Plutarch after his death in conjunction with a bust of him. It was the Amphictyons who set up Simonides' epitaphs on columns. Modelling themselves on the Amphictyons, either the Delphians or Chaeroneans set up an epitaph for Plutarch. Quoted in Russell (1973: 13) it reads, "Delphians and Chaeroneans erected this statue together, / obeying the ordinance of the Amphictyons." I must thank Szerdi Nagy (KwaZulu-Natal) for this reference.

ᾠ ξεῖν', ἀγγέλλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῆδε
κείμεθα, τοῖς κείνων ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι.

O stranger, announce to the Spartans that here
We lie, having obeyed their words.

And thirdly and finally one for the seer Megistias, which reads as follows:

Μνήμα τόδε κλεινοῖο Μεγιστία, ὃν ποτε Μῆδοι
Σπερχειὸν ποταμὸν κτεῖναν ἀμειψάμενοι,
μάντιος, ὃς τότε Κῆρας ἐπερχομένας σάφα εἰδὼς
οὐκ ἔτλη Σπάρτης ἡγεμόνα προλιπεῖν.

Here is a memorial of famous Megistias, whom once the Medes
Killed, having crossed the Spercheius river,
A seer, who, knowing plainly that his doom was approaching,
Did not dare to desert the leader of the Spartans.

Collectively these poems celebrate the loyalty, bravery and obedience that the Greeks demonstrated at the Battle of Thermopylae. However, it is Simonides' epigram for the Spartan dead in particular that has received the most attention by scholars and writers alike, becoming the epigram *par excellence* of the genre and has been described as

demonstrating: “*edle Einfalt und stille Größe*”.²³ Writers as varied as Cicero in antiquity, the German polymath Friedrich Schiller as well as more modern writers such as Heinrich Böll and William Golding have all appropriated Simonides’ epigram.²⁴ Adolf Hitler himself appropriated the epigram for his own use in a German context. In *Mein Kampf* (1925) Hitler appeals to the Spartans’ valour at Thermopylae in comparing them to the Germans who fought in the Great War. He writes: “Traveller, when you come to Germany, / Tell the Homeland that we lie here, true to / the Fatherland and faithful to our duty.”²⁵ Even in recent years, popular fiction writer Steven Pressfield has also adapted the epigram in his 1999 novel, *Gates of Fire*, as has Frank Miller in his 1998/9 graphic novel *300*.²⁶ It is therefore no surprise that it was this epigram in particular, apart from the rest, which was used in commemorating the British and their dead at the Battle of Isandlwana.

Apart from these epigrams recorded by Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus also records an *encomium*, which he states Simonides wrote in praise of the Spartans’ valour at Thermopylae.²⁷ The poem reads as follows:

τῶν ἐν Θερμοπύλαις θανόντων

²³ “noble simplicity and quiet greatness” (Kytzler 2004: 325). Based on the famous line from Winckelmann’s *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* 1755.

²⁴ For Cicero see *Tusc. Disp.* 1.101. *Dic, hospes, Spartae nos te hic vidisse iacentes, / dum sanctis patriae legibus obsequimur*. For Schiller see: Kytzler 2004: 324. Heinrich Böll’s short story; “*Wanderer kommst du nach Spa...*” (1950) takes its title from Simonides’ epigram. See also William Golding’s travelogue: *The Hot Gates* (1965).

²⁵ (tr. Murphy 1939: 182). This is not the only reference to Thermopylae in *Mein Kampf*. Hitler also mentions Ephialtes in connection with unpatriotic Germans (tr. Murphy 1939: 110). I must thank Prof. Bernhard Kytzler (KwaZulu-Natal) for pointing this out to me.

²⁶ See Chapter 2.

²⁷Diod. Sic. 11.11.6 (tr. Oldfather 1961)

εὐκλεῆς μὲν ἅ τύχα, καλὸς δ' ὁ πότμος,
βωμὸς δ' ὁ τάφος, πρὸ γόνων δὲ μνάστις, ὁ δ'
οἶτος ἔπαινος.
ἐντάφιον δὲ τοιοῦτον οὔτ' εὐρῶς
οὔθ' ὁ πανδαμάτωρ ἀμαυρώσει χρόνος
ἀνδρῶν ἀγαθῶν. ὁ δὲ σηκὸς οἰκέταν εὐδοξίαν
Ἑλλάδος εἶλετο. μαρτυρεῖ δὲ Λεωνίδας
ὁ Σπάρτας βασιλεύς, ἀρετᾶς μέγαν λελοιπὸς
κόσμον ἀέναόν τε κλέος

Of those who perished at Thermopylae
All glorious is the fortune, fair the doom;
Their grave's an altar, ceaseless memory's theirs
Instead of lamentation, and their fate
Is chant of praise. Such winding-sheet as this
Nor mould nor all-consuming time shall waste.
The sepulcher of valiant men has taken
The fair renown of Hellas for its inmate.
And witness is Leonidas, once king
Of Sparta, who hath left behind a crown
Of valour mighty and undying fame.

Diodorus interprets their stand at Thermopylae as an act of extreme self-sacrifice, having given up their own lives for the common salvation of the Greeks.²⁸ Aided by this outpouring of poetry, one could easily conclude with A.R. Burn that the legend of Thermopylae was “not slow to be born”.²⁹ Simonides and his fellow Greeks, Herodotus and Diodorus, were not the only ones in antiquity to fuel the flames of the legend of Thermopylae. The Romans too looked back to Thermopylae as an exemplum of courage and bravery. Aulus Gellius in his *Noctes Atticae* records that Cato the Elder in his work *Origins*, which we now possess only in fragments, made one of the earliest comparisons of a subsequent battle to the one at Thermopylae. He compares Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans to the Roman military tribune Caedicius and four hundred of his men, during the first Punic War. Seeing that the Carthaginian general had advanced to a superior strategic point, and thus had exposed the Roman soldiers to attack, Caedicius approached the consul and volunteered himself and his four hundred men to advance against the enemy. It was clear that the volunteers would be slaughtered, but in so doing they would enable the rest of the Roman army to move to a position of safety. According to Cato, all four hundred men fell except Caedicius, who although being severely wounded was recovered to safety by his fellow soldiers. According to Aulus Gellius, Cato made the comment that, unlike his Greek counterpart Leonidas, Caedicius received little glory for his deeds. He states:

*Leonidas Laco, qui simile apud Thermopylas fecit, propter eius virtutes
omnis Graecia gloriam atque gratiam praecipuam claritudinis*

²⁸ Diod. Sic. 11.11.1.

²⁹ 1984: 420-421.

inclitissimae decoravere monumentis: signis, statuis, elogiis, historiis, aliisque rebus gratissimum id eius factum habuere; at tribuno militum parva laus pro factis relicta, qui idem fecerat atque rem serverat.

The Laconian Leonidas, who performed a like exploit at Thermopylae, because of his valour won unexampled glory and gratitude from all Greece, and was honoured with memorials of the highest distinction; they showed their appreciation of that deed of his by pictures, statues and honourary inscriptions, in their histories, and in other ways; but the tribune of the soldiers, who had done the same thing and saved an army, gained small glory for his deeds.³⁰

Thus the British appropriation of Thermopylae and Simonides' epigram is not without precedents. In fact the Battle of Thermopylae has been 'misappropriated' as recently as the Second World War, when Hermann Göring used the battle as a comparable model of the Nazi's battle for Stalingrad.³¹ A crucial fact that must also be kept in mind with regards to the use of Thermopylae as a model for those in the British colony is the influence of Greece and Rome on Victorian Britain. The influence of the classical tradition on the Victorian era has been clearly demonstrated by scholars like Norman Vance.³² Vance has established the heritage of Greece and Rome in all areas of Victorian

³⁰ Aul. Gell. *NA*. 3.7 (tr. Rolfe 1961).

³¹ See: Kytzler 2004: 328-329 & Hardwick 2003:1 for the relevance of this comparison regarding the context.

³² 2007: 87-100. See also Chapter 4.

life, from politics and religion to even things as banal as the steam engine.³³ One may surmise then that this influence was felt even in Britain's colonies. In fact, not only did the classical world in general influence this period, but Ian Macgregor-Morris argues, convincingly, that the second half of the 18th Century and the first half of the 19th can be understood as the 'Age of Leonidas' in Britain in particular, stating that it was during this period that "Leonidas and Thermopylae served as moral ideals [and] were seen to epitomise the often vaguely defined virtues of patriotism and liberty, virtues that were to play such a crucial role in the thought and politics of the period."³⁴ And he goes on to state that, "At a time when the classical tradition was reaching its height in the public consciousness, Leonidas and Thermopylae represented the very qualities for which antiquity, and ancient Greece in particular, were being venerated."³⁵ This provides perhaps one more motive for turning to Thermopylae as an exemplum for the Battle at Isandlwana. Closer reflection, however, on the appropriation of the Battle of Thermopylae as well as Simonides' epigram by the British in commemorating their own dead at Isandlwana proves to be problematic.

At Thermopylae a small Greek force, comprising of Thebans, Thespians and Spartans and led by Leonidas, the Spartan king, were willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of Greece. They fought in defence of their land against the expansionist Persian Empire and with the desire to live free from the tyrannical rule of the Great King. These

³³ See Chapter 4 for its specific influence in children's literature.

