This is a pre-copy-editing version of the following chapter:

- Fotheringham, L.S. (2019), 'Doing justice to the past through the representation of violence: *Three* and ancient Sparta', in Hague, I., I. Horton & N. Mickwitz, *Contexts of Violence in Comics*, London, Routledge.

Introduction

This chapter examines a recent work of graphic historical fiction set in the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, focusing in particular on its representation of violence within Spartan culture. The decision about which kinds of violence to represent is an important factor in the work's self-positioning vis-à-vis the traditions of popular depictions of Sparta, especially one important precursor in the comics medium; this self-positioning, together with aspects of the way that violence is represented, encourages readers to think about the complexities of our historical understanding. The chapter builds on my earlier analysis of approaches to Sparta in twentieth-century popularising works in different media (Fotheringham 2012), and combines comics-analysis with insights taken from de Groot's work on the (prose) historical novel (2010).

Three, conceived and written by Kieron Gillen with art by Ryan Kelly (pencils/inks) and Jordie Bellaire (colours), was published by Image Comics in five monthly issues from October 2013 to February 2014; a collected edition followed shortly after the end of the run. The choice of the title *Three*, for a graphic novel about Sparta published in 2013-14, already indicates that the work is positioning itself in relation to *300*, Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's depiction of the glorious sacrifice of the Spartans at the battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C.E. (Dark Horse, five issues May-September 1998; collection 1999). In pre-publication interviews, Gillen had been open about the fact that his initial idea for *Three* emerged from concern about *300*'s suppression of the Spartan military machine's dependence on unfree labour, jarringly combined with a constant emphasis on the Spartans as the defenders of a freedom they denied to others (Jaffe 2012; Dietsch 2013). In *Three*, as a consequence, the majority of the scenes of violence do not show the Spartan army in glorious combat with external enemies, but the elite Spartans' violent oppression of the local slave/serf-class, known as the helots. Gillen's first move in his attempt to do justice to the historical sufferings of the helots is to reinsert them into the story being told.

The plot of *Three*, however, goes well beyond a simple reminder of the helots' existence. When a small group of Spartans, led by an ephor (annually elected magistrate), carries out a massacre at a helot farmstead, three of the helots – two men, Terpander and Klaros, and one woman, Damar – unexpectedly succeed in killing all their attackers except the young nobleman Arimnestos; they flee ahead of reprisals, making for the neighbouring state of Messene. Arimnestos takes the news back to Sparta, where he is outcast for having fled the slaughter; the remaining ephors send Kleomenes II, the young king of the Agiad dynasty (Sparta had two royal households ruling in tandem), at the head of three hundred elite warriors, to chase down the three helots. Arimnestos also pursues the three on his own; after trapping them in a ravine with no exit, he fatally wounds Terpander but is himself killed by Klaros. Kleomenes and his warriors are not far behind. In an echo of Thermopylae, where

three hundred Spartans held a narrow pass against the overwhelming might of the Persian army, the three helots are trapped in the ravine by three hundred Spartans; Klaros, wearing Arimnestos' armour, holds them off for a while but is eventually killed, although by a trick rather than in open combat: two Spartans are sent to climb the ravine and push a rock down to crush him. Because the Spartans, unaware that one of the three fugitives was a woman, take the mutilated corpse of Arimnestos as that of the third helot, Damar is no longer pursued and escapes to Messene, where she bears Klaros' twin sons.

