‘Off with her ΑΙΔΩΣ’: Herodotus 1.8.3–4

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‘OFF WITH HER $\textit{A}I\Delta\Omega\Sigma$’: HERODOTUS 1.8.3-4*

Confronted with the suggestion that he contrived to see Candaules’ wife naked, Gyges immediately expresses his horror (Herodotus 1.8.3-4):

Δέσποτα, τίνα λέγεις λόγον οὐκ ἴγνε, κελεύων με δεσπουν θην ημινθην θηςαυθην γυμνην; άμα δε κοζων ήκδυομενω συνεκδυται καὶ θην αίδω γυνην. πάλαι δε τα καλα ανθρώπων εξείσηται, έκ των μαθανειν δεί έν τοις έν τοις έστι, σκοπειν τυα έν έσωτον. έγω δε πειθομαι έκεινην είναι πασεων γυναικών καλιστην, και σεο δεομαι μη δεσβαι ανόμων.

The phrase άμα δε κοζων ήκδυομενώ συνεκδυται καὶ θην αίδω γυνη forms part both of Gyges’ explanation for his shock and of his justification for his refusal; it is a phrase which has been intermittently discussed, but not yet, I think, fully explained.¹

The most natural way to take the sentence, all things being equal, is as a reference to the attitude and behaviour of women; the gnome is expressed in general terms,² and the most regular sense of αίδως in the context of women’s sexuality is that of shame or modesty, the force which inhibits improper behaviour.³ This interpretation, that on removing her tunic a woman sheds her sense of shame, is precisely that given the passage by Plutarch, who protests vigorously (Conjugalia praecepta 10 = Moralia 139c):

ο\(\upsilon\) ορθως ΄Ηρωδοτος είπεν ὅτι ἡ γυνη άμα τα χιτωνες εκδυσκο λα και θην αιδω τοναινιον γαρ ή σωφρον αντενυεται την αιδο, και του μαλιστα φελεν αιδεισαε συμβαλω χρωναι προς ἀλλήλους.⁴

Plutarch clearly takes Gyges’ remark in a negative sense, as an observation on the \(\delta α\)\(ι\)\(δε\)\(i\)\(a\) of women and their prodigious appetite for sex; as such, it would not be hard to parallel. But it has been felt inappropriate that Gyges should make such an observation in the context of his refusal to comply with Candaules’ suggestion; on Plutarch’s reading, Gyges imputes a lack of \(σωφροσύνη\) to his mistress (even as he stresses that she is his own mistress, δεσπουν την έμην); there is nothing in the context to suggest that such an imputation would be justified (and in fact the woman demonstrates the strength of her sense of honour at 1.10.2–11.3), nor would it be particularly tactful even if it were.⁵ Moreover (it has been argued), why should the woman’s immodesty constitute a reason for Gyges’ refusal? As a comment on feminine (or even uxorial) \(\delta α\)\(ι\)\(δε\)\(i\)\(a\) the sentence has seemed gratuitous and irrelevant, and so it has been argued that Plutarch has misunderstood the sense of the word

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¹ See C. E. von Erffa, \(AΙ\DeltaΩΣ\) und verwandte Begriffe in ihrer Entwicklung von Homer bis Demokrit (Philot. Suppl. 30.2, Leipzig, 1937), pp. 180–1; R. Harder, ‘Herodot 1.8.3’, in G. E. Mylonas and D. Raymond (edd.), \textit{Studies Presented to David M. Robinson} (St. Louis, 1953), ii. 446–9 (= W. Marg [ed.], \textit{Herodot} [Munich, 1962], 370–4); A. E. Raubitschek, ‘Die schamlose Ehefrau’, \textit{RHM} 100 (1957), 139–40. I exclude from this study the much discussed topics (a) of the sources and versions of the Gyges story and (b) of the relation between the Hdt. passage and tragedy.

² On women’s αίδως, see my \textit{Aidōs} (Oxford, 1993), pp. 120–5, 185–8, 205, 305–40.