³⁴ 2000: 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.* In fact other Classical references are also to be found in Anglo-Zulu War poetry. For example, H.B. Worth calls upon Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, to aid him in his poetical composition in *Victoria Aut Gloria*, or in another anonymous stanza, Virgil is referred to: The youths that Virgil celebrates, / And makes immortal by his song, / Did not much braver things than these... Both of the texts of these poems are quoted in Verdonck 2006: 93-108.

Greeks held off the Persian king, Xerxes, and his far larger army for two days at the pass of Thermopylae, until finally being betrayed on the third day by Ephialtes and being overcome. All died except a few Thebans, who are said to have surrendered. It was one of the key encounters between the Persians and the Greeks in the Persian Wars, and yet unlike the battles of Marathon, Salamis and Plataea, Thermopylae was a defeat for the Greeks. Like Thermopylae, historians of the Battle of Isandlwana also remain undecided on the actual events of the battle, with many of the sources offering differing accounts.³⁶

The basic account of events is as follows: on the 11th of January 1879 British troops under the command of Lord Chelmsford entered Zululand to enforce an ultimatum made by Sir Bartle Frere in the previous month. This ultimatum had demanded the payment of fines, surrender of certain Zulu men to colonial authorities and most importantly the abolition of the Zulu military system. It was only a few days later, on the 22nd of January, that these troops who had entered Zululand with high hopes of imperialist expansion, received a severe blow when their soldiers stationed at Isandlwana were thoroughly defeated at the hands of the Zulus. This Battle at Isandlwana proved to be a blemish on the ‘glory’ of the British Empire. One similarity between the Greeks at Thermopylae and the British troops at Isandlwana was that they were both outnumbered by their opponents who had far larger forces. But unlike Thermopylae, the British at Isandlwana had no natural geographical features that would aid their smaller numbers. Despite not having a narrow pass to manipulate to their advantage, the British did manage to back themselves

³⁶ See: Morris 1965, Guy 1979 and Lock 2002. For differing accounts of Thermopylae see Chapter 1. There is a dearth in literature (whether in English or Zulu) on the Anglo-Zulu War from a ‘Zulu perspective’. See, Cope 1981: 41-50 for an explanation of this, and for a general survey of literature on the war up to 1980.

up against the hill of Isandlwana, to prevent attack from the rear. What we can know for certain is that like the Greeks at Thermopylae, it was a defeat for the British and a decisive victory for the Zulus, unlike the other battles of the Anglo-Zulu war such as Rorke's Drift and Ulundi, in which the British demonstrated superior tactical skills and armament.³⁷ But conversely to Thermopylae, it was the British fighting at Isandlwana that were the aggressors with imperialistic aims and instead it is the Zulus who fought to defend their freedom against the territory-grabbing British. A comparison between the Zulus and the Spartans in terms of their similarities as martial societies has been undertaken before; this comparison however is not in relation to the Battle of Thermopylae.³⁸ If this comparison was extended to Isandlwana and Thermopylae, it would be a logical result to match the Zulus with the Spartans and make the British synonymous with the Persians. This brief description of the antagonists and defenders at both Thermopylae and Isandlwana, hopefully demonstrates the problematic nature of this appropriation.

It must be noted that apart from the Battle at Isandlwana, the battle at Rorke's Drift, another major conflict during the Anglo-Zulu War, which occurred on the same day as the Battle of Isandlwana, approximately 10 kilometres west of Isandlwana, across the Buffalo River, has also been likened to Thermopylae in poetry. In another poem printed in the *Cape Times* on the 20th of February 1879, an unnamed poet wrote:

³⁷ Despite being a victory for the Zulus, they themselves considered it a Pyrrhic victory due to the large casualties they suffered. This was told to me by a guide at the battlefield.

³⁸See: Ferguson 1918: 197-234.

For in that little fortress
Five score at most held out,
While twice two thousand Zulus
Raised high their battle shout.
'Twas but a hundred heroes –
Leonidas had three-
Yet have they made of that stockade
A new Thermopylae!

Unlike the Battle of Isandlwana, the Battle of Rorke's Drift was a victory for the British and thus immediately a comparison with Thermopylae breaks down. It did however demonstrate the British troops' ability to hold out against a much larger force in a similar manner to those Greeks at the Anopean path. Therefore the motif of 'few against many' is appropriate to the comparison. At the mission station by Rorke's Drift, 139 British troops successfully defended themselves against a mass of some 4000 Zulu warriors. Due to large casualties, the Zulus began withdrawing after midnight, ending their attack completely sometime after 4 a.m. The battle was celebrated as a victory by the British and the Victoria Cross, which is the highest military decoration awarded to British forces for valour in warfare, was awarded to 11 of the men who took part in the defence at Rorke's Drift.

Another longer poem also purporting to compare Rorke's Drift to Thermopylae appeared in Britain in March of 1879. The poem in fact compares the Battle of Isandlwana to

Thermopylae. Presumably because both battles were fought on the very same day and conflicting news reports were circulated, the poet confused the two battles. Written by Albert H. Bencke, the poem's title: *Thermopylae B.C. 480. Rorke's Drift, Natal A.D. 1879* as well as its subtitle: 'An Historical Parallel', immediately signals to the reader the intended comparison.³⁹ In his preface to the poem, Bencke states his intentions:

The following lines were written on the first arrival of the news of destruction of a wing of the 24th Regiment, when such expression as "disgraceful defeat," "tarnished honour," "humiliating disaster," were used by certain journals with most unseemly freedom.

It was to combat these expressions that these lines were written.

The poem is divided into two shorter poems, one on the Battle of Thermopylae consisting of eight quatrains and the second focusing on the events of the day of both battles: Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. This poem, although originally nine stanzas also of four lines each, was altered by Bencke, who replaced stanza VII with two other quatrains.⁴⁰ The first poem recalls that the "brave and free" Greeks under Leonidas held the pass at Thermopylae against the Persians. The size of the opposing forces is alluded to, with the Greeks being described as "the little band of heroes" and the Persians simply as "the mighty host" or again, "the mighty foe". The Greeks' unwillingness to flee from the battle, but rather to stay and fight until death is also recalled, "Nought remains except to die; / Yet the little band of heroes / One and all disdain to fly." Stanza VI reports the

³⁹ Bencke's poem is reproduced in full in Appendix 2.

⁴⁰ See the footnote to stanza VII in Appendix 2.

positivist views held by most of the Battle of Thermopylae: “Scanty is the Persian triumph, / Though, indeed, they win the pass;” Despite the Persian victory at Thermopylae, post-battle propaganda viewed the defeat as a sort of victory, or at very least a spur for the Greeks onto later victory at Salamis.⁴¹ This is also pointed out by Bencke in the poem: “Nor in vain was great example, / As the Persians found, I wis, / When it taught the Grecian people / How to win at Salamis.” The final stanza of the ‘Thermopylae poem’ demonstrates something of the mirage created for Sparta because of the Battle of Thermopylae. It reads: “Many a fight have won the Spartans, / Battles great, by land and sea, / But their Maidens’ boast was ever / How was *lost* Thermopylae.” The juxtaposition of ‘won’ in the first line with ‘lost’ in the last poignantly illustrates Thermopylae’s importance in Sparta’s military history.

Despite the title of the second poem: ‘Rorke’s Drift A.D. 1879’ the majority of the poem is spent reflecting on the defeat suffered by the British at the hands of the Zulus at Isandlwana. It begins by referring to the “woeful sad disaster” that the Battle of Isandlwana turned out to be for the British. The weather (“On a gloomy winter’s evening”) in Britain reflects the mood that the public must have felt upon hearing of the defeat. The implications of shame and honour that the defeat caused for the soldiers and the country are then appealed to in stanza II. Again, as in the ‘Thermopylae poem’ the size of each of the armies is noted (“Twenty thousand savage foemen”) and the Zulus, despite being ‘savage’, are described to be trained and armed with European skill and

⁴¹ Perhaps the English idiom: “You may have won the battle, but you will not win the war” is most appropriate.

weapon.⁴² Bencke aims to stress the point that only because of the ‘civilizing’ aspect of European culture are these ‘barbarians’ able to win the battle. In stanza V, Bencke appeals to his reader to forbear their cry of “Shame” until they have heard of the noble stand made by the few troops at Rorke’s Drift. Much is made in the poem of the loss of ‘colours’ of the Queen’s 24th Regiment of Foot. This anecdote from the final stages of the Battle of Isandlwana has proved popular in subsequent retellings of the battle. The details are as follows: Lieutenants Melville and Coghill, mounted officers of the 24th Regiment, in an attempt to save the Queen’s Colours from the Zulus, escaped from the camp and made a heroic ride of about 5 miles to the Buffalo River. Both were able to cross the river but on the Natal bank were killed by the local Zulus. During the river crossing, with the river being in flood, the flag was inadvertently lost down the river, untouched by the Zulus, on whom the significance of ‘capturing the Colours’ was lost. The Colours were subsequently retrieved after the battle, after which they were returned to Britain where they now reside, displayed in Brecon Cathedral in Wales. Bencke’s initial manuscript seems to have been written prior to the recovery of the flag. In his unedited text, he acknowledges that Lieutenants Melville and Coghill lost the Queen’s Colours. However in the emended stanzas he writes: “Rumour said they lost the colours, / Gold inwrought with fame of old, / But t’was false, alone there failed / Hands the colours to uphold.” He acknowledges the two soldiers’ deaths in attempting to save the flag, “E’en in death they yet preserved them, / Twain they died the flag to save,”. Stanza eight provides the now well-worn motive for the soldiers’ ‘heroic’ deaths: “Death they could not but foreknow /

⁴² The fact that the Zulus had large quantities of European firearms is attested to by historians of the Anglo-Zulu War, but whether they were trained to use them is another matter. Greaves (2002: 67) notes: “By the time of the British invasion the Zulu army possessed firearms in large numbers...but most Zulus were untrained and highly inaccurate.”

