Sam Lech

Vulture Bone Flute
Kyle Gervais
Western University, Canada

THIS IS MY SPARTA!

Screen Junkies’ satirical ‘Honest Trailer’ for 300 bills it as ‘a film based on a graphic novel based on an older film¹ based on ancient Greek propaganda based on a true story’.² And indeed, the 2007 movie and the 1998 Frank Miller comic book series that it is based on are particularly complicated moments in the already complicated reception history of Sparta and the Battle of Thermopylae (I will complicate things further by looking at Three, a response to 300). The derisive ‘Honest Trailer’, released on 25 February 2014, is one of the latest examples of negative reactions by critics, academics and artists to 300—both the comic and, more often, the film, which is not the slavish adaptation tacitly assumed by most studies. These reactions belie the commercial success of both comic and film,³ and tend to focus on the works’ questionable treatment of history, politics, race, gender, disability and sexuality. But comic books and action films traditionally fare poorly on these fronts. Why then the particularly strong criticism in this case? Certainly, the timing of at least the film’s release was a factor. As the US implemented a troop surge in Iraq, a woman and a black man announced their candidacy for presidency, and same-sex marriage began to gather momentum, it was hard not to read awkward subtexts into an American movie about a king

---

and his band of 300 nearly naked white muscle men fighting dark skinned effeminate Persians, while on the home front the queen submits to rape for political gain and intones such lines as ‘Freedom isn’t free at all’ (00.36.17).4

But I wonder if another exacerbating factor was a feeling, latent for most people but acutely felt by Classicists, that we have a right to possess the Classical past and construct its meaning for modern world, and that rival claims to ownership must be carefully guarded against.5 And so it is easy to shift the emphasis in the most often repeated line from 300. Faced unexpectedly with execution, a shocked Persian messenger objects, ‘This is blasphemy. This is madness!’ and Leonidas replies ‘This is Sparta!’ (1.13)6 But we perhaps hear ‘This is Sparta!’ This is Sparta, 300 seems to say: not the comfortable Sparta of older popular fiction like 1962’s The 300 Spartans (whitewashed and assimilated to contemporary Western tastes),7 nor the darker Sparta known to modern academics (a state of slavers, eugenicists and military disciplinarians, easily appropriated as a model for both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union),8 but a more worrisome Sparta that practises eugenics, suppresses dissent, derides homosexuality and effeminacy, endorses suicide missions, and still somehow stands as a model for modern Western democracy and family values.9 This paradoxical Sparta can be most clearly seen in the film version of 300, and in the first two parts of this paper I will trace how it was developed from the very different Sparta of the comic book as part of an attempt to accommodate Miller’s idiosyncratic vision of the Thermopylae legend to the tastes of a broader audience. Then, I will turn to the comic book series Three, which deconstructs the visions of Sparta found

4 I cite the film by time index (hh.mm.ss) and the comics by issue and page (i.pp). Gorgo quotes a phrase often repeated in the US with varying degrees of piousness. A version is inscribed on the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, which was dedicated in 1995. On the other hand, the song ‘Freedom isn’t Free’ from the popular film Team America: World Police, released in 2004 just three years before 300, specifies that ‘freedom costs a buck-o-five’.
5 Cf. Jeroen Lauwers, Marieke Dhont, and Xanne Huybrecht, “‘This is Sparta!’ Discourse, gender, and the Orient in Zack Snyder’s 300”, in Ancient worlds in film and television: Gender and politics, ed. Almut-Barbara Renger and Jon Solomon. (Leiden: Brill), 91.
6 Thus the comic (throughout I use italics to mark where words have been bolded in the original). The movie version modifies the line for its Leonidas, ‘cinema’s yelliest king’ (‘Honest Trailer—300’. Screen Junkies. 2014.): ‘Madness? THIS! IS! SPARTA!’ (00.12.40).
in both the film and comic 300 and reasserts a more consistently negative vision of the city state. What will emerge is a series of attempts to claim ownership of Sparta and the Battle of Thermopylae, and to shape the meaning of these important aspects of the ancient world for a modern audience.

‘FOR HONOR’S SAKE. FOR GLORY’S SAKE. WE MARCH.’