³ Cf. \textit{De Aud.} 1, 37d.

alScos in its Herodotean context; it is used, according to von Erffa and Harder, not in its common ‘active’ significance, of the subjective sense of shame, but in the ‘passive’, of the quality in an individual which excites the respect of others; it is not that the naked wife is ‘shameless’, rather that she is no longer alScos.

It is true that alScos, like other similar terms in Greek (and in English), can shift between the subjective and objective spheres; in two passages of the Iliad, for example (2.262, 22.75), alScos is used not of the subjective emotion of shame, but of that on which the emotion focuses (in both cases, the genitalia, τα αἰδώσια). In these cases alScos is the object of shame, not the object of respect, but a case can be made for referring the noun in passages such as Odyssey 8.171–3 and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter 213–150 not to an emotion or attitude in the subject but to that quality which excites the alScos of others. But where alScos is a quality of a human being, there is a sense in which it is unnecessary to choose between objective and subjective senses; for alScos is, like χάρις, fundamentally at home in reciprocal relationships, those who show alScos deserve alScos, those who possess the tendency to respect others eo ipso possess the quality which excites others’ respect. Thus in the Odyssey passage alScos is both an aspect of the speaker’s manner in addressing others and a quality which attracts their respect, while in the Hymn the alScos which Metaneira detects in Demeter’s eyes is both an aspect of the way she conducts herself vis-à-vis others and a quality to which Metaneira wishes to respond. In such situations we are closing our eyes to a major element of significance if we take the ‘passive’ use to exclude the active; equally we are choosing between false alternatives if we restrict ourselves to debating whether alScos in Herodotus 1.8.3 is ‘active’ or ‘passive’.

The first point to note regarding the form of Gyges’ observation is the strict parallelism between the woman’s χιτών and her alScos; their removal is simultaneous, as the preposition ἀμα, the prefix συν-, and the use of the present in both participle and finite verb emphasize. The primary meaning of the gnome is that the removal of the χιτών represents or symbolizes the removal of the alScos, i.e. that alScos itself is a type of garment put on to conceal what lies underneath. The image is readily explicable, for alScos traditionally is something that conceals, that prevents exposure; this is part of the fundamental association between alScos and the visual

7 Harder (n. 1) is confused on this point; he adduces the use of alScos as ‘respect’ as evidence for its ‘passive’ sense (pp. 447–8); but ‘respect’ is just as much a response of a subject to an object, and therefore ‘active’, as is shame, and none of the passages cited by Harder contains an instance of alScos as ‘that which excites respect in others’ as opposed to ‘respect for/from others’.
8 See Cairns (n. 3), p. 57 n. 44. The use of the noun in this sense (as of the more common al&oia) documents the fundamental inhibition over nakedness and genital exposure which presumably lies behind Plutarch’s insistence that the good wife never abandons her alScos.
11 On χάρις, see now B. MacLachlan, The Age of Grace (Princeton, 1993); on the reciprocity of alScos, see Cairns (n. 3), pp. 158–9, 184–5 and Index s.vv. ‘guest-friendship’, ‘philia’.
12 Cf. the parallel passage in Hes. Th. 91–2, where alScos is the response to the speaker’s kingly qualities rather than a quality of the speech. But in the Od. passage, too, it is clear that the speaker’s alScos calls forth the respect of the audience.
14 On the notion of exposure as fundamental to alScos, see A. Beil, “alScos bei Homer”, Der altsprachliche Unterricht 5. 1 (1961), 51–64; B. Williams, Shame and Necessity (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 78, 82, 220–1; for Beil and Williams (literal) fear of physical exposure is the origin of all alScus-feelings; I would not go so far, but grant that the notion of exposure is a fundamental aspect of the imagery/phenomenology of alScos.
(the eyes, being seen, hiding, etc.); but most relevantly to our present enquiry, it is represented by the phenomenon of veiling as a manifestation of αἰδώς.¹⁵ Like a veil, the χτενών in Gyges’ gnome covers that which is αἰδοῖον; hence we cannot dispense with the subjective, ‘active’ sense of αἰδώς in this passage—the associations with exposure, covering, concealing, and the veil all belong to αἰδώς in its active sense, to the self-protective emotion of shame or modesty.