Yet to save their country's honour / Died, their faces to the foe." Like Thermopylae the soldiers resigned themselves to their impending deaths for honour's sake. The final stanza of the poem questions the notions of honour and shame in this battle, most probably in opposition to contemporary journalist's reports, and it appeals to the immortal glory that the soldiers have won for themselves by dying on their country's behalf: "Yea so long as time may be / Purest glory shall illumine / "Twenty-fourth's" Thermopylae!" The poem attempts to salvage the reputation of the British soldiers' conduct at the Battle of Isandlwana. By appealing to the epic stand at Rorke's Drift after the defeat at Isandlwana, the public's attention was shifted away from the shame of the defeat and onto the honour of the victory, no matter how small it was. Greaves rightly concludes, "an inglorious defeat could be offset by a glorious victory."⁴³

The Battle of Thermopylae, Cartledge argues, was subsequently used by the Greeks as a 'morale victory'.⁴⁴ And as Peter Green has argued, the defeat at Thermopylae in fact spurred Greece on to victory at the Battles of Salamis and Plataea.⁴⁵ So in a similar way, the shame that the defeat at Isandlwana caused for the British, spurred them on to their ultimate victory at the last major battle of the Anglo-Zulu war, the Battle of Ulundi on the 4th of July 1879. Jeff Guy writes of the British responses to Isandlwana that "there was no debate over the fact that the Zulu had to be punished for daring to defend their independence so effectively."⁴⁶ The only other similarity between the two groups of

⁴³ 2002: 178.

⁴⁴ Cartledge 2004: 171.

⁴⁵ 1996: 145.

⁴⁶ 1979: 53-54.

soldiers is that they both fought in obedience to their orders, the Spartans to their laws and the British to Chelmsford's command.

The British forces' sentiment towards the war at Isandlwana is perhaps akin to those of the Spartans at Thermopylae. For, judging by the tone of these poems, the British forces viewed fighting and dying for one's country as something noble. Lines in the inscription like the ones that state: "Falling To Dye The Earth / With Brave Men's Blood" glamourises men who die in battle on behalf of their country as brave. And again so too do the following lines of the poem printed in the *Natal Witness*:

Contemnit audax. Duxit in ardua

Virtus repulsae nescia vel fugae,

Lauroque ditavit future,

Heu nimium juvenes fideles!

Inter profundae laetitiae sonos,

Sunt quas amarus flere iubet dolor,

Optata non illas salutant

Oscula, nec tenerae loquulae.

But that man fears dishonour more than death,
Whom freedom nurtures with sure trust in God;
He goes unflinching through opposing troops,

And blanches not at war's uplifted rod,

Brave because true. So our too trustful lads,

Valour, which knows not how to cringe or fly,

Beckoned right on to danger and to fame,

And left them all to suffer, some to die.

Or again;

Hinc homines procul

Cedant profane. Sistite paullulum,

Vos o viatores! Honore

Ne careant patriae sepulcra.

Nam sempiterna est gloria; posteris,

Quum nostra dudum praeteriit dies,

Narrabit Isandlwana nomen,

Nobilium facinus viorum.

...Let no rude step profane

These sacred precincts. Traveller, pause-awhile;

They who lie here died for their country's sake,

Their memory shall enjoy their country's smile.

Self sacrifice ne'er dies. And still when down

The stream of time our record disappears,

Will Isandlwana to our sons proclaim

The noble exploits of our Carbineers.

These lines excerpted from the longer poem, are addressed like Simonides' epigram to a traveller who would pass by the place where the fallen soldiers lie, and they express attitudes to war and death that would have been all too familiar in Spartan society. The tone of the poem is often exultant, despite acknowledging the defeat that the battle was. Praise is assigned to those who died, not for their victory in battle, but rather for the way they conducted themselves in defeat and for going to their deaths bravely. Despite the optimistic tone of the poem, however, the following lines:

Inter profundae laetitiae sonos,

Sunt quas amarus flere jubet dolor,

Optata non illas salutant

Oscula, nec tenerae loquulae.

Forget not how amidst yon notes of joy,

Bleeds many a woman's silent aching heart,

Whose lips no more one other's lips may meet,

Nor to his ear love's tender words impart.

acknowledge and mourn the losses felt on the side of the British. However, these losses are used to assign even more glory to the self-sacrifice the soldiers made on behalf of their country.

In discussing the poetry of often anonymous poets, on the periphery of the Victorian canon, who sought to commemorate the battles of the Anglo-Zulu War in their verse, Verdonck states,

In adopting the idiom and the structure, then, both rhetorical and metaphorical, generally associated with the *auctoritas* of Greco-Roman antiquity and the chivalric fantasia of medieval times, these poems mean to position themselves (as minstrels, the medium of heroism) and the heroes of which they sing the praise (the very currency of these ancient narratives) on a historical continuum which works at bringing together the British empire and the mythical dominion of a past that is univocally perceived as heroic and venerable.⁴⁷

Therefore the atmosphere that these poems create, and the language – often ornate, archaic and grandiloquent - within which this atmosphere is couched, creates a heroic credibility to the dismal outcome of events at Isandlwana for example, and justifies the

⁴⁷ 2006: 98.

very presence of the British in Natal and Zululand. In effect, as Verdonck rightly concludes: “These poems, in short, want poetry, not history, in the Aristotelian sense.”⁴⁸

Similar to the sentiments expressed by the British are the well known laconic sayings such as the one attributed to a Spartan woman and mother, by Plutarch, in which a Spartan mother after having given her son a shield encourages him to either return with it or on it.⁴⁹ The mother expects her child to either return victorious to Sparta, or if not, to have died in combat. Similarly to Plutarch, Herodotus also illustrates these shared sentiments and attitudes by relaying the story of Aristodemus, one of the three hundred who escaped death on account of his blindness.⁵⁰ Unlike a fellow Spartan, Eurytus who was also suffering with ophthalmia, but rejoined the three hundred to die by their sides, Aristodemus returned to Sparta, where, Herodotus tells us, he was disgraced and dishonoured. No Spartan gave him fire, or spoke to him except to label him a coward.⁵¹ In a similar story Herodotus tells of one Pantites, who by carrying a message to Thessaly, also did not die with Leonidas and his three hundred men.⁵² In shame, however he committed suicide upon his return to Sparta. Xenophon traces the origins of this shame and honour culture to Sparta’s legendary law-giver Lycurgus, stating:

Ἄξιον δὲ τοῦ Λυκούργου καὶ τόδε ἀγασθῆναι, τὸ κατεργάσασθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει αἰρετώτερον εἶναι τὸν καλὸν θάνατον ἀντὶ τοῦ αἰσχροῦ βίου.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Plutarch. *Moralia* 241. F. 16.

⁵⁰ See a fuller discussion of this episode in Chapter 4.

⁵¹ Hdt. 7.229-231.

⁵² Hdt. 7. 232.

He caused his people to choose an honourable death in preference to a disgraceful life.⁵³

The passage goes on to illustrate how Lycurgus achieved this feat:

ἐκεῖνος τοίνυν σαφῶς παρεσκεύασε τοῖς μὲν ἀγαθοῖς εὐδαιμονίαν, τοῖς δὲ κακοῖς κακοδαιμονίαν. ἐν μὲν γὰρ ταῖς ἄλλαις πόλεσιν, ὅποτεν τις κακὸς γένηται, ἐπὶ κλησιν μόνον ἔχει κακὸς εἶναι, ἀγοράζει δὲ ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ ὁ κακὸς τὰ γαθῶ καὶ κάθηται καὶ γυμνάζεται, ἐὰν βούληται ἐν δὲ τῇ Λακεδαίμονι πᾶς μὲν ἂν τις αἰσχυνθεῖ τὸν κακὸν σύσκηνον παραλαβεῖν, πᾶς δ' ἂν ἐν παλαίσματι συγγυμναστήν.

Clearly, what he did was to ensure that the brave should have happiness, and the coward misery. For in other states when a man proves a coward, the only consequence is that he is called a coward. He goes to the same market as the brave man, sits beside him, attends the same gymnasium, if he chooses. But in Lacedaemon everyone would be ashamed to have a coward with him at the mess or to be matched with him in a wrestling bout...small wonder, I think, that where such a load of dishonour is laid on the coward, death seems preferable to a life so dishonoured.⁵⁴

⁵³ Xen. *Lac.* 9.1 (tr. Marchant 1968).