In the story of the Battle of Thermopylae, comic book writer and artist Frank Miller found both the beginnings and the apex of a career-long fascination with heroic sacrifice. He learned of Thermopylae as a boy by watching the 1962 film The 300 Spartans, where he saw that such sacrifice involved a hero ‘[doing] the right thing at the cost of his own life’,10 and that ‘the hero wasn’t necessarily the guy who won’.11 Many of the heroes in his comic books before 300 embodied this ideal: the samurai in Ronin (1983–84) kills himself to gain the mystical power needed to defeat a demon, Batman in The Dark Knight Returns (1986) dies in a fight against Superman (or does he?) to prevent government interference in Gotham City, and Marv in Sin City: The Hard Goodbye (1991–92) endures pain, defamation and a lingering death to avenge the murder of a prostitute who was ‘nice’ to him. Miller’s ‘heroes’ usually have unheroic qualities. Cruelly violent, antisocial, psychologically fractured, even mentally unstable—often, the only thing that separates them from the villains they fight is the laudable principle that they fight for.

Unsurprisingly, the 300 Spartans as envisaged by Miller perfectly fit the model of heroism that they had inspired him to develop. Miller’s 300 are tough and uncompromising, savage to their enemies, almost wholly unencumbered by social or familial ties, and suicidally dedicated to the loftiest (and most abstract) of principles: honour, glory, duty, reason, law, justice, freedom. These characteristics were ideal for Miller’s vision of heroism, but necessarily came along with a historical society marred by many unpalatable practices, including slavery, child abuse and military indoctrination, and eugenics. Miller softened or passed over these practices in an effort to main-

tain audience engagement with his heroes. As he puts it: ‘I didn’t want to render Sparta in overly accurate terms, because ultimately I do want you to root for the Spartans. I couldn’t show them being quite as cruel as they were. I made them as cruel as I thought a modern audience could stand.’

It turns out that his idea of what a modern audience could stand was out of step with the makers of the film adaptation. But before we discuss that, I want to focus on Miller’s goal of having his audience ‘root for’ the 300. In fact, I think he aims for more than this, and invites us to ‘identify’ with the Spartans—and even to join the Spartan cause. The narrative aligns the reader closely with the 300 Spartans, and especially Leonidas. Members of the 300 appear in 66 of the 75 pages in the five-issue series; Leonidas himself appears in 49. In some of these pages, Leonidas acts or speaks; in others he simply observes the actions of others. The narrator is an (apparently) anonymous Spartan soldier who refers to the 300 in the first person plural (‘We march’ [1.1]) and Leonidas in the third person; nevertheless, he frequently describes the king’s unspoken thoughts directly. Three times, these thoughts precipitate flashbacks that are presented as Leonidas’ memories (1.11–13, 2.2–7, 5.13). This close alignment with Leonidas culminates in his death scene, where the reader views the action in four large panels through the eye holes in Leonidas’ own helmet (5.10–11). This ostentatious visual trick is combined with the narrator’s vivid description of the king’s memories and sensory experience: ‘The seaborne breeze coolly kissing the sweat at his chest and neck. Gulls cawing, complaining even as they feast on thousands of floating dead. The steady breathing of the three hundred boys at his back …’ (5.13). The reader sees, feels, hears and remembers what Leonidas does, and when Leonidas dies, the narrator allows him to take over the captions and ‘speak’ in his own voice to his absent wife: ‘My queen. My wife.

---

13 Miller discusses his desire not to create ‘an ambiguous reaction in a reader’, which he would have risked if he had emphasised the Spartans’ less noble qualities.
Daly ‘Miller’s Tales’.
Brayshaw ‘Interview with Frank Miller’, 55.
14 I have discussed elsewhere my discomfort with the concept of ‘identification’, which can discourage nuanced understanding of how audiences engage with characters but here the term will serve.
My love. Be strong. Goodbye.’ (5.18) The invitation to ‘identify’ with the king at the moment of his glorious heroic sacrifice could not be stronger.