The violent massacre at the helot farmstead, along with various other events recalled in the course of the main narrative, takes a second step towards doing justice to the sufferings of the neglected historical group by representing those sufferings in vivid detail on the stage. Gillen's story also takes further steps, giving the helots personality and agency rather than treating them simply as victims. This is achieved both in small ways throughout the narrative and in the major acts of rebellion depicted and referred to – occasions when helots used violence against their Spartan masters. The invented story and characters allow the helots' rebellion to be represented as having some success: they achieve heroic status, especially through the plot's reversal of the Thermopylae motif, which turns the three hundred Spartans from heroic defenders into the overwhelming odds against which these new heroes must fight. One of the three, against all odds, escapes and survives.[1]

De Groot draws attention to certain aspects of historical fiction which mean that it can very naturally be used – though it need not be used – to encourage reflection on the ways in which historical information is handed down, to draw attention to individuals and groups who have been under-represented in the historical record, and to challenge earlier authoritarian narratives (2010, 2-4, 21, 29, 139-182).[2] The conflicting duties of the writer to historical accuracy (where such a thing is possible) and to the narrative expectations of fiction-readers, to representing the strangeness of the past and to creating a picture that can be understood in the present, encourage reflection; this is confirmed by the tendency of historical fiction to include substantial amounts of discursive paratext in the form of prefaces, afterwords, footnotes etc. (De Groot 2010, 6-7, 63). Paratext is a notable feature of *Three*, discussed below. The need to invent material, in order create a convincing fictional world, encourages the inclusion of women, children, servants, slaves and other neglected and oppressed groups; this in turn enables the challenging of earlier accounts which focused primarily on elite males. In the case of *Three*, reinserting the helots into the picture was the *raison d'être* of the project, and although Gillen emphasised in interviews that the challenge to a particular precursor

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[1] An earlier work of fiction – not read by Gillen – which similarly creates a heroic tale about helots is Manfredi 2002.

[2] For an example of graphic historical non-fiction focusing on the telling of untold stories, see Witek's *Comic Books as History* on the work of Jack Jackson (1989, 58-95). Witek hints at the connections between history and fiction when he states that 'all three creators [whose work is explored in his book] are concerned to varying degrees with the connections between historical and fictional narrative' (p.4). Another non-fiction equivalent to Gillen's recuperation of the helots is Joe Sacco's work on the 'previously unarchived voices' of Palestinians discussed by Chute (2016, 235; 243), and also by Adams (2008, 121; 157) and Earle (2017, 120), under the label 'documentary' comics. For an example of an academic historian expressing concern about certain historical approaches undervaluing the sufferings the helots, see Cartledge 2003, 17.

was only the starting-point for the project, the relationship with *300* increases the chance that readers may reconsider previously held ideas about Sparta.

Doing justice to lost figures from history, however, is far from easy due the extreme difficulty of knowing anything at all about them. The majority of the ancient evidence for Sparta, including for Spartan-helot interaction, was composed by other Greeks viewing the city-state from the outside, often writers from inimical cities or working centuries later and looking back on semi-legendary paragons of military virtue. As neither enmity nor idolisation is necessarily conducive to accurate reporting, historians refer to the traditional composite picture of Spartan society, built from a patchwork of comments and anecdotes, as the 'Spartan mirage'.[3] There is almost no aspect of this picture that has not been addressed sceptically by some historian or other, and there are widely divergent views on the helots, as expressed by the various authors collected in Luraghi and Alcock 2003 – a work read by Gillen as part of his research for *Three*. On the other hand, popular depictions of Sparta, including popular history/documentary as well as historical fiction in various media, tend to perpetuate the traditional composite view, albeit with varying emphases.

In my earlier work on twentieth-century popular representations of the battle of Thermopylae, I identified two common approaches to the depiction of Sparta (Fotheringham 2012). Because one of Sparta's best known features is military prowess, all representations include reference to the military violence the city exercised with such skill against her external enemies. Works taking a positive approach to Sparta, however, tend to ignore or downplay those aspects of the mirage which involve violence internal to Spartan society, including the violent treatment, or even the very existence, of the helots; works coming to an ultimately negative view of Sparta horrify the reader/viewer by emphasising these aspects. Miller's *300*, along with Steven Pressfield's prose novel *Gates of Fire* (also 1998), seem at first to represent something new in that they combine a clearly positive evaluation of Sparta with more emphasis than had been shown previously on one form of internal violence, the brutal communal training regime. Each author, however, appears to have had greater qualms about other forms of violence, including the oppression of the helots. Miller essentially leaves them out, an omission he acknowledged in interview was made in order not to 'turn off' readers (George 2003, 65). Pressfield allows the helots considerable prominence in his plot, but I argue that aspects of his presentation reveal discomfort with the historical situation, ultimately undervaluing the suffering of large numbers of historical individuals. These works, therefore, although appearing more willing to face up to some of the less palatable aspects of the Spartan mirage, in the end still de-emphasise others out of a desire to present Sparta positively.