⁵⁴ Xen. *Lac.* 9.3-4 (tr. Marchant 1968).

In summation then, Spartans were bound to their honour, which depended to a large degree on how the fellow members of their society perceived them. The Victorian British were by no means a shame and honour society to the same extreme as that of the Spartan one, but in a similar way did place huge importance on an individual's standing in society, and so too in a similar way believed that death for the sake of one's country was a noble thing. An ideal that was heavily criticized by another 'war poet', Wilfred Owen, in his poem on the First World War *Dulce et Decorum est*, published posthumously in 1920. In this poem, quoting well known lines from Horace's *Odes*, Owen states that, if seeing the horrors of war, and in his case the trench warfare of the First World War, then a person would not tell a child the 'old lie' that dying for one's country is fitting and sweet.⁵⁵ In the last years of the nineteenth century, however, this realisation was still in the future. The Chief Justice, Sir Henry Connor is reported in the *Natal Witness* on the 9th of August 1879, as insisting that to die fighting for England at Isandlwana was "as they knew from the days of their Latin Grammar, an honourable and a beautiful thing." And in the same vein, Sir Henry Bulwer, the Governor of Natal, is reported as saying;

We rejoice to know that when the danger of that fierce death came suddenly upon them, our men faced it bravely, and that they gave up their young lives gallantly and nobly, and that their death was a soldier's death, a death honourable to all men...[and] that they have done their duty right-well, and that they have worthily upheld the reputation of this Colony.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Hor. *Odes*. 3.2.13.

⁵⁶ *Natal Witness*, 9 August 1879.

These similarities then that remain between the Greeks fighting at the Battle of Thermopylae, and the British in the battles of the Anglo-Zulu War, particularly Isandlwana, are shown in the views held by each side with regards to war and death experienced in battle in the service of one's country. The differences between them however are numerous, and we must therefore conclude that the battles of the Anglo-Zulu War definitely do not present a South African Thermopylae.

Chapter 4

Once upon a time in Thermopylae...Children's Literature and the Classics

Peter Hunt makes the following claim about children's books:

They are overtly important educationally and commercially – with consequences across the culture, from language to politics; most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development.¹

With a statement like this, one can rightly conclude that children's books are enormously influential. And yet until recently, children's literature has been a marginalised field of study. The impact of this in recent years has been advantageous to those wishing to consider this literature more closely. In fact Hunt claims that 'children's literature' has not become the property of any set discipline but rather has been engaged with from a variety of perspectives, namely, literary studies, education, psychology, history, art, media and popular culture. The result has been a myriad of specialised approaches to the genre.² Despite the research area of 'children's literature' constantly growing because of these varied approaches, classicists have paid little attention to it. And yet, it is often through the fiction of their youth that people are first introduced to the classical world;

¹ 1999: 1.

² *Ibid.*

one only has to think of René Goscinny's *Asterix* series from the mid-20th century as an example. The myths, stories and histories of the classical world have influenced, and still do influence, children's literature. In fact, not only does Greco-Roman antiquity influence children's literature but often its myths, stories and histories have been adapted and adopted into juvenile works of fiction and non-fiction. In this chapter I will consider the way that the ancient world is presented in children's literature with the purpose of elucidating possible reasons for turning to Greece and Rome as storehouses of suitable stories for children. In line with the rest of my dissertation, I will use the Battle of Thermopylae as a point of reference and for the sake of space and interest; I will delimit my discussion to children's literature produced in the Victorian era³, focusing on one fiction account of the battle in the form of Caroline Dale Snedeker's *The Coward of Thermopylae*, a chapter book⁴ for older children aged 12 years and up, as well as Andrew Lang's short non-fiction retelling *The Spartan Three Hundred*.

It has been claimed that the Victorians invented 'childhood'.⁵ Therefore it is understandable that this period apart from any other has been designated the 'Golden Age' of children's literature. It was this age that produced childhood classics like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883). Focus by the Victorians on children and childhood is traced by Lewis Roberts to

³ I use this 'Victorian Period' loosely to signify the dates: 1860-1920, mainly because this is designated as the 'golden age of children's literature' see: Hunt (1994: 59-105). In fact Queen Victoria ruled Britain from 1837-1901. I have only included children's literature written in English.

⁴ A 'chapter book' is designated as such because of its short chapters that facilitate easy reading for novice readers.

⁵ Roberts 2002:354.

eighteenth-century concerns over education and the recognition of ‘childhood’ as a unique and separate phase of life from that of ‘adulthood’. Roberts states,

John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau promoted educational philosophies which defined all children as capable of developing into rational, enlightened human beings through a nurturing system of education based on experience and observation rather than rote memorization or harsh, punitive discipline. Seeing a child as a tabula rasa, a blank slate, Locke argued that educators must carefully evoke the desire to learn in each individual child. Rousseau argued that children were born in a state of innate innocence, not original sin, and that social institutions corrupted such childhood virtue.⁶

On another front, the prevailing evangelicalism of the period insisted that childhood was an important time for “redeeming individual souls and reforming society.”⁷ It is no wonder then that with rising concerns, Victorian society did not view children’s literature simply as harmless fun. It must be stated though that as the period progressed, the reins loosened somewhat until an “ideal of clothing didacticism in amusement, and justifying amusement as a necessary part of a happy, fulfilling childhood, came to be generally accepted”.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Roberts 2002:355.

⁸ Roberts 2002: 356.

It is also important to consider the cultural impact that ancient Greece had on the Victorian period. The works of scholars like Richard Jenkyns, Frank M. Turner and more recently Isobel Hurst have clearly mapped out the terrain of any serious study of the legacy of Greece on the Victorian era.⁹ Turner has argued convincingly that the Victorian period was dominated by a concern with Greek over Roman antiquity.¹⁰ This is not to exclude the vestiges of the influence of Rome in previous periods, and the continuing education in Roman culture or Latin authors. It does however suggest a slight shift of balance from Rome to Greece within this period. Factors too numerous to elucidate here in any detail are responsible for this shift. I will, however, mention a few.

Classical education in schools and universities in the Victorian period is well-attested.¹¹ New archaeological discoveries in the period also stimulated renewed interest in the classical world. Technological advances in the area of travel, such as the steam-engine, also generated renewed interest in the Classics. This was due to travel being made easier and more accessible and so more people were able to visit sites of the ancient world. Increase in scholarly activity, during the period, on works of Greek history, literature and philosophy in turn filtered down from the intellectual elite to capture the imagination of the public.¹² This is tied up with publishing in the Victorian period. Norman Vance states, "...with improvements in printing and binding processes, the matter of Greece and Rome could reach people more vividly and more inexpensively than ever before."¹³

⁹ See: Jenkyns 1980; Turner 1981; Hurst 2006.

¹⁰ 1989: 61-81.

¹¹ See: Stray 1998.

¹² Turner 1989: *passim*.

¹³ Vance 2007: 95.

Combining this proliferation of the classical world with the ethos of children's literature of the period, particularly literature for young boys often in the form of adventure stories, it is no wonder that the heroic stories of the Persian Wars, and particularly the 300 Spartans' last stand at Thermopylae, were used in children's historical fiction and non-fiction of the period.

Emma Bridges in her discussion of historical fiction relating to the Persian Wars states,

Since the nineteenth century, authors of modern historical fiction on both sides of the Atlantic have, with varying degrees of success, selected and adapted material from these ancient sources to mould them into narratives aimed primarily at a non-academic, in many cases non-classically educated, readership, and indeed a readership which may have no prior knowledge of the historical timeframe within which the events of their novel take place.¹⁴

This is definitely true of children, who present something of a *tabula rasa* for classical stories and ideas. The Battle of Thermopylae featured prominently in many collections of children's stories of the same period¹⁵, for example: Alfred J. Church's *The Story of the Persian War from Herodotus* (1881), *Three Greek Children* (1890), *Pictures from Greek*

¹⁴ 2007: 406. See Bridges also for a brief, but good introduction to historical fiction pertaining to the Persian Wars.

¹⁵ I have searched for retellings of the Battle of Thermopylae aimed at children from between 1860-1920. Most notable of children's literature from outside of this period, that features the Battle of Thermopylae, is Mary Renault's *The Lion in the Gateway* (1964) and Kenneth Lillington's *Young Man of Morning* (1979).

Life and Story (1894) as well as *Helmet and Spear: Stories from the Wars of the Greeks and Romans* (1900). Church believed in a thorough knowledge of the Classics and in their power to produce standards of taste as well as create pleasure.¹⁶ Apart from this Reverend *cum* Latin Professor's zeal for classically educating children's stories, the Battle of Thermopylae also appeared in the following collections: Jacob Abbot's *Xerxes* (1850), H. A. Guerber's *The Story of the Greeks* (1896), Charles D. Shaw's *Stories of the Ancient Greeks*, John H. Haaren and A. B. Poland's *Famous Men of Greece* (1904), Caroline H. Harding and Samuel B. Harding's *Stories of Greek Gods, Heroes and Men* (1906), Charles Morris' *Historical Tales* (1908), Eva March Tappan's *The Story of the Greek People* (1908) and finally Mary Macgregor's *The Story of Greece* (1914).