This glorious death is followed by another remarkable device to manipulate reader identification. 300 begins with three splash pages of the Spartan army marching, and the narration, ‘We march. From dear Lakonia—from sacred Sparta—we march. For honor’s sake—for glory’s sake—we march.’ (1.1–3) In the absence of any identifying information over the next 70 pages, we must conclude that the insistent first person plurals of the opening and the rest of the narration are spoken by an anonymous member of the 300. A reader might start to suspect that something is up when it is revealed that a semi-fictional Spartan soldier named Dilios—the army’s best storyteller!—is sent away before the fatal last stand.15 Throughout the narrative, the narrator has referred to Dilios in the third person (e.g., the repeated ‘Dilios spins his stories.’ [1.7, 3.5, 5.4]), but in the final pages of the comic this is revealed as a subtle trick.16 After a splash page showing the dead Spartans with the narration giving an English translation of Simonides’ famous sepulchral epigram,17 the next page opens with two panels of Dilios looking out directly at the reader and talking about the inspirational quality of the 300’s last stand in a speech that begins, ‘And so my king died. And so my brothers died. Barely a year ago’. (5.21) We realise that the narrator has been Dilios all along. The next panels show that he is speaking to his troops before the Battle of Plataea. The relationship between narrator and reader has bled into one between Dilios and the Spartan soldiers, and the subtle narrative logic of the transition falls into place when narrative captions reappear, placed alongside Dilios’ speech bubbles at Plataea. Again, the captions refer to Dilios in the third person: ‘Captain Dilios spins his stories. His best story. The one about the Hot Gates. The Hot Gates—and beyond. [5.21]): modern comic book narrator and ancient Spartan storyteller are one and the same, comic book reader and Spartan soldier are one. On the first pages of the comic, when the narrator declared ‘We march’, only wilful readers could break down the narrative barrier and number themselves in that ‘we’. On the last page, as the Spartans attack at Plataea, the invitation to attack with them is there for only wilful readers to refuse: ‘The order is giv-

15 Dilios, who loses an eye in the fighting before being sent away, has roots in the historical Aristodemus, a Spartan sent away from the last stand because he suffered an eye disease (Hdt. Hist. 7.229).
16 Oddly, several interpreters fail to understand that the final pages identify the narrator as Dilios: e.g., GN Murray, ‘Zack Snyder, Frank Miller and Herodotus: Three takes on the 300 Spartans’, Akroterion 52 (2007): 25; Gideon Nisbet, Ancient Greece in film and popular culture (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2008), 140; Lauwers et al., ‘This is Sparta’, 92–3.
17 ‘Go tell the Spartans, passerby: that here, by Spartan law, we lie.’ (5.20).
en’, the caption reads, ‘The battle flutes play. To victory—we charge!’ (5.22)

‘FOR SPARTA. FOR FREEDOM. TO THE DEATH.’

The makers of the film adaptation of *300* have repeatedly emphasised their faithfulness to Miller’s comic, focusing in particular on visual fidelity. And indeed, the comic did offer rich visual material for direct translation to the medium of epic cinema. But its savage, uncompromising narrative and characters were much more problematic for a film whose success depended on reaching a much wider audience than the comic. So the filmmakers made both obvious and subtle changes to the comic in an effort to undo Miller’s uncomfortable invitation to ‘identify’ with his heroes. The most immediately obvious change has one of the most subtle effects. We saw how Miller conceals his narrator until the end to encourage identification of his readers with his Spartans. The filmmakers reveal Dilios as the narrator almost immediately, showing him speaking to his troops at Plataea less than six minutes into the movie. Far from identifying audience with Spartans, this clearly established narrative frame offers a way for the audience to distance themselves. As Gideon Nisbet puts it:

Within the film, Miller’s editorial voice became just one voice (albeit the only one we got to hear)—Dilios. … Snyder and his collaborators bracketed Miller’s ultra-conservative revisionism and offered a get-out for *300*’s homo-, xeno-, and liberal-phobia—if you were inclined to accept one, and not all audiences were.

---

18 Like most films, *300* relied on collaboration between director, producers, writers, actors, and other. There is no need to distinguish individual contributions here.


22 Nisbet, Ancient Greece in film and popular culture, 140; Murray, ‘Zack Snyder, Frank Miller and Herodotus’, 24–25. Both naively accept this narrative device.
It is not quite true that Dilios’ is the only voice we hear. Other voices, absent, deeply marginalised, or treated differently in the comic, emerge in the film as humanising alternatives to Miller’s relentless focus on the cold militarism of his 300 Spartans. The most prominent of these voices is Queen Gorgo’s, whose role in the comic is limited to seven images and four speech bubbles on a single page (2.7). The film expands this considerably to show her interacting at length with her son (a character not present in the comic) and husband and playing a prominent role in Spartan politics.23 Almost all of this expanded role comprises scenes completely absent from the comic, many of which demonstrate the suffering that Gorgo endures as a result of Leonidas’ decision to fight at Thermopylae; most notably, her son is threatened by the traitorous politician Theron, she allows Theron to rape her in exchange for a chance to plead with the Spartan government on behalf of Leonidas’ cause, and we see her silently learning of Leonidas’ death and passing the news on to her son.