I will return briefly later to the question of whether *Three* presents a straightforwardly negative view of Sparta. Wishing to produce something that stands as more than simply the 'anti-*300*', however, Gillen chose not to present an alternative take on Thermopylae itself – though still engaging with Thermopylae as a moment in Spartan history important to his characters – but to set his story over a century later, a period far less represented in popular culture. Focusing on this period, when Sparta's power had entered its long period of decline, provided the opportunity to present an alternative

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[3] The term was originally coined, as 'le mirage Spartiate', by French historian François Ollier in 1933.

picture of Spartan society that would still not be too jarring for readers familiar with *300*. Since so little is known about the helots, the core story had to be fictional, whereas *300* depicts an actual historical event; whereas Miller's approach to the battle of Thermopylae is heavily mythologised, however, Gillen wanted to ground his story in as accurate a setting as possible. The importance of the claim to historicity for the image of the book is signalled by the inclusion of Professor Stephen Hodkinson (University of Nottingham) as 'Historical Consultant' alongside members of the creative team when the forthcoming comic was being advertised to retailers (CBR Staff 2013), and on the title-pages of each issue and the collection. A conversation between Gillen and Hodkinson about various aspects of Sparta was serialised in issues 2-5 and reprinted in the collection. Considerably more pages of the collection's back matter are devoted to historicity than to artwork: nine pages of 'Historical Footnotes' (new to the collection) and eleven pages of '*Three*: A Conversation', in comparison to seven pages of 'Covers Gallery' and three of 'Layouts & Design'. Even readers who do not choose to read the historical information in detail are likely to notice the claim to historicity being staked here.[4]

Hodkinson's own work on ancient Sparta has taken a sceptical approach to numerous aspects of the Spartan mirage; he describes the tendency in recent research, including his own, 'to "normalize" Sparta, […] based upon an increasing realization of the many respects in which her society – for all its peculiarities – was also characteristically Greek' (2006, 113). One scene in which this kind of normalisation may have been influential on *Three*, in contrast to other works where Spartans are depicted as going about armed in daily life because of the constant threat of a helot revolt, is the one in issue/chapter 2 where two Spartans stroll through the streets without weapons, although behind them numerous helots can be seen working, including one wielding a mallet which could easily have been used as a weapon against the hated oppressors (2.14-15; cf. '*Three*: A Conversation', p.9, Hodkinson 2006, 133). For the most part, however, Gillen felt that he could not challenge the traditional picture of Sparta too much for fear of losing the reader altogether:

> I ended up mainly writing to a core, popularly recognisable Sparta while trying to avoid conflicting with the latest research. I also backed away from some of the more radical theories, simply because they were so far away from that perception […] and so making the whole story too easily dismissed. ('Historical Footnotes', p.1)

Today's historians are in any case not agreed on the extent to which normalisation is appropriate; each aspect of the mirage is hotly debated. As historical consultant, Hodkinson was well aware not only of these disagreements but also of the artistic and commercial considerations that have to be taken into account when advising on the historicity of a project like *Three*. For all Gillen's desire to justice to the current scholarship on Sparta, a work of fiction is not necessarily the place to explore the wide variety of possible interpretations – although the use of inset stories, explored below,

