

SHAME THAT CREEPETH WITHIN THE CAVE

The classical literature is well stocked with stories into which we have, using our current meaning of the term, projected our understanding of *hubris*. It is the great typological sport of modern classicists. Oedipus refuses the right of way of Laius, secretly his father, killing him; Agamemnon walks on the royal purple tapestry; Odysseus blinds and mocks Polyphemos; Icarus flies too near the sun. In all of these we are meant to see men grown too big for their britches; we chafe at the pomposity, the audacity, the presumptuousness. Bigheadedness: the greatest of sins. Certainly teenage students of Homer are made to understand that what Oedipus, Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Icarus lacked was a healthy humility. It is our Christian heritage at work. *The meek shall inherit the earth, and just look at Odysseus!* But *hubris* as a concept has little to do with boldness as set against meekness. Nor can it be understood to represent the mere contravention of the gods' wills. (For when were their wills consonant?) *Hubris* is a specific crime. It seems to have begun with necrophilia and moved on to a general understanding that violence done to another man should not, at all costs, *shame* him. Violence which shames its victim shames also its perpetrator. And the laws of *hubris* were meant to punish the self-inflicted shame of the perpetrator.¹ Some violence might well be glorified. But hubristic violence was the greatest of all crimes, and it had shame as its taproot.

Moderns take a narrow understanding of shame. The prevailing meaning in the English-speaking world is "disgrace, ignominy, loss of esteem or reputation." This is the Second Edition Oxford English Dictionary's definition 3a. The editors quote Shakespeare: "Free from these slanders, and this open shame."² Definition 1, however, is poetically put: shame is "[t]he painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's own

¹ N. Fisher, "The law of hubris in Athens," *Nomos: Essays in Athenian Law, Politics, and Society*. P. Cartledge, P. Millet, S. Todd, eds. University of Cambridge, 1990.

² Com. Err. IV. Iv. 70.

conduct or circumstances (or in those of others whose honour or disgrace one regards as one's own), or of being in a situation which offends one's sense of modesty or decency." This enjoys the favor of the ages, but is certainly subjugated in contemporary usage to the non-primary meaning.³ Yet this definition can be seen as proceeding from the justice set out in Plato's *Republic*. For in *Republic* shame is a primary—perhaps the primary—expedient of natural justice; shame is the quickest and surest judge thereof. The question, though, is what Plato means by shame and how he proposes to deal with it. As I will show, shame is the greatest obstacle for Plato. He will use shame to his advantage. But shame—inherent, painful shame—will also frustrate the designs of the philosopher-king more than anything else.

It was neither the eradication of nor the assiduous obedience to the pangs of shame of which the men of Athens were proud. Their great accomplishment lay in the *moderation* of shame. Thus Thucydides remarks, early in his *History*, upon the progress his countrymen had made in the practice of gymnastics. While the Grecian peoples evolved, the barbarians remained accustomed to covering themselves in sport, lacking

“a modest style of dressing, more in conformity with modern ideas, [which] was first adopted by the Lacedaemonians, the rich doing their best to assimilate their way of life to that of the common people. They also set the example of contending naked, publicly stripping and anointing themselves with oil in their gymnastic exercises. Formerly, even in the Olympic contests, the athletes who contended wore belts across their middles; and it is but a few years since that the practice ceased. To this day among some of the barbarians, especially in Asia, when prizes for boxing and wrestling are offered, belts are worn by the combatants.”⁴

³ It is a question whether it is even within the ability of the modern to “regard” the “honour” of another “as one's own.”

⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I, 6.

But the Greeks were not barbarians, and the nude gymnastic of the former was held up as totemic of their superiority over the latter. Nakedness, though, has ever been associated with shame.

In the Judaic and Christian stories it is the very definition of the fallen world:

“And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man....And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

“Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.”⁵

Critically, in the Judeo-Christian philosophy, the shamefulness of nakedness comes about from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Shame, when Adam and Eve feel it, is not an expression of their beliefs or their feelings, is nothing to do with their individual souls, and certainly is nothing to do with cultural mores: shame is exogenous. Shame, in other words, is a route to truth. It exists below the consciousness and above social convention.

Socrates knows the truth of shame. He appears to have two goals for dealing with shame in the *Republic*: the first, to convince Glaucon to defeat shame and to become shameless, for only then can

⁵ Holy Bible, King James Version, Genesis, 2:21-3:7.

reason unmolested dominate the soul of Glaucon and allow philosophy to rule; second, to wield shame against Glaucon, relentlessly, to achieve the first result.⁶

The paradox of Socrates's pedagogy is that it employs shame to eject shame. The shame employed appears to be of two kinds: things thought culturally shameful, and things that Socrates believes Glaucon, given his position, is likely to think shameful. For example, we are told that living "nobly" and living "shamefully" are polar opposites. 581e. "Slavish"ness is shameful. 395c. There is deep shame in most political systems. Shame comes about just as the oligarchy descends into the democracy, when citizens begin "shamelessly" lending at usury. 556b. But the most remarkable and sinful characteristic of the democracy is that it has collectively *lost* a sense of shame: returning "shamelessness from exile," it will call "shame simplicity," and "shamelessness courage." 560c-561a. And though democracy was its rescuer, the tyrant is the ultimate consummator of shame: the tyrannical man behaves as though "released from, and rid of, all shame." 571c. He is filled "with madness brought in from abroad" where once there were "opinions and desires accounted good and still admitting of shame." 573b. The lowest of men has the smallest apprehension of shame. Yet later, Socrates is going to insist that Glaucon, too, have no apprehension of shame—so that he may become the finest of men.