Gorgo is also inserted into the scene where Leonidas kills the Persian messenger, a scene subtly changed from the comic in several ways to portray women in a manner more acceptable to a wider cinematic audience. In the comic, the only women present in the scene are four anonymous characters in the marketplace including, on prominent display near the centre of the panel, a prostitute showing off her bare breasts (1.12). In the film, the prostitute is absent. Instead, Gorgo gets one of Leonidas’ lines from the comic (‘Do not be coy or stupid, Persian. You can afford neither in Sparta.’ [00.09.36]) and an extra line, attributed to the historical Gorgo (Plut. Mor. 240E.5), ‘only Spartan women give birth to real men’ (00.09.43). Then, as Leonidas ponders whether to give into the messenger’s demands or kill him, he looks in succession at a woman and her family working in a nearby field, a woman holding her daughter in the marketplace, a group of women, old men and young boys, and finally, Gorgo. His decision made to kill the messenger, he looks once more at his wife; with a sad but resolute expression, she nods her assent.

Miller’s depiction of prostitutes and a king who commits his city to war with Persia with no overt thought of the human cost is thus softened: Sparta is a place with wives and children and families (including his own), and

both he and Gorgo know that his decision to go to war will cause them to suffer. Gorgo articulates her role as a representative of this suffering in her speech to the Spartan council near the end of the film, which begins: ‘I come to you as a mother. I come to you as a wife. I come to you as a Spartan woman. … I am here for all those voices which cannot be heard. Mothers, daughters, fathers, sons’ (01.29.47). But (as Lauwers et al. 2013: 87 have pointed out), this voice of suffering immediately turns to speak in support of Dilios’ controlling martial voice: ‘We are at war, gentlemen’, Gorgo continues, ‘We must send the entire Spartan army to aid our king …. Send the army for the preservation of liberty. Send it for justice. Send it for law and order. Send it for reason’. And so on (01.30.28). Gorgo’s is not really a subversive voice, but simply an attempt to offer (maybe female members of) a modern audience an alternative route to engaging with the 300 Spartan heroes who die, like Miller’s heroes, for liberty, justice and so on.

Another not-so-subversive voice is that of the Spartan captain, who marches to Thermopylae with his son Astinos, where the son is killed in battle. In the comic, the entire father-son sub-plot is confined to two panels and two captions describing the father’s berserker rage in response to the death (5.3); the son is not named or shown and the captain does not appear again in the story. The film greatly expands the plot to ramp up the pathos and suffering. Astinos is introduced as the captain’s son early on (00.23.12) and subsequent scenes show both his friendly rivalry with another young Spartan, Stelios, and his father’s growing pride in his accomplishments. His death by decapitation is shown explicitly and in slow motion, in full view of both Stelios and his father, moments after his father has praised him for his martial prowess. And so, when the captain goes ‘blood drunk’ with grief and slaughters a horde of enemies (01.15.03), as he does in the comic (5.3), the response has a greater impact. Later, we hear that he ‘curses the gods and mourns alone’ (01.22.59).

But again, this potentially subversive voice of suffering ends up supporting Dilios’ martial voice. In a scene written for the film, the captain emerges to declare, ‘I have lived my entire life without regret until now’ (01.25.41). But his regret is not that he allowed his son to fight (Leonidas had tried to stop him [00.23.12]). His regret is not even ‘that my son gave up his life for his country. It’s just that I never told him that I loved him the most. That he stood by me with honour. That he was all that was best in me’ (01.25.50). Like Gorgo, the captain offers a broader cinematic audience another way to engage with the Spartans, to understand and support
their suicidal behaviour at Thermopylae: paternal love and pride turned to a desire for vengeance. ‘I have filled my heart with hate’ (01.26.29), the captain says, and he is ‘ready to die’. He does so pulling a spear through his own chest so he can get close enough to kill the enemy who holds it.

A final alternative voice may be the most problematic in the film: Ephialtes’. The historical Ephialtes was an able-bodied Malian who betrayed the Spartans to the Persians in the hopes of a reward (Hdt. 7.213). Miller transformed him into a severely disfigured Spartan, hidden by his parents at birth to avoid infanticide, who asks Leonidas to join the 300 and, after being refused, goes over to the Persian cause in anger. While disfigurement and a desire to do good twisted into a misguided lust for vengeance are both common tropes of comic book villains (Batman’s Two-Face is a prominent example), in 300 they raise the uncomfortable issue of Spartan eugenics. Miller, having decided to raise the issue (why not keep the historical Malian Ephialtes?), is efficient in his depiction of Sparta’s cruel philosophy. Ephialtes is introduced revving himself up for his suit to Leonidas, and already a member of the 300 in his own mind: ‘Persian bastards we’ll kill you all. We Spartans will destroy you’ (3.1). The very next panel outlines the Spartan eugenics programme that foredooms Ephialtes’ ambitions: ‘We are born. We are inspected. If we are small or puny or sickly or misshapen, we are discarded’ (3.2). And that is just what Leonidas does, albeit with some kindness: ‘I’m sorry my friend. I can’t use you’. As Leonidas walks away, Ephialtes does what his parents did not: throws himself off a cliff (3.9: the image matches the earlier image of a rejected baby thrown from a cliff, 3.2). Of course, in comic book fashion, he survives and turns in despair to the Persian side.