[4] Page-numbers do not appear anywhere in either the individual issues or the collection. In order to reduce the numbers which must be counted in order to provide and decode references to specific pages, the count has been restarted for each individual issue/chapter ('1.1' indicates issue/chapter 1, page 1), and for each section of the back matter. References to '*Three*: A Conversation' are to the printing of the complete text in the collection rather than to its piecemeal distribution in the issues.

allows for the possibility that the storytelling is not always reliable, and Gillen does manage to include a reference to the fact that one of these existed in two versions (2.13-14). In the back matter of Issue 1 (not reprinted in the collection), Gillen describes his goal as producing 'a story as heroic as Thermopylae, but about the people in Sparta who never made it to the history books' (cf. Dietsch 2013). Heroic stories often involve some distortion of history.[5]

In what follows, I will begin with the representation of the helots as victims of violence and then move gradually to representations of their turning violence against their oppressors. I focus on embedded stories rather than violent events belonging to the main narrative for two reasons: because they are shorter and can be analysed in fewer words, and because of the relationship between embedded and frame stories encourages readers to reflect on the nature of historical understanding. I will start, however, with the opening five pages of the comic, which establish key aspects of the culture in which the story is set, and which are themselves separated from the main narrative as a kind of prologue.

Helots as victims: the *krypteia*

The prologue-section, marked out from the main narrative by heavier use of the narratorial voice in captions which help establish the setting, depicts a particularly brutal form of Spartan-helot violence described as a semi-regular occurrence by Plutarch:

> The magistrates from time to time sent out into the country at large the most discreet of the young warriors, equipped only with daggers and such supplies as were necessary. In the day time [*sic*] they scattered into obscure and out of the way places, where they hid themselves and lay quiet; but in the night they came down into the highways and killed every helot whom they caught. (Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 28)

Plutarch was writing in the early 2nd century C.E., but drawing on an earlier work of Aristotle (late 4th century B.C.E.). He refers to this institution/activity as the *krypteia*, a word sometimes translated as 'Secret Service'. An earlier account by Plato (early 4th century B.C.E.) omits the helot-killing and may suggest that all Spartan males went through this activity:

> the "Crypteia," as it is called, affords a wonderfully severe training in hardihood, as the men go bare-foot in winter and sleep without coverlets and have no attendants, but wait on themselves and rove through the whole countryside both by night and by day. (Plato, *Laws* 633b-c)

This description has led some modern scholars to see in the *krypteia* an ordeal which formed an initiation into manhood for Spartan youths. In Miller's *300*, although the word *krypteia* is not used, the scene depicting the young Leonidas' 'initiation' appears to draw on this Plato passage (*300*, 1.7-9). Plato may have omitted the helot-killing from his description because he did not know about it because the Spartans were secretive, because the function developed after his time, or because it was

[5] His emphasis on *Three* as a heroic tale leads Gillen to downplay its 'social realist' aspects. Nevertheless, his explicit orientation towards class politics and his focus on the labouring helots mean that his work has much in common with those works Adams classifies as social realism (2008: 29-34). It is worth noting that although Adams is explicitly focusing on documentary comics, one of his examples – Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* – is a partly fictionalised version of Nakazawa's life.

not relevant to his focus on training that develops 'hardihood'. The evidence provided by these two passages and a few other brief references has been hotly debated.[6]

The different scholarly interpretations of the *krypteia* are acknowledged by Gillen:

> In terms of the Krypteia's visuals, we walk an awkward line. As we talk about in the conversation, there's two traditional views of them. One has them as the secret police assassins. The other has a coming of age survival test. We merge both. The nakedness is mainly a nod to the latter. Greek sports were performed naked, so if this was an act of "sport" I wanted it visualised as such. The red cloaks are one of the big Spartan icons. The face paint is an invention. ('Historical Footnotes', p.1)

