

Frank Miller, a graphic novel author and illustrator, recalls that his notion of heroism was profoundly influenced by the battle between the allied Greeks and Persians at Thermopylae in 480 BCE: “[t]he story of the Spartans and their sacrifice made a very deep, lifelong impression. It became the project that I was going to tackle when I thought [I] was ready for it” (George 2003.65). In 1998 this project was finally completed in *300*, an adaptation which loosely follows Herodotus (*Histories* 7.201-233). However *300* was not the first time Miller had dealt with Thermopylae. In *The Big Fat Kill* (1995), the third volume of Miller’s long running *Sin City* series, the model provided by King Leonidas at the Hot Gates plays a pivotal role in the conclusion, though several integral elements are reversed.

Unlike *300*, a work of historical fiction, *Sin City* stories take place in an imaginary urban environment strongly influenced by the crime novels of Chandler, Spillane, and Hammett. *The Big Fat Kill* narrates the dilemma of the city’s prostitutes, who are caught in a vicious turf war with the mob and the police. In this thoroughly contemporary setting of asphalt and alleyways, the sudden appearance of a fully-armored Spartan hoplite at the beginning of the fifth and final chapter of the book is arresting. This is a manifestation of the inner thoughts of the protagonist, Dwight McCarthy, on his current situation: how will he defeat the mob, which has far greater firepower and numbers? The Spartans’ stand at Thermopylae – holding off an enemy of greater strength and numbers for several days – thus serves as a paradigm for the conclusion when Dwight and the prostitutes massacre the mob in a narrow alleyway.

Despite this parallelism, the assimilation of Thermopylae is partial in *The Big Fat Kill*: Dwight and his allies survive whereas Leonidas and his men perish; the traitor figure is killed whereas the Persian collaborator Ephialtes survives, and so on. In this paper I argue that Miller suppresses a number of aspects of the Thermopylae narrative because of the demands of the macro-narrative. Thermopylae is the ideal battle for Miller, but it must be inscribed into *The Big Fat Kill* so that it resonates with the heroic ethos of *Sin City*. Examining the adaptation of Thermopylae in a modern narrative thus demonstrates one of the many ways in which this ancient story has been appropriated and altered by and for contemporary individuals.

Selected bibliography:

George, Milo, ed. 2003. *The Comics Journal Library, Volume 2: Frank Miller*. Seattle.

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