Miller recognised the difficulties posed by all of this, and censored the Spartan disdain for disability as much as he felt necessary: rather than ‘very gently’ refusing Leonidas, says Miller, ‘It would be much more classically Spartan if Leonidas laughed and kicked him off the cliff’. This concession to modern sensibilities clearly was not enough for the filmmakers, but rather than aggressively rewriting the subplot, as they did with Gorgo, they opted for smaller changes. First, Leonidas’ rejection is even gentler: ‘I am sorry, my friend, but not all of us were made to be soldiers. If you want to help in a Spartan victory, clear the battlefield of the dead, tend the wounded, bring them water, but

---

24 The narrator’s words to describe all 300 Spartans, but spoken over a close-up of the captain’s face.
25 Daly, ‘Miller’s Tales’. 
as for the fight itself, I cannot use you’ (00.43.26). Then, more subtly, Ephialtes’ introduction is no longer juxtaposed with an account of Spartan eugenics (that account was moved to the opening scene of the film). Instead, it immediately follows Gorgo’s grandly romantic farewell to Leonidas. Gorgo orders her husband simply to ‘come back with your shield or on it’ (00.26.04), but her expression and gestures, the plangent soundtrack, and the golden fields of Gladiator-style waving wheat all express the boundless but restrained love she is willingly sacrificing. The narrator underscores this with a speech taken from the comic: ‘There’s no room for softness. Not in Sparta. No place for weakness. Only the hard and strong may call themselves Spartans. Only the hard. Only the strong’ (00.26.26). In the comic, the repeated captions ‘Only the hard. Only the strong’ frame Gorgo’s face as she secretly sheds tears for her husband. In the film, the lines are spoken as the shot switches from Gorgo watching the 300 march away to Ephialtes, hidden on a hill, watching the same thing. The implication is that all Spartans must make sacrifices for their homeland, whether it be Gorgo giving up her love for Leonidas or Ephialtes giving up his dreams of being a soldier. The cold logic of Ephialtes’ exclusion from military service in the comic is turned into tragic, noble sacrifice.

The problem is that this shifts the significance of Ephialtes’ betrayal. In the comic, he turns to the enemy after realising that Spartan society has unequivocally excluded him. In the film, he refuses to make the sacrifice that Sparta requires of him, and this failure of character is all the greater because it is juxtaposed with Gorgo’s willing acceptance of her duty. In the comic, he is a sympathetic victim of a cruel system. In the film, he is a selfish cripple who refuses to support his country in wartime. It is no wonder members of the disabled community were unhappy with Ephialtes’ portrayal.26

Recent scholarship has focused on these sorts of failures in the attempt to accommodate Miller’s singular vision of Sparta and the 300 to the tastes of a broader audience.27 Miller was fascinated by the contradictions of Sparta: as he puts it, ‘They were the biggest slave owners in Greece. But at the same time, Spartan women had an unusual level of rights. It’s a paradox that they were a bunch of people who in many ways were fascist, but they were the bulwark against the fall of democracy’.28 The filmmakers for the most part

---

28 Daly, ‘Miller’s Tales’.
tried, with questionable success, to hide these contradictions and transform the Spartans into something more familiar to a modern audience. The differing approaches are epitomised by the deletion of two sentences from the comic. There, just before last stand of the 300, Leonidas rallies his troops with a speech about their sacrifice inspiring reason, justice and the rule of law ‘in the hearts of free men for all the centuries yet to be’ (5.5). The young soldier Stelios replies, ‘We’re with you, sir. To the death’. Leonidas’ response is unexpected but perfectly suited to Miller’s narrative universe: ‘I didn’t ask. Leave democracy to the Athenians, boy’. In the film, Stelios’ words are transposed to an earlier scene and modified: ‘We are with you, sire. For Sparta. For freedom. To the death’ (00.22.55). And Leonidas simply nods in approval.