When we are told that the guardians "must consider it most shameful to be easily angry with one another," Plato uses "*aischron*," which means "base," "ugly," or "shameful," and which Allan Bloom describes as "the opposite of *kalon*," or fine, fair, noble. 378c. Again what is shameful is what is not

⁶ A brief survey of the *Gorgias* reveals similar tactics. "Socrates uses or is accused of using appeals to shame to refuse each of his three interlocutors. Shame (it is said) makes Gorgias concede that he could and should teach his students about justice; it makes Polus concede that justice is better than injustice; and it makes Callicles concede that hedonism is false. Why does Socrates rely on shame in these refutations, instead of sticking to purely rational arguments?" *Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul*, J. Moss, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, XXIX, 2005.

noble. This makes it all the more striking that Socrates's "noble lie" is something of which he is decidedly ashamed. When Socrates finally reveals the first of the noble lies—the myth of the people and the metals—Glaucón says: "It wasn't for nothing that you were for so long ashamed to tell the lie." 414e. Socrates, far from denying the shameful nature of the story he has proposed for the undergirding of the just city in speech, admits that "[i]t was indeed appropriate" that he should be ashamed of it. 415a. Of the lies of Homer, too, Socrates is ashamed. Homer and the great poets are liars; their lies are in competition with those of Socrates. Yet Socrates is not seduced. "A man must not be honored before truth," but why does Socrates hesitate at all in his excoriation of Homer? Because of the tremendous power of the poet in creating shame. It is not only "a friendship for Homer" but, crucially, a "shame before him" that restrains Socrates in speaking out against the poet. 595b. The great power of the poet is his license to manufacture and distribute shame. Through this he wields power across races and through time.

Socrates employs *thumos* throughout in his efforts to eradicate shame from erotic Glaucón. Yet, although spiritedness is introduced in Book IV, by Book X Socrates has retreated to the bimodal model of the soul—that it is part rational and part irrational. (Or part rational and part imitative.) There is no longer mention of spiritedness. By Book X "spiritedness....follow[s] all our action [like] poetic imitation." 606d. In fact Socrates virtually collapses the desiring part of the soul and the spirited part of the soul into the imitative part. We might take this, then, as the mere *status quo*—the imitative part of the soul as merely the part of the soul used by all Socrates's contemporaries. Perhaps *thumos* is reserved for Socrates, or reserved for the "founder" who creates the genesis moment.⁷ Either way, spiritedness disappears soon after the hypotheticals surrounding the first two cities in

⁷ The founding *ex nihilo* is laid bare in several places, where we see mention of the just city having been founded by "some god." See, e.g., 443b. This is "some god" apart and distinct from the god (or sometimes gods) to which Socrates occasionally refers in describing the founding myths of the city.

speech. Certainly *thumos* is employed by Socrates in his discussion of the bronze, silver, and gold; of the dog-like guardians; of the viscous music and the righteous music. But by Book X Socrates has turned to addressing the actual behavior Glaucon will exhibit in the world. He has turned from myth to application—from faith to work. The parousia, told through the myth of Er, is purposed to cement Socrates’s teachings. Hell, or something hellish, awaits a Glaucon who fails to apply what he has learned. But when the erotic Glaucon encounters spirited stories, “when we listen to it, we’ll chant this argument we are making to ourselves as a countercharm, taking care against falling back again into this love, which is childish and belongs to the many.” 608a. No one should enter the mind of Glaucon after Socrates locks up. This suggests the uncomfortable yet well supported view that Socrates views himself as *sui generis*—not as a philosopher-king, but as the philosopher-king. His metaphysics set up Glaucon to rule in Socrates’s image, but no one after Socrates may found; he alone has the key to the kingdom.

Socrates has so far indulged Glaucon in the latter’s ideas of shame. He has repeatedly implied that Glaucon, if he does not behave as Socrates advises, would lose his noble character. But these are only culturally enforced shames—the created shame of the poets. The essential shame, as we saw above, is the shame of nakedness. This is a natural shame. Critically, this is the shame Socrates sets out to dismantle. If philosophy is to rule, it must not be preempted by the blush.

