

Is Seeing Believing? Visually Communicating Gender in Herodotus & Ctesias

In her monograph on bodies and clothing in ancient Greece, Mireille Lee argues that “dress was the primary means by which individuals negotiated identity” (2015: 1). Building off of Lee’s work, specifically her application of modern dress theory, I examine depictions of cross-dressing in the narratives of Herodotus and Ctesias. Both authors assert that their knowledge is trustworthy because their accounts are based on autopsy and observation of bodies. Because clothing as an identifier creates visual partitions (Foxhall 2013), I analyze instances of cross-dressing to show that autopsy is unsuitable for acquiring knowledge (cf. Anhalt 2008). I propose that these authors use the very act of cross-dressing itself to “question the means by which reality is made” (Butler 2004: 218); the reader is then able to choose what information is trustworthy.

For Herodotus, cross-dressing is a means to an end within a larger pattern of visual deceptions for martial gain (Hornblower 2013). In each example (4.146, 5.17-22), a group of men switches clothes with women who have already been seen. This previous experience communicates a false truth to the observing internal audience, allowing the men to take on female attire for a brief time. They continue to act as men in every other way while asserting their culture over those who would suppress it (Fearn 2007).

Cross-dressing in Ctesias’ fragments, on the other hand, is not used as deception (F1b§23-24, F6-6b); the two rulers who dress as women do so for personal enjoyment. Each man assumes female clothing, cosmetics, and even habits, which leads witnesses to assume that he is an unworthy ruler based on false understanding of his bodily presentation (Lenfant 2004). Despite these assumptions, we see that, for Ctesias, both rulers navigate fluidly between

gendered roles (Gera 2007; Waters 2017), to such an extent that later authors suggest that Sardanapallus, e.g., is an amalgamation of two distinct rulers (Llewellyn-Jones & Robson 2010).

While the individual author's purpose and technique varies, in every instance of cross-dressing the internal audience's gender-based assumptions are manipulated, whether intentionally (for Herodotus) or not (for Ctesias). By showing the inaccuracy of conclusions based on visual evidence, each author undermines his own claims of autopsy as the basis for his account. As a result, I argue, the motif of cross-dressing creates a plurality of truths that complicates identity while also reminding the external audience that identification based on autopsy is not to be trusted.

Works Cited

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