In many Greek communities the veil (i.e. the himation pulled up over the head) is what comes between a woman and men who do not belong to her immediate family; women wear the himation over their heads when they must appear in public, and draw it across their faces when confronted with strange men.¹⁶ More importantly for our purposes, the veil is (at least in Athens) particularly associated with the ritual of the wedding and the status of the married woman;¹⁷ the veil is worn (subject, perhaps, to one brief interruption),¹⁸ throughout the marriage celebration,¹⁹ and becomes the symbol of the wife’s virtue as a matron; thereafter, she unveils principally for her husband, as she did on that first occasion after arriving in her new home.²¹


¹⁷ On the gesture of veiling, see C. Sittl, Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer (Leipzig, 1890), pp. 84, 278–9; women (like boys) cover their heads in public; see At. Lys. 530–1; on drawing the veil before strange men, see Od. 1.333–4, 16.415–16, 18.209–10, 21.64–5, with H. F. North, Sophrosyne (Ithaca, 1966), p. 308 n. 143, M. Nagler, Spontaneity and Tradition (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 44–67; for the gesture in vase-painting, see (e.g.) K. Schefold, Gods and Heroes in Late Archaic Greek Art (Eng. trans. Cambridge, 1992) figs. 254, 262. There is a general discussion of women’s public veiling in C. M. Galt, Veiled Ladies, AJA 55 (1951), 373–93, but an up-to-date treatment is badly needed.


²⁰ There is some confusion about this (Oakley [n. 19], p. 114, and Sutton [n. 19], p. 358, regard the bride as unveiled during the procession to her new home), apparently resulting from different notions of what constitutes ‘veiling’; in her father’s house the bride’s head is probably completely covered (τάνων ἀκρίβως ἐγκεκάλυμμενη, Luc. Conv. 8); in depictions of the procession to her husband’s house, however, her head is still covered. Though her face is visible (Deubner [n. 18], p. 149; J. Toutain, ‘Le Rite nuptiale de l’anakalaptetria’, REA 42 [1940], pp. 347–8; R. Rehm, Marriage to Death [Princeton 1994], pp. 141–2, 213 n. 5; Oakley and Sinos [n. 19], p. 32; cf. Paus. 9.3.1–2). For the black-fig. procession (bride veiled in chariot) and the red-fig. leading of the veiled bride χεῖρ’ ἐπὶ καρπίῳ, see now Oakley and Sinos (n. 19), pp. 26–34 (with ill.).

²¹ The bride’s final unveiling is prefigured in the ἄνακαλαπτητίρα, but this is probably not the moment to which the term ἄνακαλαπτητίρα is properly applied; see Redfield (n. 19); Sutton (n. 19), pp. 358–9; Oakley and Sinos (n. 19), p. 25; against Toutain (n. 19), pp. 348–50; Rehm (n.
Just as the woman unveils for her husband, so she undresses only for him; in both cases, she sheds the *aídōs* which normally comes between her and the outside world. Thus, on one level of significance, Gyges’ *gnome* may be considered an objective description of what inevitably happens when a woman undresses; if the dress, like the veil, represents the *aídōs* which is a woman’s normal public attitude, then the removal of the dress or the veil constitutes the removal of that *aídōs*; the removal of the concealing garment in itself transforms the woman’s state and her status. But *aídōs* is not a purely descriptive term, and abandonment of *aídōs* cannot be without ethical implications.

The clothed and veiled woman is the acculturated woman, presenting to her society a proper regard for her own honour and that of her *kûrōs*, and meriting the respect of her community in return; for a woman to be unveiled or unclothed is for the everyday system of honour to be disturbed—except when she undresses or unveils for her husband. This lies at the heart of the advice attributed to Theano the Pythagorean by Diogenes Laertius (8.43).22