‘FUCK OFF! YOU HUNTED SLAVES.’

Kieron Gillen’s five-issue comic book series, Three, was written with the historical consultation of Stephen Hodkinson, director of the University of Nottingham’s Centre for Spartan and Peloponnesian Studies, and features extended interviews with the professor at the back of Issues 2 to 5. It shows evidence of careful research on every page, and in balancing historical accuracy with storytelling exigencies, cleaves much closer to history than 300, whose narrative strategy Gillen acutely characterises: ‘It looks at what we know of Sparta, selects what it thinks interesting, and turns it into a story about free-men and slaves’ (1.25). But Three is structured and explicitly intended not simply as a historically accurate portrait of Sparta, but as a response to 300’s portrait of Sparta. Gillen describes his response late one night to reading one of the comic’s ‘monologues from these wonderful, heroic and entirely-without flaw Spartans defending liberty against the heaving hordes of irrationality’ (1.25). He spoke to the book—‘Fuck off! You hunted slaves’—and the full story of Three suddenly came to him, beginning with a depiction of the slave-hunting Krypteia.

Three is set over a century after Thermopylae as Sparta’s fortunes are fading, and from beginning to end savagely parodies both the comic and film-
ic versions of 300, repeatedly offering us ironic intertexts to undercut 300’s glorious vision of Spartan heroism. Gillen’s Krypteia are first shown on the crest of a rocky hill and naked except for red cloaks with golden clasps (1.2), clearly evoking Miller’s marching Spartans, who crest a rocky hill in similar garb at the opening of his comic (1.4). But while Miller’s heroes march against an impossible enemy for ‘honor’ and ‘glory’ (1.3) and in defence of freedom, the Krypteia are hunting unarmed Helots to enforce a slave economy. This hunt, called ‘a rite of passage’ (1.3), evokes the opening of the cinematic 300 too: the young Leonidas’ ‘initiation’ (00.03.18), where he heroically defeats a wolf twice his size. The intertext is programmatic: Spartans are no longer noble underdogs, but savage hunters and oppressors.

The rest of Three’s first issue concerns an ephor and his son Arimnestos imposing themselves on the hospitality of a group of helots at a farm (including our three heroes, Klaros, Damar and Terpander). This unwelcome visit echoes the Persian embassy to Leonidas at the end of 300’s first issue, but Gillen reverses the outcome. In 300, the Spartan hosts commit blasphemy by executing the Persian ambassadors; in Three, it is Spartan guests who execute their Helot hosts. In 300, Leonidas was reacting to the Persian demand for Sparta’s surrender (1.11–13); the ephor in Three humiliates the Helots for his amusement and then orders their death when Terpander loses his composure (1.15–24). Gillen also swiftly undoes the movie’s careful portrayal of Spartan women in the embassy scene (discussed above): when Damar tries to stop Terpander from speaking foolishly, Arimnestos dismisses her with, ‘Woman: your will matters not’ (1.20).

Gillen’s second issue focuses on Spartan society. Again he looks to Miller’s story of Leonidas and the wolf (moral: breeding is more important than training\[31\]) to show the ignoble pragmatism of his Spartan society. The Spartan king Kleomenes II overhears a fable of Lycurgus taking two well-bred Lakonian puppies and raising one to be a fine hunter, the other a lazy housedog (moral: ‘Blood alone is not enough’ [2.13]). This fable is related by Plutarch (Mor. 225F–226B), along with an alternative version, which is the one that Gillen’s Kleomenes remembers from his youth: Lycurgus trained a well-bred hound to be a housedog and a housedog to be a fine hunter (moral: ‘training is more important than breeding’ [2.14]). As Kleomenes’ older companion Tyrtaios explains, Sparta’s star has fallen so far that ‘all they

---
31 Dilios introduces the tale with, ‘Training can make a man a good warrior—but a great warrior is crafted by the gods’ (1.7).
have left’ is the arrogant belief in their genetic superiority. Tyrtaios is the captain in Kleomenes’ army; their roles are the same as Leonidas’ and the Captain’s in 300. But whereas 300 presents a platonic relationship (Leonidas: ‘You are a good friend’ [00.23.29]), Tyrtaios and Kleomenes were explicitly lovers in their youth (2.15). This simultaneously exposes the homoerotic undercurrents of 300 and rejects the much-maligned homophobia of 300s Spartans (Leonidas: the Athenians are ‘those boy-lovers’ [1.12; 00.10.43]). 32

