

Book 1 of Herodotus' *Histories* concludes with the image of Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae, vaunting over the corpse of Cyrus the Great as she plunges his decapitated head into a wineskin filled with blood (1.215). This gruesome revenge is exacted in response to Cyrus' invasion of her land, the dishonorable ambush of her troops, and for the subsequent death of her son. At first glance Tomyris appears to fit the model of a vengeful "barbarian" queen, whose wrath destroys a powerful male and whose actions further substantiate stereotypes of feminine and foreign excess. A closer examination of the episode and the specific form of this retribution, however, reveals a far more complicated portrait of the nature of female power, its connection to women's reproductive capacity, and its narrative significance in the *Histories*.

In this paper, I argue that Tomyris' revenge—its cause and its execution—must be read in light of her identity as a mother. **Of the possible reasons for which Tomyris might desire revenge, the one accorded the most narrative emphasis is the death of her son, who was captured while intoxicated with wine.** Only upon hearing news of her son's death does Tomyris vow to give Cyrus his "fill of blood". I argue that the submersion of Cyrus' head into a bloody wineskin at the hands of a royal mother constitutes an inverted birth image that evokes a fetus enclosed in a blood-filled womb—fitting recompense for the "bloodying" of the Massagetan prince by means of Persian wine. Critics have noted the many points of contact between Herodotus' *Histories* and the Hippocratic corpus (e.g. Thomas, 2000; Chiasson, 2001), but none have used the gynecological treatises to shed light on images of the female body and its reproductive power in the *Histories*. In these treatises the womb is likened to a wineskin into which menstrual blood flows and nourishes the fetus within (Dean-Jones, 1994). It is thus Tomyris' violated maternity that forms the basis for her revenge and also provides the symbolic means of executing it.

Despite the bloody nature of this revenge, however, Tomyris is not depicted as a transgressive figure. Unlike Queen Pheretime in Book 3, who demands an army and, thus, seeks traditionally masculine forms of revenge for the death of her son, Tomyris neither leads her troops into battle nor kills Cyrus by her own hand. Moreover, while Pheretime dies a horrible death sent by the gods, as Herodotus says, for her excessive thirst for revenge, Tomyris does not suffer any negative consequences for her actions. Her retribution, in its symbolically reproductive form, is consistent not only with Cyrus' crimes against her as a mother but with her comportment as a woman. In contrast with Cyrus' increasingly transgressive imperial ambitions and his "less than masculine" strategies to acquire Massagetan land—a marriage proposal to Tomyris and the gastronomic seduction and ambush of her army—Tomyris' submersion of Cyrus' head into a wineskin filled with blood is situated within a maternal and, thus, specifically female context.

Gender provides the evaluative framework for the exercise of power and aggression in this episode and helps to explain the divergent consequences of those acts. Adherence to or violation of gender norms becomes an index of a broader pattern of transgressive behavior. By situating Tomyris' revenge firmly within the context of her maternity, Herodotus is able to exploit the connotations of growth, change, and death inherent in the reproducing female body to express the vicissitudes of human existence and the transient nature of political power. The reduction of the first king of the Persian Empire to a bloody fetus illustrates, in quite literal terms, Herodotus' programmatic statement that history is comprised of an endless cycle of small things that become great and fade away again into obscurity.