That Theano explicitly recommends removal of one’s *aísghýn* along with one’s clothes indicates that this passage does not merely present the act of undressing as a symbolic abandonment of *aídōs*; Theano is clearly referring to the woman’s subjective sense of shame, and recommends, in the strict privacy of the marital bedroom, behaviour which would be considered shameless in all other circumstances.23 This gives us an element of the meaning of the Herodotus passage (that element on which Plutarch seized and to which he objected so strongly)—the naked woman has not only discarded the symbols and trappings of her *aídōs*, but rather without these she is also, albeit temporarily, without the disposition of *aídōs* itself, and has given in to the sensuality which *aísghýn* normally controls. Clearly this is the kind of observation which can be given a misogynist twist, one which would chime in with the common view of women’s sexual appetites as represented particularly in Aristophanes and Euripides, but there is no pejorative implication in Theano’s

20), pp. 141–2. The famous metope from Selinus (O. Benndorf, *Die Metopen von Selinunt* [Berlin, 1873], pp. 54–6 and pl. 8) most likely depicts the final unveiling of Hera prior to the consummation of her *iêpós* *γάμος* to Zeus; cf. the relief vases depicting the groom’s unveiling/undressing of the bride in the bridal chamber reproduced and discussed by A. Brückner, *Anakalypteria*, Berliner Winckelmannsprogramm 64 (1904). These vases show that the bride retained her veil (and her *aísghys*) until the very last minute; cf. the loutrophoros discussed by Sutton (n. 19), pp. 337–47 (the veiled bride being led into the bedchamber); also the scene in the bedchamber of the newly-wed Alexander and Roxanne in Luc. *Herod./Aet*. 5. The east frieze of the Parthenon depicts Hera unveiling herself to Zeus, possibly in the context of the *ánakalyptória* (so I. S. Mark, ‘The Gods on the East Frieze of the Parthenon’, *Hesperia* 53 [1984], p. 303), but perhaps simply in a gesture which recalls their wedding night/symbolizes their married status.

22 See von Erffa (n. 1), p. 181; Harder (n. 1), p. 446; Raubitschek (n. 1), pp. 139–40. For Raubitschek (and for W. Aly, *Voktsmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen* [Göttingen, 1921], p. 34), Theano’s advice is the (ultimate) source of Gyges’ gnome; rather, Diogenes’ paraphrase of Theano points to an original *gnome* similar in form to that attributed to Gyges, but which need not have originated with Hdt. Plato disputes this conventional wisdom when he suggests that naked female athletes may remain clothed in an (invisible) garment of ἀπετῇ (Resp. 457a).

23 That such advice was necessary is demonstrated by the shyness of the brides depicted in Brückner (n. 21). With Theano’s advice—that a frankly acknowledged, active female sexuality should be unleashed in the proper context of the marital relationship—compare the Islamic orthodoxy as described by F. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* (New York, 1975), pp. 6–14.
advice, nor need Gyges’ remark imply condemnation of Candaules’ or any other wife; nevertheless it is part of the implication of the latter context that when a woman, behind closed doors, frees herself of the garments which normally constrain her, one of these ‘garments’ is the sense of shame which otherwise moulds her social identity.

Thus Gyges’ remark both draws attention to the objective fact that an undressed woman has cast off the signs of her conformity to society’s standards of honour and shame, and implies that, having done so, she no longer observes those standards. But his observation also constitutes a reason for his horrified rejection of the breach of decorum which he is being asked to commit. Thus he is not concerned only with the situation, attitude, or behaviour of the woman; on the contrary, the function of his utterance is to communicate his own respect for standards of honour and shame. One should not overlook his use of several terms to condemn Candaules’ proposal as improper: the proposal itself is ‘not healthy’ and ἄνομον; to see a woman without her 

24 The remark does, however, imply fear of the danger created by a woman’s abandonment of normal social restraints; Gyges’ anxiety is apparent in 9.1—6 ἐξελέγων τοιαύτα ἀπεμάχετο, ἀφρυδεῖοι μὴ τί ὅτι ἐξ αὐτῶν γένθαι κακῶν. Clearly, he suspects a trap, but fear of the potential for disaster created by his transgression into a private world where the power of female sexuality is unleashed would be well justified by the sequel, in which the wife demands disaster for Candaules as the price of safety for Gyges. On the presentation of feminine power in Hdt., cf. P. Walcot, ‘Herodotus on Rape’, Arethusa 11 (1978), 137–47; P. Cartledge, The Greeks (Oxford, 1993), pp. 84–6; for a more positive account of Hdt.’s strong women, see C. Dewald, ‘Women and Culture in Herodotus’ Histories’ in H. P. Foley (ed.), Reflections of Women in Antiquity (New York, 1981), 91–125.

