

The ways in which Frank Miller's *300* departs from classical tradition reveals much about the contemporary outlook of a western country at war with a Middle Eastern one. The narrative details of this work are secondary to the visual impact of the graphic medium, in which Miller allows his long experience in creating super-villains for comic books to take center stage. It is interesting to contrast Miller's work with Greek vase paintings and relief sculptures of "Eastern" barbarians such as Amazons, for example. Following the Persian Wars, there were many literary examples of Hellenic chauvinism against Easterners, such as Aeschylus' *Persians*, or Euripides' *Medea*, yet in artistic depictions they are not shown as particularly grotesque, but are portrayed in their characteristic dress, certainly exotic when compared with that of Greek warriors, but not emotionally charged to the same degree as Miller's depictions.

Although Miller's portrayal of the Spartans is primarily indebted to Hellenic sources of sculpture and vase painting of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, he breaks with this tradition in his portrayal of the Persians, making them exaggeratedly dark-skinned. Rather than using the iconographic image of Xerxes (as well as other Persian "Great Kings") that depict him as bearded, fair-skinned, and wearing stately robes, Miller draws him with a modernist sensibility. Completely shaved and semi-nude, the Persian ruler resembles a modern African-American actor playing a cross between a punk rocker and Hollywood's idea of a Zulu warrior. Additionally, as Miller has done in previous comics such as his *Dark Knight* series, the "bad guys" are signaled by their bizarre physical adornments, such as multiple facial piercings and strange weapons, as well as a tendency to go very scantily clad. In general, Miller's Persian warriors show an extreme grotesquerie that is intended to combine the threat of physical violence with one of sexual perversion, and an unbalanced psyche. Their fetishized appearance signals their tendency to corruption, as well as creating a dramatic contrast with the bearded, armored, and Caucasian-featured Spartans, whose military appearance is uniform and consolidated rather than individually bizarre. By creating an alien and corrupt Persian look, Miller draws on his long experience in creating frightening looking villains, as well as tapping into our modern alienation from the Middle East. The question is, was there any artistic genre in which the ancient Greeks portrayed their barbarian foes in like manner, and which would offer an artistic predecessor and parallel for Miller's approach?