Caroline Dale Snedeker, an American author, was first encouraged by her husband the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in Cincinnati, shortly after their marriage, to write. Her response was to remark that only a Greek scholar could write the story she wished to write. Her husband is supposed to have replied, "Well, then, make yourself a Greek scholar." The anxiety which characterized Victorian women writers' relationship with the Classics is superbly mapped out in Isobel Hurst's 2006 study, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics. The Feminine of Homer*. In this study Hurst argues that Victorian women writers' responses to the Classics were unique and different from those of their male counterparts, due largely to their being denied access to them. Unlike their male counterparts, in whom a dislike and distaste of the Classics was imbibed through the rote

¹⁶ 1969: 295. Alfred J. Church's greatest contribution to this endeavour must be his retellings of Homer's epic poems for children. *The Story of the Odyssey*, as well as *The Story of the Iliad* appeared in 1892. In 1906 *The Odyssey for Boys and Girls* was produced, with *The Iliad for Boys and Girls* a year later in 1907. These later two versions were reissued combined in *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer* in 1964.

memorization and prose composition of school lessons, as well as being subjected to the more philological aspects of the discipline, women in the Victorian period came to the Classics simply for pleasure, albeit under much difficulty.¹⁷ A typical encounter by a Victorian woman with the Battle of Thermopylae is suggested as follows by Hurst,

The schooling available to women born in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, was that offered by traditional ladies' seminaries...which provided social rather than intellectual training. These schools did not typically offer tuition in the classical languages; they gave their pupils a genteel degree of familiarity with ancient history and mythology from textbooks like Richmal Mangnall's *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions, for the Use of Young People*, written by a woman...In fact, although there is little depth, the historical sections of *Mangnall's Questions* do equip the student with elementary information on a wide range of topics, including the siege of Troy, Homer, the Olympic games, ostracism, *the battle of Thermopylae*, funeral ceremonies, the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, Herodotus, Lysander, Socrates and so on.¹⁸

Snedeker went on to write many classical-inspired historical novels. At first, however, when she set out to write historical fiction, she did not realize that she would find her

¹⁷ Hurst 2006: *passim*.

¹⁸ 2006: 70-71, italics mine.

widest audience amongst young people.¹⁹ Her 1911 novel *The Coward of Thermopylae* only received the popular success and recognition it did, when it was rereleased the following year under a new title *The Spartan*, repackaged in a format to appeal to young readers.²⁰ A review in the New York Times stated that Snedeker, "...shows us the golden life of shadow and sunshine which lies behind a half-forgotten name or a chance allusion in the pages of history."²¹ The book's merits were not only noted at a popular level but also by classicists at the time, one reviewer, in *The Classical Journal*, writes,

The author has taken some discreet liberties with history, but very few in comparison with the usual historical novel, and it is very gratifying to note that she has avoided romance. The charm and chief value of the book lie in its delineations of Greek character and life...They combine to make the book a source of profit and pleasure to the young, and of pleasure at least, to older readers.²²

Her novel tells the story of Thermopylae from the point of view of Aristodemus, the Spartan who, due to blindness, returned from the battle unharmed. Being disgraced upon his return to Sparta, Aristodemus fought to prove himself at the Battle of Plataea. Unlike

¹⁹ See: Meigs 1969: 497. Her historical fiction includes the following titles: *The Perilous Seat* (1923) about a Delphic priestess, *Theras and His Town* (1924) about an Athenian boy who has many adventures after being taken to Sparta against his will, *The Forgotten Daughter* (1933) about Chloe, a Greek slave girl at Rome, *The White Isle* (1940) about a patrician Roman family's exile from Rome, *Luke's Quest* (1947) about the New Testament Gospel writer, *A Triumph for Flavius* (1955) which deals with the issue of slavery in the Roman Empire, *The Bronze Bow* (1961) set in Roman occupied Israel and finally *Lysis goes to the Play* (1962) which tells of siblings journeying to the Dionysia.

²⁰ Meigs 1969: 497.

²¹ "Back to Young Hellas: *The Coward of Thermopylae*, a Well-Drawn Picture of Greece." The New York Times, July 16, 1911.

²² Murray 1911: 142. For errors of fact in *The Spartan* see Schaeffer's review in *The Classical Weekly*, vol. 5, No. 10. 1911. p.79.

in Snedeker, Aristodemus features as a minor character in Herodotus' narrative. He is mentioned only twice briefly. Firstly Herodotus mentions him in connection with Thermopylae, as one of two Spartans who were suffering from acute inflammation of the eyes, the other a man named Eurytus.²³ Being unfit for battle, they were therefore dismissed from the battle by Leonidas in order to recover. Unable to agree on whether to return to Sparta or to rejoin their comrades in the battle, Aristodemus and Eurytus argued and parted ways. Eurytus with the help of his helot rearmed himself and rejoined the battle where he was killed, while Aristodemus, whose heart Herodotus comments failed him (λιποψυχέοντα), remained behind. The result, Herodotus tells us, is that he was rejected by his fellow Spartans upon return to Sparta and was labelled a 'coward' (τρέσας). Herodotus also gives an alternate explanation of his survival at Thermopylae, stating that he was sent on an errand with a message, and deliberately loitered on the way, and in so doing saved himself and missed out on the battle itself. The second time Herodotus mentions Aristodemus, is in connection with the Battle of Plataea.²⁴ Here he is said to have fought the bravest on the Greek side, however after the battle the Spartans are said not to have honoured him because he had wished to die because of the shame he had suffered from Thermopylae and had demonstrated this by rushing forward into the battle like a frenzied madman. This lack of order and discipline, however, would have been ill-appreciated by the Spartans.²⁵

²³ Hdt.7.229-231.

²⁴ Hdt.9.71.

²⁵ See note on 9.7 in de Sélincourt's translation.

Snedeker's novel begins as a sort of *Bildungsroman*, following Aristodemus' growth from childhood into adulthood. After the death of his Athenian father, Aristodemus' mother Makaria returns with her son to Sparta and her family there, where her uncle, Gyllipos, is one of the ephors.²⁶ The novel constantly stresses the differences between the two city-states, characterising the Athenians as 'soft' and enlightened and the Spartans as 'hard' and unthinking. This binary opposition effects Aristodemus' interaction with his fellow Spartans, for example, when the time comes for them to choose him into their company in the *agoge* (ἀγωγή), he is shamefully not chosen at first:

He stood, scarce knowing where to look. The Spartan boys, with a single swift step, formed into companies, each with its ilarch, a youth of nineteen or twenty, in front. Thin, sunbrowned boys they were, from ten to twelve years old, barefoot, bare-legged, wearing the single unbleached garment cut short above the knees. There was about them the trim swiftness of antelopes, and the shy luster of the antelope look in their eyes. The first ilarch put the vote to his little company of fifteen. "Ayes!" he called in the heavy silence. Then "Noes!" Upon which came a full, united shout. Aristodemos's heart gave a quick leap. A hot flush of shame shot over his whole body. His forehead grew wet, his hands cold. Gyllipos pushed him toward the next company. A second time fell the sharp shout of "No!" A

²⁶ Aristodemus' mother Makaria features in the story as a strong-willed independent woman. In fact all Spartan women are presented as fairly liberated, and can perhaps be read through a Victorian 'feminist' lens. Snedeker seems to pick and choose assorted societal facts from Ancient Greece to support her own position, so while valuing Athens and intellectual freedom and also valuing the liberty enjoyed by Spartan women, she rejects the authoritarian society of Sparta. This question, while deserving further study, is too large to consider in any depth here however and is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

third and then a fourth company rejected him. Suddenly, with a fierce sob, he turned upon his uncle. “No!” he cried. “The son of Lykos will not be scorned like a market slave! I will sleep in the street.”²⁷

Aristodemus’ clash with the strict disciplinarian nature of Spartan society is also highlighted throughout the novel. He is presented as a reasoning and thinking individual in contrast to the blind group obedience of the other Spartan boys. Despite Aristodemus’ acculturation into Spartan society, he remains to the end an Athenian in his ideological outlook. A telling passage in the novel, regarding his birth, confirms this:

On the third day the old nurse ran with the little one around the family hearth, putting him forever under the care of the household gods. On the tenth day Lykos claimed him formally as his own son, and named him Aristodemus after the Spartan hero, in honour of his mother. “But he shall be an Athenian,” Lykos said joyously to those who feasted with him. And an Athenian he was indeed, even to the day when glorious death overtook him, and he left the paths of men.²⁸

Despite not being completely accepted by his Spartan comrades, a curious sub-plot that Snedeker includes places Aristodemus in a pederastic relationship with Leonidas, the Spartan king. This being Victorian young adult fiction, nowhere in the novel is any sexual element to the relationship hinted at. Instead Snedeker presents it in the purely

²⁷ 2005 [1911]: 25-26.