The idea of the 'coming of age survival test' is indicated by the use of the term 'rite of passage' that appears in the captions; it may also be indicated by the nudity of the Spartan youths – although after *300*, this early in *Three*, this could be understood as simply the way Spartans are always depicted. The face paint is compatible with the notion of this activity as some kind of ritual; as depicted, however, the ritual involves helot-killing, with the hardship undergone by the Spartan youths only hinted at if the reader stops to think about what wandering through the countryside naked would actually mean for the soles of the feet and the tenderer parts of the body; perhaps also in the emaciation of a couple of the youths' faces. A leaning towards the more violent take on the *krypteia* is ultimately unsurprising, due its recognisability as a standard feature of the Spartan mirage (for readers familiar with the mirage; see e.g. Selwood 2016), and for its value in establishing the type of Sparta in which the story is set. Hodkinson might perhaps be expected to be critical of this easy acceptance of the more vicious interpretation of the *krypteia*; instead, he acknowledges that 'most modern scholars produce a composite picture' of the two views, and describes Gillen's representation as 'the perfect amalgam' ('*Three*: A Conversation', p.2).

The artwork by Ryan Kelly and Jordie Bellaire demonstrates the effectiveness of the comics medium for conveying the effects of violent action, doing justice to the possible sufferings of the historical helots. The first page and a half of the sequence establish a potentially idyllic country-scene: the olive harvest. Halfway down p.2, the atmosphere darkens with the depiction of a group of young men, naked but for red cloaks and with faces weirdly painted, apparently lurking at the edge of the scene. On these pages, the panels are rectangular, separated by broad gutters, and extending to the page-edge; on p.3, as the Spartan youths begin to stalk their victims, the framework of the page changes. Panel-corners are no longer right angles; there is a subtle mismatch between the angles of the panel borders and those of the surrounding gutter, which itself is surrounded by black, seeping in from the page-edge. It is as if both the images and their frames have broken free from the regular grid and are floating loose on the page, reflecting the violent disturbance about to erupt. The visual disturbance is developed still further on p.4, where the panels have broken apart altogether and overlap, two corners of the largest are lost beyond the edge of the page, and the gutters of the two short, wide panels are coloured not pale yellow but a vibrant, shocking red (Figure 1.1). The final page of the sequence, which is given the spare, emphatic label 'Sparta', is a victim's eye-view splash-page,

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[6] A recent painstaking analysis can be found in Ducat 2006, 281-332.

coloured in shades of orange/brown against a pale-yellow background, showing five youths stabbing downwards in a frenzy (Figure 1.2). Reading *Three* in dialogue with *300* and the heroising image of Sparta that work represents, the prologue comes across as strongly corrective, pointing out that the Spartans not only exploited unfree labour but violently oppressed the helot labourers.

Helots as people: the *krypteia* and other massacres in the main narrative

The *krypteia* is briefly referenced in the main narrative at 3.7 when Damar, referred to earlier as a 'widow' (1.10), confirms that her husband was one of the helots who was 'harvested' by the *krypteia*. Two panels illustrate Damar's memory as what I have called above an inset story. The narrative of *Three* is peppered with references to the past, both fictional character's memories and attested historical events such as Thermopylae. On seven occasions (1.22, 1.23, 2.13, 2.18, 3.7, 4.7, 5.12) the references to earlier events are not simply referred to in dialogue but illustrated in separate panels, marked out from the main narrative by their colouring. In the next section I will discuss the first two examples of these flashbacks, the pair of stories told by Terpander which prompt the initial massacre at the helot farmstead (see Figures 1.3-1.4). Like these images, Damar's memories are illustrated in a pair of identically sized panels united by a single gutter, in grey tones rather than colour except for a spattering of red blood-drops which creates the impression that these images have a physical substance, as if they were documents on which blood could be spilled. The grey tones convey a sense of pastness through the association with pre-colour photography, while the regular size and shape within a noticeable gutter used here may recall Polaroids. The images of violence that are conveyed using this technique thus acquire something of the status of historical documents.