Meanwhile, the massacre of the Helots has taken an unexpected turn: Klaros is revealed to be a skilled fighter, and along with Damar and Terpander, fights back and kills all the Spartans except Arimnestos, who escapes. The three Helots set out to cross the border to freedom in Messene. Arimnestos returns to Sparta with word of his father the ephor’s death. King Kleomenes meets with the four remaining ephors (2.17–20). Although this meeting is as hostile as Leonidas’ meeting with the ephors in 300 (2.3–6), unlike in 300, Gillen’s ephors are not physically deformed, morally corrupt priests. Rather, they are unexceptional politicians, cynical and pragmatic. In 300, King Leonidas leads his 300 on their glorious mission in defiance of the ephors. In Three, it is the ephors who order a grudging King Kleomenes on a less heroic mission with 300 soldiers. Kleomenes’ 300 march not ‘For honor’s sake—for glory’s sake’ (1.1–3) like Leonidas’ 300. Rather, as Kleomenes declares to rally his troops, ‘Today we march for justice. We march for order. … This day three hundred march!’ (2.21–22). But privately he admits to Tyrtaios their mission is a ‘bloody farce’ (2.21): in another expression of Sparta as brutal oppressor, 300 Spartans are pursuing the three escaped Helots.

Gillen’s 300 Spartans march to a farcical showdown with three Helots instead of 300’s ‘thousand nations of the Persian Empire’ (00.40.31), 33 and various details in the next issues of Three flesh out this intertext. A storm on the River Eurotas matches a storm off the coast of Thermopylae; in a cruel reversal, 300’s storm gods (Zeus, Boreas, Poseidon) side with the underdog Spartans by wrecking part of the Persian fleet (2.12), while in Three ‘the heavens hold a grudge’ against the embattled Helots, swelling the river to block their crossing (3.16). Later, Gillen’s 300 massacre and dismember a group of Helots they meet on their march as an intimidation tactic (4.1–2); this evokes the massacre of a Greek village by the Persians in the movie.

32 Miller began to defend himself against criticisms as early as the letters pages of the fourth issue.
33 An amplification of the comic’s ‘one hundred nations’ (3.7).
adaptation of 300. Most significantly, Arimnestos—whose flight from the Helots in issue one has left him branded a ‘trembler’, cast out from Spartan society—steps into the role of Ephialtes, similarly cast out from birth for his deformity. Each man takes up his father’s armour but fails to live up to his example (300 3.9; Three 3.14). Each tries to join the march of the 300 but is rejected (300 3.8–9; Three 3.4). And, just as Ephialtes dooms the Spartans by showing the Persians the goat path they use to outflank the Spartans, Arimnestos tricks the Helots into taking a goat path that leads to a dead end.

In probably the most overt visual intertext with 300, this dead end is a narrow, Thermopylae-style cleft in a cliff face (compare, e.g., 300 2.11 and Three 4.11). This is the site of the Helots’ hopeless last stand in the final issue of Three; as at Thermopylae, the confined space prevents the larger force (in this case, the 300 Spartans) from surrounding and swamping the smaller force (the Helots, mainly the able fighter Klaros). Throughout the battle, Gillen bitterly parodies several heroic moments from 300’s Thermopylae. The issue opens with the Helot Klaros spearing a dog through the mouth (Three 5.1), in an image which matches the young Leonidas’ defeat of the wolf (300 1.9). But whereas Leonidas and the wolf was an example of Spartan bravery against long odds, a metaphor for the 300 against Persia, the scene in Three demonstrates Spartan pragmatism: King Kleomenes has sent dogs against the Helots first so as not to risk his men (5.1). Both comic and film version of 300 make dramatic use of an adaptation of Leonidas’ famous phrase: ‘Spartans. Ready your breakfast. And eat hearty—for tonight we dine in Hell!’ (01.29.00; 5.6). In Three, the Helot Terpander taunts the Spartans by reminding them that the heroic 300 of Thermopylae each had a Helot slave who fought and died beside him, and concludes: ‘So come, any who would dine in Hades, let those who lived there show you the way’ (5.9). Finally, before King Kleomenes accepts Klaros’ challenge to single combat (which he treacherously wins by having his soldiers push a boulder onto Klaros), he echoes King Xerxes’ vow in 300 that no future generations will know of the Spartans’ sacrifice (300 4.8). Leonidas answers by disagreeing: ‘They’ll know’ [4.8], as he stares out of the page at the reader. Klaros is equally laconic, but less optimistic. Kleomenes observes, ‘History will not remember you’. Klaros replies, ‘Then we have something in common’ (5.16–17).