²⁸ 2005 [1911]: 45.

non-sexual *philia* that Plato advocated. It is this relationship also that provides one of the reasons for Aristodemus' absence from the final fight at Thermopylae. According to Snedeker's version of events, Leonidas sends Aristodemus to spy out the Persian camp, and also to signal back to the Greeks if and when the Anopean path is betrayed. Aristodemus achieves this task successfully, but in the process his blindness begins. He returns to Eurytus, who has also been separated from the Spartan camp because of his blindness, only to discover that Leonidas has fallen. The pain of this news shocks Aristodemus into reasoning that, "to die for Greece might not be so noble as to live for her."²⁹ And so unlike Eurytus, he does not return blind into the battle. It is stressed that while Eurytus here dies for Sparta's honour, Aristodemus has the whole of Greece in mind, and resolves himself that to fight for the sake of Greece perhaps later, is more important than dying honourably with his Spartan comrades.

Aristodemus pays for his reasoned logic however, and upon return to Sparta, is mocked, jeered and ridiculed by the whole city, including his own mother. The people mock him as 'Aristodemus, the Coward of Thermopylae', hence the original ironic title of the novel, and they refuse to eat with him in the mess, as well as refusing him light for his fire. The consequence of this shaming in Spartan society, Xenophon points out in his *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, was to ensure that its citizens prefer an honourable death to a disgraceful life.³⁰ This forces Aristodemus to leave Sparta, and in an extended sub-plot, he journeys to the Oracle at Delphi, as well as to the Greek colony of Elea. It is here that

²⁹ 2005 [1911]: 179.

³⁰ See: Xen. *Lac.*9.1-4. He highlights that in Sparta, apart from being labelled a 'coward' the individual would also be excluded from interaction with fellow Spartans.

Aristodemus, who had rescued Parmenides' son from slave-traders, returns the boy to the philosopher. These interactions along the way produce in him the desire to fight on behalf of Hellas at Plataea. The novel then begins to stress the Pan-Hellenic nature of the defence of Greece against the Persians, and so Aristodemus, uniquely placed between the cultures of Athens and Sparta, rallies to the battle, where, as in Herodotus' account, he fights most valiantly for the sake of Greece at Plataea. Ultimately Aristodemus is presented in the novel as an anti-hero. He does not subscribe to Sparta's – or even the Victorian period's - heroic code. He does, however, conform to Snedeker's heroic model, one that values rational decisions. She states regarding the title change in her Preface, "The new title of the book will be found a little less misleading than the former. One must perhaps know our hero well before "Coward of Thermopylae" can become an affectionate paradox."³¹

Throughout the novel, as Aristodemus travels through Greece – particularly as a child led by his mother, but also later as an adult after fleeing Sparta – Snedeker introduces the world of Ancient Greece to her protagonist, but in so doing, introduces it to her young readers as well. For example people like Aeschylus, Pindar and Themistocles all feature as characters in the plot. Places like Athens, Sparta and the Oracle at Delphi do also. Snedeker also often describes in detail various aspects of ancient Greek culture and society. The pedagogic nature of this text, when viewed like this, becomes apparent.³²

³¹ 2005 [1911]: iv.

³² This pedagogic element is further enhanced by the period's emphasis on the close similarities of the ancient world with Victorian Europe and North America. Guy N. Pocock in his introduction to one of Snedeker's other novels, *Theras and His Town* (1924 [1928]: 7), states, "As a boy one thrilled at the story of the defence of the Pass of Thermopylae; but somehow one never realised that the Spartan boy was no more than a very hardy boy Scout; that the Athenian boy was an ordinary schoolboy like oneself."

Snedeker as she is educating Aristodemus is also educating her young readers, all the while subscribing to the pleasurable element of children's literature. At no point in the novel, does the narrative digress into dry historical facts, but rather the reader is carried along by the inventive plot. Hunt claims that the primary aim of fiction, regardless of whether it is historical fiction for children or not, is pleasure.³³ Like Snedeker though, despite being non-fiction, Lang's retelling of Thermopylae also aims at bringing pleasure to his young readers.

The name 'Andrew Lang' conjures up for most classicists, the famous Scottish classicist, scholar, critic and poet who was educated and taught at the universities of St Andrews and Oxford.³⁴ However as a child Lang's relationship to the Classics was not love at first sight, one biographer writes,

His classical learning had been attained only with pain and grief: "Greek, for years seemed a mere vacuous terror...Horace, to a lazy boy, appears in his odes to have nothing to say, and to say it in the most frivolous and vexatious manner," while Caesar, Virgil, Xenophon and Euripides presented no additional attractions, until he first began to read the *Odyssey* in the original: "to myself," he says, "Homer was the real beginning of study." Only then did he begin to take an interest in the classics...³⁵

³³ Hunt 1994: 26.

³⁴ According to Green 1946: 20-35, Lang did well in Greek at St Andrews, and received a First Class in his Classical Moderations at Balliol, Oxford in 1866 as well as a First in the 'Greats' in 1868. He later received an Open Fellowship to Merton College.

³⁵ 1946: 17.

His greatest contribution to classical scholarship was as a Homeric scholar. He published three important monographs in this field, *Homer and the Epic* (1893), *Homer and His Age* (1908) and *The World of Homer* (1910). He was also a noted translator of classical works, most notably for his translations of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and the Greek Bucolic poets. However to non-classicists and especially to children, Andrew Lang is most remembered for his collection of fairy-tales. Throughout his life Lang was fiercely interested in the mythologies and folklores of assorted people groups and avidly collected and edited them. Roger Lancelyn Green, his biographer, writes:

Reading, in the early seventies, from the mythology of the most primitive races, and from the literature of the highest civilizations, from the historians and thinkers of Greece and Rome as freely as from the field-anthropologists and the historians of more recent peoples...Lang was struck more and more by the fact that the most divergent races - Aryans, Aztecs and Australians - often delighted in the very same tales, with almost identical incidents, but with characters bearing completely different names.³⁶

Perhaps because of his solid classical education, Lang's collection of fairy-tales and stories always included a healthy smattering of either adapted Greek or Roman stories or

³⁶ 1946: 69.

at least ones heavily influenced by them. Of his work with the stories themselves, Lang comments:

My part has been that of Adam, according to Mark Twain, in the Garden of Eden. Eve worked, Adam superintended. I also superintend. I find out where the stories are...*I do not write the stories out of my own head...*³⁷

Between 1889 and 1910 Lang published his series of twelve 'colour' *Fairy Books*, starting with the *Blue Fairy Book* (1889). These *Fairy Books* contained little else except traditional fairy-tales and other well known stories, all simply adapted or rewritten for children. However amidst the publication of the *Fairy Books Series* Lang also published the *True Story Book* in 1893. This collection in contrast to the *Fairy Book Series* contained true and historical stories adapted and rewritten for children. With tongue firmly in cheek, Lang writes in the Introduction to this collection the following words:

It is not without diffidence that the editor offers the *True Story Book* to children. We have now given them three fairy books, and their very kind and flattering letters to the editor prove, not only that they like the fairy books, but that they clamour for more. What disappointment, then, to receive a volume full of adventure which actually happened to real people! There is not a dragon in the collection, nor even a giant; witches, here, play no part, and almost all the characters here are grown up.³⁸

³⁷ 1946: 96.

³⁸ 1893: ix.

Lang also alerts his juvenile readership to the differences between fairy-tales and true-life stories, he states,

Still, it cannot be denied that true stories are not so good as fairy tales.

They do not always end happily, and, what is worse, they do remind a young student of lessons and schoolrooms. A child may fear that he is being taught under a specious pretence of diversion, and that learning is being thrust on him under the disguise of entertainment.³⁹

Lang remarks on two key factors, firstly, that in the ‘real world’ things do not always end well, or to couch it in terms familiar to readers of fairy-tales, everything does not always end *happily ever after*, the ‘goodies’ do not always conquer the ‘baddies’, and often the line between right and wrong is a little bit blurred. Secondly, ‘real life’ stories by their very nature cannot be simply escapist entertainment and so often encourage a pedagogic element in their retelling. This second point is a bit more slippery though, as numerous fictitious stories also carry with them a didactic or moralising element; one thinks for example of Aesop’s fables or the parables of the New Testament Gospels. Lang does promise in his Introduction though that his purpose has not been to ‘teach’ children with the stories present in this collection.⁴⁰

It is in this volume that Lang’s retelling of Herodotus’ narrative on the Battle of Thermopylae is included. Entitled: “The Spartan Three Hundred”, Lang comments that

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the reason that this story has won immortal fame is because of the honour shown by those fighting down to the last man for the sake of Sparta. Lang himself notes, concerning this story, that it would be easy to embellish it, or add more ‘local colour’ as he puts it, due to the then recently discovered friezes at Susa by French enterprise, but he opts rather not to change the narrative of events and to instead leave them simple and straightforward, mimicking what he states is the Greek way of telling stories with a simplicity that is almost ‘bald’. He concludes also by asking the rhetorical question: “who dare alter and ‘improve’ the narrative of Herodotus?”⁴¹

In Andrew Lang’s simple retelling of the battle at Thermopylae, he begins by providing motivation for the Spartans in joining in war against Persia. He states that they fought for the freedom of their country, and not out of ambition or greed, juxtaposing this with Persian imperial ambition and greed. He also qualifies the Battle of Thermopylae as “the story of the greatest deed of arms that was ever done.”⁴² He stresses to his adolescent readership that the reason that the Spartans did not retreat is because of their great honour and sense of duty. He stresses the divided responses of the Greek states to the Persian invasion, contrasting those that were for war, freedom and ruin, if ruin came, and those that were for peace and slavery. Lang states the reason for the Greeks not sending a larger force to defend the pass at Thermopylae was because of celebration of their games, and that fact that they were about to begin another festival. In a comment on this fact he states:

⁴¹ 1893: xii.