The way the colouring technique used for flashbacks in *Three* grants the episodes a kind of physical existence means that they vividly symbolise the on-going presence of past – a potentially important theme in any historical novel. The visual representation of Damar's memory on the page, immediately beside the image of Damar in the present of the story, parallels the way her present behaviour is influenced by her past. The anonymous act of helot-slaying depicted in the prologue is personalised and made more specifically relevant to the current action; in addition, Damar's expression of her own thoughts on the process turns her from simply a victim into a human being finding a way to live with what has happened. This narrative move parallels recent developments in scholarship on historical slavery explained by Hodkinson: from viewing the enslaved as 'defenceless, passive victims' to exploring the ways in which they retain agency in an attempt to do more justice to their experiences ('*Three*: A Conversation', p.5).

Here what is depicted is not a specific incident recounted in an ancient source, although it does have a mediated relationship with the passages from Plutarch and Aristotle discussed above. On five of the occasions when the technique is used, however, an episode taken from the actual ancient sources is being illustrated. This is the case with the next episode of violence to be discussed, dealing with one of the most controversial single episodes in Spartan-helot relations (4.7).[7] Here Terpander, suspicious about Klaros' skill with weapons, is asking about his compatriot's past; he has guessed that Klaros once fought in the Spartan army, as helots were on various historical occasions

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[7] Opposing scholarly views of the credibility of the story are expressed by Paradiso 2004 and Harvey 2004.

encouraged to do. The story Terpander tells comes from Thucydides 4.80.3 (with variants in other authors):

> … with a view to guarding against the Helots—they had once even resorted to the following device. They made proclamation that all Helots who claimed to have rendered the Lacedaemonians [= Spartans] the best service in war should be set apart, ostensibly to be set free. They were, in fact, merely testing them, thinking that those who claimed, each for himself, the first right to be set free would be precisely the men of high spirit who would be the most likely to attack their masters. About two thousand of them were selected and these put crowns on their heads and made the rounds of the temples, as though they were already free, but the Spartans not long afterwards made away with them, and nobody ever knew in what way each one perished.

It is precisely fear of such an act – an extension of the *krypteia*'s remit to kill the 'strongest' helots, established in the prologue – that, Terpander suspects, prompted Klaros to fake an injury and thus get away from the army.

The two panels containing this story are not united by a single gutter but alternate with panels showing Terpander speaking (2.18). Readers may be suspicious of Terpander, whose aggravating character has been well established by this point in the story, and who is clearly motivated by a desire to get a reaction from Klaros; this emphasised by the repeated depiction of his face: in two panels he is directing a probing look at his addressee. Terpander's use of the past here goes beyond Damar's explanatory use earlier; he actively shapes the telling of the story, not for the purpose of informing and educating, but to support a theory he has developed and to get a reaction out of his interlocutor. The parallel between Terpander's use of history and Gillen's or indeed any historical writer's is there to be drawn by any reader inclined to reflection. Those who turn to the back matter are explicitly invited to consider the problem of historicity in terms not only of what happened but of what historical groups believed about what (might have) happened:

> This anecdote was high up the list of stories to use. It's also a controversial story, in terms of where and when (and even whether) it could have happened. Even the "how" is controversial if you think about it. It's not as if 2000 people being killed is in any way easy to arrange. I end up choosing the most conservative, safest telling – and it's presented by Terpander who – despite all his knowledge – is far from a reliable narrator. It's the sort of story that while we may doubt details of it, you have to suspect the Helots believed it 100%. ('Historical Footnotes', p.8)

Gillen's reflections on Terpander's use of this story encapsulate the problem of the Spartan mirage: our evidence does not give us Sparta, but only the stories people told about Sparta.[8]

In a subsequent conversation with Damar at 5.12-13, Klaros finally confirms Terpander's suspicions, that he faked an injury in order to 'hide from the krypteia's blades'. He also conveys a memory of his

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[8] Similar awareness of the way information about more recent historical events may be filtered through the perspectives of the individuals recounting them is conveyed by Joe Sacco's emphasis on his own presence as interviewer filtering the accounts of his Palestinian interlocutors; see for example Adams 2008, 151-3.