25 Or ‘mind your own business’; interfering in other people’s affairs is ἄνασαχωρεῖα at E. IA 327–31; cf. ἀιδῶς at involving others in one’s own troubles at Her. 1162, 1200. Or. 280–2, IA 981–2 (Cairns [n. 3], p. 288 n. 83). That women are no longer to be under the exclusive tutelage of a single male κῦρος is one reason why Plato can permit their naked exercise in the Republic (n. 22 above).

26 Dr S. Blundell points out to me that having intruded upon the king’s privileges as a husband in the private context of the bedchamber, Gyges is then forced to assume Candaules’ political role as king; the message of the wife’s ultimatum is that the rights which Candaules has shared can only belong to one man; and the transgression of which Gyges is afraid (n. 24 above) is one which confounds established hierarchies in the political as well as the private sphere.

27 Hdt. is careful to site his tale in the context of Lydian values and to relate these to the Greek (see 1. 10. 3); but in this case, at least, barbarian norms are just Greek norms writ large,
of honour prevents his transgressing the limits of appropriateness and dishonouring
(or colluding in the dishonour of) others. His response is comparable to that of the
recipient of a suppliant appeal—the suppliant’s abandonment of aißós calls forth the
aißós of the supplicated as a response to the former’s disruption of regular patterns
of mutual deference; more particularly, one might compare the way in which a
woman’s deliberate exposure of her breast, a part of her body that aißós normally
conceals, is used as a lever to call forth the aißós of her son in Iliad 22.79–83 and
Aeschylus, Choephori 896–9 (though in both these cases the requirement to repay
τροφῆς is also in play). Gyges’ use of the word aißós in his justification of this response
thus refers to the woman as an object of his respect as well as the possessor of a
subjective sense of shame, and (at least part of) the illocutionary force of his utterance
is to condemn the violation of accepted standards of honour advocated by his master.

To sum up: to understand the passage fully we must (a) take the equivalence of
χειρῶν and aißós at face value and (b) recognize the reciprocal nature of aißós as a
factor in social relationships. The aißós to which Gyges refers is at once (a) the χειρῶν
itself, an outward manifestation of the woman’s acceptance of society’s notion of the
honourable; (b) the woman’s subjective sense of honour, which she gives up in the
privileged space of the marriage bed; and (c) her claim to honour in the eyes of others,
a claim which she inevitably abandons when she uncovers what should normally be
concealed. Candaules’ suggestion, that Gyges should invade the privacy of the marital
bedchamber, where abandonment of aißós is permitted, confounds the categories of
public and private and nullifies the relationship of honour and deference which
exists between husband and wife on the one hand, and master, mistress, and sub-
ordinate on the other; it is these normative categories that Gyges’ response seeks to
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and Gyges’ response is thoroughly Hellenic, articulated as it is in terms of reciprocity and τροφῆς.
In as much as Candaules’ transgression depends on a basic similarity between Greek and Lydian
attitudes towards female nudity, the tale varies the pattern in which the point of reference for the
description of barbarian sexual norms is their (degree of) ‘otherness’ vis-à-vis the Greek,
even as it affirms that polarity in its depiction of a powerful, anti-Hellenic woman and in
Candaules’ unGreek confusion of public and private (see in general M. Rosellini and S. Said,
‘Usages de femmes et autres nomoi chez les “sauvages” d’Hérodote’, ASNP 8 [1978], 949–1005;
cf. Walcot [n. 24], pp. 145–6; Konstan [n. 5], p. 5; Cartledge [n. 24], pp. 77–80).

28 Dewald (n. 24), pp. 105–6; Konstan [n. 5], p. 5; Cartledge [n. 24], pp. 77–80.
29 On the tension created by the suppliant’s abandonment of honour, see Cairns (n. 3),
pp. 115, 185, 209–10, 223.