⁴² 1893: 64.

They [that is, the Greeks] would not omit or put off their games however many thousand barbarians might be knocking at their gates. There is something boyish, and something fine in this conduct, but we must remember, too, that the games were a sacred festival, and that the Gods might be displeased if they were omitted.⁴³

This comment reveals two possible aims the author envisioned in retelling this story. Firstly there is a question of higher duty. Taken as a didactic element of the story, Lang is prompting his readership to question where their first duty is bound. Secondly this quote also alludes to the author's intended audience. In effect the Battle of Thermopylae is a man's story, or in this case, a boy's story, and this provides a motivation for the retelling of the story. That is, the author intends the three hundred Spartans to be a didactic model of honour and bravery, which little boys must emulate if they are to grow up to be *real* men. This is best corroborated, perhaps, by an appeal to Matthew Arnold's educational reforms at Rugby School, during roughly the same period:

Dr Arnold emphasized Greek epic, prose history, and philosophy in the curriculum at Rugby School because the heroes in Homer and Thucydides exemplified ideals of masculinity on which his pupils could model their conduct; he wanted to produce gentlemen noted for manly virtue rather

⁴³ 1893: 65.

than the aristocratic style which earlier educators had seen as characteristic of a classical education.⁴⁴

Lang's version features all the familiar *topoi* of Herodotus' account: the Spartans combing their hair, Xerxes' dialogue with Demaratus, Ephialtes' betrayal, Megistias' loyalty, and Aristodemus' cowardice, as well as including the famous Herodotean maxims and lines associated with the Battle of Thermopylae – ones that anyone familiar to the story has heard before. For example, when Lang explains the heavy losses felt by the Persians against the Spartans, he quotes: "Thereby was it made clear to all men, and not least to the king, that men are many, but heroes are few"⁴⁵ He also refers to Dieneces' quick wit in answering the Persian who stated that their arrows would block out the sun, and so replied that, "Then we'll fight in the shade!"⁴⁶ Unlike many other retellings of this famous battle, Lang does not deviate from Herodotus' narrative. In concluding the story Lang states the following: "The marble lion erected where Leonidas fell has perished, and perished has the column engraved with their names, but their glory is immortal."⁴⁷ This statement reveals Lang's belief that those who die defending their own country's freedom win for themselves immortal glory. A fame that is so immortal in fact that their story is still told to children today.

In conclusion then, while Lang is uncritical of the heroism presented in Herodotus' narrative, Snedeker prefers a reasoned response to battle rather than blind bravery.

⁴⁴ Hurst 2006: 19.

⁴⁵ 1893: 66, Hdt. 7.210.

⁴⁶ Hdt. 7.226.

⁴⁷ 1893: 67.

Whether these adaptations of the Battle of Thermopylae are used to educate, albeit intellectually or morally, or whether these adaptations are simply for pleasure and entertainment, is often a fine line of distinction, particularly in the case of children's literature, when the readers themselves by virtue of their very natures present themselves as innocent to both of these aims.

Conclusion

In the course of this dissertation I have examined three broad areas of the battle of Thermopylae's reception; firstly in contemporary popular culture (Chapter 2), secondly in South Africa (Chapter 3), and finally in Victorian children's literature (Chapter 4). While the umbrella term 'reception studies' has informed each of the theoretical approaches of each section, within each chapter I have attempted to use relevant theoretical approaches as well. In so doing I hope that I have contributed to the growing field of reception studies within the discipline of Classics, as well as providing a 'classical slant' on those individual theoretical approaches.

In Chapter 2 Classics and its relationship with popular culture was discussed. I attempted to stress that this once elitist discipline has now, with the advent of mass media in popular culture, reached a far wider audience than ever before. While the responses to classical antiquity have not always been as 'educated', erudite and scholarly, as in previous decades and centuries, they have produced some interesting adaptations of the classical world. And its success has definitely demonstrated that the story of Thermopylae appeals to a mass audience.

In Chapter 3 I sought to engage with the way a 'classical story' or idea has been understood in a specific place and time. Tracing the reception history of a specific classical motif, work or theme in South Africa and trying to map out the influence of Thermopylae at a national level proved to be an impossible task. A more narrow focus on

Thermopylae in the war poetry of the Anglo-Zulu war and particularly its comparison with the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift demonstrated the effect that a classical education has on the production of art in separate, and very different, cultural contexts.

Chapter 4's aim was to push the area of reception studies within the discipline of Classics into unfamiliar territory for classicists. While children's literature in general can clearly be seen to be influenced by the classical world, this relationship has yet to be properly explored by trained classicists. In my discussion of Caroline Dale Snedeker's *The Spartan* as well as Andrew Lang's *Three Hundred Spartans*, I proposed that through children's literature, children's authors and educators endeavoured to provide for children a classical education that was not only moral or intellectual but also entertaining at the same time.

In each of the chapters though, the Battle of Thermopylae, and its re/presentation and/or adaptation has been central. By highlighting the main points of the battle recorded in the ancient authors, I have tried to reduce the story of the battle to a single theme or motif, or 'kernel', or at the very least a series of 'kernels'. In her discussion of the Elektra myth in the Marvel Universe, Steinmeyer attempted to map out an anthropological approach to myth with reference to popular culture.¹ She discussed how Claude Lévi-Strauss postulated that in order to understand a myth structurally, it needed to be reduced to its essential elements, which he labelled 'mythèmes', and that then these assorted 'mythèmes' had to be studied in their relationship to one another. Roughly thirty years

¹ 2007: 317-340.

later a similar approach was adopted by Jean-Louis Backès in his work, *Le Mythe d' Hélène*. He extracted from the various differing accounts of the Helen myth what he called a *noyau* (kernel), which is constant and resistant, the seeming essence of a myth². Applying this to 'myth' in the broadest sense, i.e. any story, even a historical one, then begs the following questions: when stories are retold, what are the essential elements that need to be present in order for the story to be the same one? For example in the countless retellings of the Battle of Thermopylae, what essential features need to be included and which features may be left out? Reduced to its most simple terms, the battle of Thermopylae is a heroic stand by a few soldiers against many, for the sake of freedom in the face of tyranny. This motif has clearly been present in all the subsequent adaptations that I have examined. Miller and Snyder's *300* both emphasized the reasoned and rational response of freedom-loving Greeks to the irrational and totalitarian Persian army. It is precisely the motif of 'few against many' and of 'civilized versus barbarian' that caused those commemorating Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift to turn to Thermopylae as an exemplum, despite the fact that under closer scrutiny this proves to be a misappropriation. And again, it is this same motif, especially highlighting the glory of standing up for what is right in the face of overwhelmingly negative odds, which provides an entertaining didactic lesson for children, whether supporting Herodotus' model closely as Lang does, or by being critical of it like Caroline Dale Snedeker.

Research into the reception of the Battle of Thermopylae is a never-ending task. As the film *300* has proved, there are constantly new approaches to the story. Nevertheless, it is

² *Constant, résistant, qui semble être l'essence du mythe*. Steinmeyer translates as: a constant resistant kernel, which seems to be the essence of myth.

still worthwhile to mention some areas where future research might take place. As yet no systematic studies have been done on the use of Thermopylae in poetry. While I focused in Chapter 3 on one narrow area of the poetry of the Anglo-Zulu war and its use of the Thermopylae theme, many other poets throughout the periods between the Persian Wars and the present day have employed Thermopylae in their poems.³ Beginning with Simonides and including poets like A.E. Housman, Lord Byron, and Douglas Livingstone one could easily compare the changing uses of the Thermopylae theme in poetry. Another area that has been neglected in Thermopylae's reception, but also in general by classicists studying the reception of Greece and Rome within the field of popular culture, is the internet and computer games. The popularity of the film and graphic novel *300* spawned an internet phenomenon. Countless memes and spoofs have filtrated everyday life through internet media like *Youtube*.⁴ *Warner Bros* also produced a highly successful computer game, *300: March to Glory* in 2007.⁵ Thermopylae has so infiltrated everyday life that one is now even able to do the '300 Workout' to achieve the sculpted bodies on display in the film.⁶ Not specific to the Battle of Thermopylae, the reception of the classical world and Classics as a discipline in children's literature is still a heavily under-researched field. There are countless fictions and non-fictions for children that adapt and appropriate the myths, literature and histories of Greece and Rome, which have not yet received any systematic study or attention. My hope is that this dissertation will be the beginning of research into some of these areas.

³ For examples of some of these, see: Bridges, Hall & Rhodes (2007).

⁴ A quick *Google* search will bring any number of these to light.

⁵ See: <http://300videogame.warnerbros.com/>.

⁶ See: Jeff O'Connell. 'Spartan Workout Secrets from the Star of *300*', www.menshealth.com.