own, explaining the event which drove him, through shame, to reject the freedom offered by the Spartans to those who fought alongside them, and return to his helot status: his participation in the torching of a sacred grove where the Messenians (themselves former helots) had taken refuge from the Spartans under whom he was fighting. The offer of freedom to 6,000 helot soldiers is from Xenophon (*Hellenica* 6.29); the torching of the grove is invented by Gillen, although based on an attested event from another period ('Historical Footnotes', p.9). The episode represents a variety of ways in which helots could attempt to take control of their lives: Klaros himself, the character we are most interested in, demonstrates moral judgement in his decision about the future he deserves – reversing the decision he and other helots made previously, to support the Spartans against the Messenian freedom-fighters in the hope of acquiring freedom through this means. The Messenians themselves are an example of helots using violence against their masters in an act of rebellion, the ultimate exercising of agency by the enslaved. The first occasion on which *Three* mentions such a thing happening is the subject of my final section.

Helot use of violence

The first two inset stories in *Three* are a pair told told by the helot Terpander, who is characterised as skilful with words but also as something of a trouble-maker; it is the second story of the pair which causes the massacre of the helots – a fact Terpander acknowledges later (3.8, 4.20). Although only one of the stories involves helots, the two have to be taken together. When the ephor and his retinue, including the young Arimnestos, take shelter from the weather at the farmstead, the helots are commanded to drink unwatered wine in order to demonstrate the follies of drunkenness. This Spartan practice is attested at Plutarch *Lycurgus* 28; its inclusion in the story underlines the oppression of the helots by the Spartans even when they are not being murdered but instead compelled by the threat of violence to perform humiliating actions. Emboldened by the wine and in spite of Damar's attempt to stop him, Terpander tells two stories about a namesake of Arimnestos from more than a century before. The first of these focuses on the battle of Plataea, a year after Thermopylae, in which the Greeks, led by the Spartans, dealt the final crushing blow to the invading Persian army (1.19; Figure 1.3). Both Herodotus and Plutarch attest that in the course of this battle, the Persian general Mardonios was killed by a Spartan named Aeimnestos (Herodotus)/Arimnestos (Plutarch): Plutarch specifies that this Spartan crushed Mardonios' head with a rock (*Aristides* 19); Herodotus adds that he subsequently died in battle against rebellious Messenian helots in a place called Stenyklaros (9.64). Terpander goes on to tell this story too (1.20; Figure 1.4), embellished with references to the fact that the Spartans have lost their pre-eminence in the Greek world. This is an act of insolence so great that the ephor initiates the massacre by commanding: 'Everyone dies. He dies last' (1.21-22).

The first of these two stories depicts the event most likely to be familiar to readers, the promise of victory at the battle of Plataea having been the end-point of *300*; Thermopylae itself has just been mentioned (1.16-17). The preceding conversation also flags up that what is coming is an inset narrative:

> I know stories. I know history. I know where one starts and where another begins. […] Would you hear that story? (1.18)

The references to Thermopylae and Plataea may create an association between the use of this technique and the representation of historically attested events; Terpander's conversation, however, draws attention to the difficulty of distinguishing history from some other kind of story. When the visuals shift, introducing the grey-scale, blood-spattered technique for the first time, it is clear what the shift signals: what is depicted is the content of this 'story'. The angles also change, to fit the subject-matter: an outdoor, action-packed battle-scene that contrasts with the oppressive interior of the farmstead. A continuous gutter frames the four panels of the story together with one at the top showing the storyteller and one at the bottom showing the reaction to the story.