---

34 The scene isn’t found in the comic, and seems to have been introduced to justify some of the brutal tactics the Spartans use later on (especially building a wall of Persian corpses).
‘YOURS IS NOT THE ONLY STORY HERE’

In true epic fashion, the memorialising of deeds is one of the most prominent themes in all three works we have discussed. The idea that memorialising stories could be inaccurate, or partisan, or that there can be more than one story attached to a deed, is mostly latent in the comic and film versions of 300. The film does give it some prominence by making Dilios’ role as narrator explicit and by ramping up the monstrosity of the Persians: we see goblin-esque ‘Immortal’ soldiers, a half-human, half-sword proto-cyborg, and what seems to be an actual Satyr, and should realise that Dilios might be bending the truth to dehumanise the enemy. The inclusion or expansion of subplots involving Gorgo, the Captain and Ephialtes also remind us that Dilios’ story is only one possible story, as we have seen. But as we have seen, all those potentially subversive stories end up supporting Dilios’ pro-Spartan master narrative.

The opposite is true in Three, where we are again and again confronted with the tendentiousness, fragility and destructiveness of stories about the past, and where several voices (Spartan and Helot) challenge, specifically, the story of Sparta that we hear in 300. We have already heard the Spartan Tyrtaios’ honest appraisal of the malleable fable of Lykurgus and the two dogs. Later, Kleomenes explains his ‘unSpartan’ decision to kill Klaros by guile: stories of suicidal ‘Spartan’ bravery have reduced Sparta to near extinction, and now ignoble pragmatism is needed. ‘Because the most unSpartan thing of all? No more Sparta.’ (5.19).

On the Helot side, Terpander, Three’s slippery answer to Dilios, introduces himself as a storyteller by claiming ‘I know stories. I know history. I know where one starts and another begins’ (1.20). In the first issue, he tells the glorious story of the Battle of Plataea (i.e., the unnarrated ending of 300) and the Spartan Arimnestos’ defeat of the Persian general Mardonius there; but then he tells the other story, where later on Arimnestos and 300 Spartiates were ambushed and slaughtered by a group of Helots (1.21–22). In the last issue, Terpander tells the other story of Thermopylae, of the Helots who served and fought with the Spartans at the battle (5.9).

Terpander’s more taciturn companion Klaros has his own story too, in the secret irony of his name. The voluble Terpander named himself for the Spartan poet, ‘whose words we’re prohibited from speaking’, and explains that ‘the prickly Damar is “she who is tamed”’. But, Terpander wonders, ‘What’s the story of “Klaros”? ’ (3.8). Klaros tells us that it is short
for Stenyklaros, the grove where the Helots slaughtered Arimnestos and his Spartiates. Terpander takes this as covert rebellion (‘So you dream of massacring your masters?’ [3.8]). But the true story is more personal and less noble: Klaros fought for his Spartan masters in a later engagement at Stenyklaros, and burnt down the sacred grove with a band of Messenians inside it (5.12). His name is a secret badge of shame: Helots reduced to sacrilege under the rule of Sparta. Tortured by his failure to live up to a heroic ideal that, in reality, the Spartans have dictated, Klaros rejects Damar’s sexual advances in the last issue: ‘I am not worthy of your touch …’ (5.13).

‘Yours is not the only story here’, she replies. ‘That’s what freedom means, Klaros’ (5.13). This redefinition of ‘freedom’ is Three’s most pointed rejoinder to 300. Freedom is not a heroic concept, to kill and die for, not something monolithic, which the Spartans have and the Persians want to take away, not a word for Leonidas or Dilios to shout before a battle. It is simply the ability to tell your own story.

In Damar’s case, that story is survival. Rejecting Klaros’ offer to help her commit suicide before their hopeless last stand, she hides, escapes the Spartans after the deaths of the other Helots, and travels to Messene, where ‘nine months later’ (5.23) she gives birth to twins, named Klaros and Terpander. Gillen ends his series by valorising this (fictional) story of survival, and elevating it to the same status as Spartan military and political history. In a final page of white text of a black background (imitating the list of facts found at the end of many ‘based on a true story’ films), Gillen tells us that Sparta had lost nearly all its influence by the end of his story, that the remainder of King Kleomenes’ reign was unimpressive, that Sparta never again rose to power—and that ‘Damar raised her family as free Greeks in Messene’ (5.28).