Appendix 1¹



Figure 1: Xerxes depicted standing behind Darius I at Persepolis on the Apadana Audience relief. <http://www.livius.org/a/1/iran/proskynesis.jpg>

¹ All pictures in this Appendix are still images taken from the film *300* (2006) unless otherwise stated.



Figure 2: A relief showing Xerxes leaving his palace at Persepolis.

http://www.livius.org/a/iran/persepolis/xerxes/damaged_xerxes.JPG



Figure 3: Xerxes 'handling' Leonidas.



Figure 4: The Immortals as depicted in *300*.



Figure 5: The masses of Medes and Persians approaching Thermopylae.



Figure 6: Ephialtes depicted as deformed in *300*.

Appendix 2



Figure 1: Inscription on Natal Carbineers Memorial, Isandlwana. Author's photo, 2009.



Figure 2: Natal Carbineers Memorial, Isandlwana. Author's photo, 2009.

1. Poem printed in the Natal Witness, 9 August 1879.

<p>IN REDITUM VOLUNTARIORUM MILITUM CARMEN ALCAICUM.</p>	<p>AN ALCAIC ODE ON THE RETURN OF THE VOLUNTEERS.</p>
<p>Gaudete cives! Festus adest dies, Rursum refulsit, nubile dividens, Sol vester, et belli procellas Dissipat aura levis parumper.</p>	<p>Rejoice o friends! This is a festal day, The gleaming sun once more dispels war's gloom Which brooded lately o'er Natalia's land; Up! Give your Carbineers a welcome home.</p>
<p>Clamore laeto plaudere nunc decet Fratres, maritos militia truci Functos, et illaesos sodales, Ter jubilo celebrare festo.</p>	<p>Now is it meet to shout a glad applause, For brothers, husbands, sons, safe home again; For friends kept scatheless in that wild affray, Give three good ringing cheers with might and main.</p>
<p>Nolite raucis parcere vocibus; Echo resultans laudibus eff... In rebus expert... Pro...¹</p>	<p>What if your voice grows hoarse? Spare not for that; Let the hills echo back how our brave youth Recked not the perils of the late campaign, So they might guard their country. For in truth 'Tis but a little while since dire suspense, And war's alarms beset both hearth and home, The Zulus threatening, and ourselves in doubt, Some dangers present, others soon to come.</p>

¹ This section of the newspaper was damaged on the microfilm that I consulted, and thus proved unreadable; I believe that two stanzas are missing from the Latin text.

	<p>But that man fears dishonour more than death, Whom freedom nurtures with sure trust in God; He goes unflinching through opposing troops, And blenches not at war's uplifted rod,</p>
<p>Contemnit audax. Duxit in ardua Virtus repulsae nescia vel fugae, Lauroque ditavit future, Heu nimium juvenes fideles!</p>	<p>Brave because true. So our too trustful lads, Valour, which knows not how to cringe or fly, Beckoned right on to danger and to fame, And left them all to suffer, some to die.</p>
<p>Inter profundae laetitiae sonos, Sunt quas amarus flere jubet dolor, Optata non illas salutant Oscula, nec tenerae loquulae.</p>	<p>Forget not how amidst yon notes of joy, Bleeds many a woman's silent aching heart, Whose lips no more one other's lips may meet, Nor to his ear love's tender words impart.</p>
<p>Eheu! Quid istum commemorem diem (sol ipse lumen pallidus abdidit), Oppressa non devicta vitas Nostra cohors dedit in tumulta.</p>	<p>Ah! Why recall to mind that fateful day (The sun himself turned sickening from the sight), When overwhelmed, not beaten, our brave band Yielded their lives in internecine flight.</p>
<p>Nescisne quanto barbarus impetus, Contra phalanges irruerit ferox, Vel morto vexillum redemptum, Vix geminá, pretio tremendo?</p>	<p>None can forget the furious torrent force, The reckless courage of the Zulu host, Nor how a noble pair the colours saved, By their own death, nor grudged the fearful cost.</p>
<p>Signat sepulcrum nuncia Crux spei; Cautes tuentur praecipites locum; Ventique cunctantes susurrant Lene melos; volucres sacratum.</p>	<p>Where sleep the brave, the Cross reveals our hope; Those lofty guardian rocks rear high their heads, A lingering breeze sighs sweetly through the bents, The neighbouring bush a hallowing influence sheds</p>
<p>Lucum salutat. Hinc homines procul</p>	<p>With songs of bird. Let no rude step profane</p>

<p>Cedant profane. Sistite paullulum, Vos o viatores! Honore Ne careant patriae sepulcra.</p> <p>Nam sempiterna est gloria; posteris, Quum nostra dudum praeteriit dies, Narrabit Isandlwana nomen, Nobilium facinus virorum.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">C.D.</p> <p>Maritzburgi, Kal, August 1879.</p>	<p>These sacred precincts. Traveller, pause-awhile; They who lie here died for their country's sake, Their memory shall enjoy their country's smile.</p> <p>Self sacrifice ne'er dies. And still when down The stream of time our record disappears, Will Isandlwana to our sons proclaim The noble exploits of our Carbineers.</p> <p>Maritzburg, August 1st 1879.</p>
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2. Douglas Livingstone.²

After Thermopylae

Years later, limping along
some foreign Mainstreet,
my good eye burning
from dust and the cataract,
I saw the sergeant who had broken,
staring back at me,
his brow furrowed.

Weeping, he had run,
stopping to scream back at
our jerked-about faces,
surprising our stone-
set expressions of concentration.

None understood what he shouted;
disappearing, a crab
with blooded nails clawing backwards
over boulders, mouthing.

² Reproduced from Hacksley & Maclellan 2004: 426-427.

Then the foe: right, front.

An ocean of helmeted beards.

I had forgotten the incident,
being found, a not-dead man
under dead men,
senseless with three wounds:
my manhood, an open thigh,
a closed eye – Old Kyklopes.

Two ancient soldiers
in a strange Mainstreet.
'God, gods ... Is it really?
In the name of ... A drink.'

Two sly veterans
in a complicity of survival.
I hesitated and looked away
- a Spartan, he.

Then I went with him,
he too having forgotten.

I dot-and-carried to a tavern,
his sword-hand clawed

under my aged, shield bicep.

We drank. He spat,

made libation, recalled

past campaigns, comrades.

I listened, silent,

having also forsaken war.

3. Albert H. Bencke.³

Thermopylae.

B.C. 480.

I.

King Leonidas, of Sparta,

Leader of the brave and free,

'Gainst the mighty host of Persia,

Guards the pass Thermopylae.

II.

Not a man can hope to conquer,

Nought remains except to die;

Yet the little band of heroes

One and all disdain to fly.

III.

Flank is turned, and gone are allies,

See advance the mighty foe;

Rushing comes a storm of arrows,

Swift precursors of the blow.

IV.

Onward sweep the Persian surges,

Beat against the human wall,

³ Bencke (1879)

Till o'erborne by human billows

One by one the heroes fall.

V.

In an hour all is over,

King hath fallen at their head;

Close around their noble leader

Lie the noble Spartan dead.

VI.

Scanty is the Persian triumph,

Though, indeed, they win the pass;

Yea, so poor the Spartan mothers

Proudly scorn to cry Alas!

VII.

Nor in vain was great example,

As the Persians found, I wis,

When it taught the Grecian people

How to win at Salamis.

VIII.

Many a fight have won the Spartans,

Battles great, by land and sea,

But their Maidens' boast was ever

How was *lost* Thermopylae.

Rorke's Drift, Natal

A.D. 1879

I.

On a gloomy winter's evening
Home there came a grievous word,
How that woeful sad disaster
And "defeat" had been incurred.

II.

Yes, "defeat," and soon there followed -
Folly helped - a cry of "Shame,"
"Blotted was the roll of honour,
Marred the British soldier's fame."

III.

"Twenty thousand savage foeman,
Known to fight with hearty will,
Armed with European weapons,
Trained by European skill" –

IV.

"These had crushed a half battalion,
Men in British garb of red,
Slain them all, and ta'en the colours,"
Tears of frantic rage are shed.

V.

True 'tis well to cry for vengeance,
But forbear the cry of "Shame;"
What though leader rashly blundered
Wherefore shriek of sullied fame?

VI.

For with fierce devoted valour
Long they fought unequal fight,
Yea for every blow received
Thrice and more they made requite!

VII.⁴

True, alas! they lost their colours,
Lost the worshipped silken fold,
But 'twas not until there failed,
Hand, the colours to uphold.

VIII.

One and all they died beneath them,
Death they could not but foreknow

⁴ Bencke (1879: 2) has emended the text of his own poem and wishes the reader to read these two stanzas in place of VII. He states the first stanza to be an emendation and the second to be an interpolation.

Rumour said they lost the colours,
Gold inwrought with fame of old,
But 'twas false, alone there failed
Hands the colours to uphold.

E'en in death they yet preserved them,
Twain they died the flags to save,
And the rest to aid devotion
Sternly fighting, found a grave.

Yet to save their country's honour

Died, their faces to the foe.

IX.

What is shame and what is honour?

Yea so long as time may be

Purest glory shall illumine

“Twenty-fourth's” Thermopylae!

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¹ All websites were last accessed, and correct, on the 10/06/09.