The second story is a surprise addition, which instantly shifts the tone; appropriately, it comes after a page-turn. Speaker and listener are both depicted above the panels of the story itself, which break free from the rest of the page in a 2x2 grid surrounded by its own gutter, hanging suspended on the page as Terpander's words can be imagined hanging suspended in the deathly silence of the room. The absolutely even size of the four panels may recall film-frames as well as Polaroid photographs. The sequence of four images precisely parallels the visual storytelling of the Plataea story on the previous page: an establishing shot showing the two sides in the conflict; a second shot showing which has the upper hand; a third showing Mardonios/Arimnestos on the ground while his nemesis approaches; a fourth showing Arimnestos/the helot delivering the *coup de grace*. The low angle from which the helot is shown, however, recalls a different image: the victim's eye-view of the stabbing carried out by the *krypteia* at the end of the prologue (1.5). The reversal of the Spartan's position is thus communicated in relation to two previous moments from the issue/chapter; it embodies on a small scale the reversal of the Thermopylae story constituted by *Three* as a whole.

The encounter between the Spartans and the Messenians attested by Herodotus is not well known even to many scholars of ancient history. Readers who do not turn to the 'Historical Footnotes' to check may assume that it is invented; any who track down the original reference will be able to appreciate Gillen's skill in turning a brief aside in Herodotus into a significant event in his fictional narrative. The fact that some helots rebelled, sometimes successfully, may not be known even to readers who know they existed; the inclusion of this incident, like the setting of the story in this time-period, does some justice to the endeavours of historical helots. The back matter indicates where Gillen stands on the question of where history ends and story begins:

> Terpander is cheating a little. The Helots had free Messenian allies in this battle, and it was much more like a field battle than what he paints here. Worth noting that the elaborations Terpander makes are pretty much identical to the Spartan-centric telling of the battle of Thermopylae – entirely stressing the achievement of the group he wants to hail and removing everyone else. (Historical Footnotes, p.4)

Terpander's narration describes the attack on the Spartans as 'a lowly helot ambush' and suggests that the 'untrained, unremembered helot' can be seen as 'a better hero' because he 'had nothing but a rock to do the deed'. The images back up this emphasis: whereas at Plataea the heavily-armed and armoured Spartans appear to be natural victors, the helots at Stenyklaros are dressed in ordinary clothes and wield clubs, farm implements and rocks; their victory is a surprise. But in addition to making the point that Terpander is not always a reliable narrator, Gillen also invites readers to think

again about representations of Thermopylae. Not all readers will be aware of these subtleties, but by including the 'Historical Footnotes' Gillen at least makes it easy for them to become aware of them, and to reflect on the uses of history.

Conclusion

There is no room here to discuss one final step which Gillen takes in his attempt to do justice to the past: his handling of the Spartans themselves.

> I said earlier that my plan for *THREE* wasn't to stick a dagger into Sparta. If I was entirely honest, initially, my inspiration did lean angry. However, the second I started the research, I couldn't. I wanted to show Sparta, with all its complications. ('*Three*: A Conversation', p.4)

The treatment of the historical character Kleomenes II and the invented character Arimnestos, specifically the representation of inter-Spartan violence (including one kind ignored by both Miller and Pressfield), could be usefully explored in order to demonstrate that what Gillen is doing in *Three* is critiquing the Spartan system rather then demonising the Spartans in the way that Miller demonises the Persians in *300*. As well as doing justice to the sufferings of historical Spartans, this approach can be seen as a final step in doing justice to the helots, by acknowledging that their enemies too were human beings rather than caricatured oppressors. *Three* makes the most of the capabilities of the comics medium to convey a layered and sophisticated fiction exploring the complexities of historical knowledge, and succeeds more than many other works in various media have done in doing justice to the violence experienced by a range of people from the distant past.[9]

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[9] I owe sincere thanks to the editors for their patience and helpful suggestions, to Kieron Gillen and Stephen Hodkinson for their generosity in allowing me access to their correspondence, and to Matt Brooker, as always, for listening to ideas. I have also received feedback on the ideas from generous audiences at meetings of the Historical Fictions Research Network, Nottingham Does Comics, and the Classical Association.

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