Revelry in the Greek triumph over the demotic barbarians seems to have been a way of life. Thucydides, noted above, reports that the barbarians had no capacity to bare the body, but were shameful of it. Virtue and dress were one. Greeks, however, could overcome shame without becoming shameless. Irreproachable, though, was the modesty of women with anyone but their lovers. Consider Herodotus, who tells of Gyges, bodyguard to Candaules, who disbelieved

Candaules's stories of his wife's beauty. Gyges was impelled by his master to sneak into the bedroom to behold it for himself. Gyges refers to this as wickedness, "[f]or among the Lydians, and indeed among the barbarians generally, it is reckoned a deep disgrace, even to a man, to be seen naked."

The next morning, the queen summons Gyges privately:

"Take thy choice, Gyges, of two courses which are open to thee. Slay Candaules, and thereby become my lord, and obtain the Lydian throne, or die this moment in his room. So wilt thou not again, obeying all behests of thy master, behold what is not lawful for thee. It must needs be that either he perish by whose counsel this thing was done, or thou, who sawest me naked, and so didst break our usages."⁸

Thus did a woman naked prompt a regicide.⁹ Greeks could temporarily overcome shame while maintaining civility, but Socrates proposes a dangerous revolution: that women should exercise with men. Socrates's radicalism is in full force. But the proposal is tactically brilliant: if Socrates can place women and men next to one another in the gymnasium, as a matter of course, the philosopher-king's subjects could experience no pangs of shame at any further outrage he might care to promote—there will be no outrages. The spigot of truth will be turned off; the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil replaced. Whether the city ruled by the philosopher is as Arcadian as Eden we do not know. Bloom proposes that Socrates has forgotten the body.¹⁰ The sacrifice of the body to the immortal soul is a theme that threads the *Republic*, but it is done subtly over the course of the text.

The gleam of shame is the blush, and we see Thrasymachus blush when he is revealed as a sophist. Until then he has appeared to us as the most shameless of the interlocutors. Yet even the spirited Thrasymachus is checked by shame. The blush is something Socrates "had not yet seen before." 350c. It appears as a novelty to him, although this cannot be literally true. It may be that

⁸ Herodotus, *Histories*, I, 10, Rawlinson G., trans.

⁹ Gyges reigned for 38 years, though "he did not perform a single noble exploit." *Id.*

¹⁰ See, e.g., Bloom 386.

Socrates had never seen his spirited interlocutor blush before—that he was unaware that this Thrasymachus could ever be made to blush—and his blush reveals to Socrates, *in res*, the pure power of shame in nature. To Socrates, who will manufacture an elaborate nomogenic superstition and seed it to the masses, the great sin of sophistry¹¹ is not that it is a lie—it is that a mere blush can reveal the lie. The sophists do not lie robustly enough. Socrates requires something stronger.

Thus, of course, the abolition of sexual embarrassment. The policy of mutual nakedness of men and women is dangerous: it could defeat the *eros* that causes mutual attraction and reproduction, and the perpetuation of the city. But the soul must be stripped as the body is and, ironically, it is the stripping of the body that performs the stripping of the soul. Socrates uses the physical *eros*, possibly even destroying it, to encourage the philosophical or intellectual *eros*, a stripping away of the pretensions of the soul. Shamelessness is critical for the philosopher's defeat of poets both tragic and comic. The comic poet laughs and causes us to laugh: out of shame, living in the shame, laughing at the shamefulness of it. But to laugh is to act as shamefully as the comedian. 606c. The man who laughs at a joke is doing a serious thing indeed: he seeks “a mighty change to accompany his condition.” 388e; see also 606c. Likewise, tragedies must not be taken seriously—they are “a kind of play, and not serious.” 602b. Socrates's proposal for men and women to exercise together elicits laughs, and that is the point: it elicits laughs because the poets' regime has been so successful. By mixing the sexes and removing the shame of nakedness, there can be no shame, and the work of the old poets can be replaced by the work of the new philosopher. The essential characteristic of shame is that it reveals the truth. We feel shame when we experience perversions of nature, and knowing that, shame tells us something about nature. This is finally the operation of shame that Socrates must defeat. The *Republic's* very early instantiations of shame are with respect to protectors turning

¹¹ Thrasymachus is, I think, the embodiment of sophistry in the *Republic*

on the protected—shepherds on sheep, dogs on men, guardians on citizens. It is “the most...shameful thing of all” for guards to harm their flocks. 416a. Socrates uses these examples early on because they call to mind what is so true and genuine about shame; we can affirm them instinctually. Indeed Socrates uses Glaucon’s sense of shame to convince him to accede to each of the small details of the city in speech. When this method does not work, Socrates becomes more brutish still: he says that, if Glaucon is a noble man and not a shameful one, he will agree. And time and again Glaucon agrees. But having wielded shame as a scalpel throughout, Socrates finally tosses the instrument away. Any shame in the just city would be a shame ordained by the philosopher. The heroic effort of philosophy is to reject things thought unthinkable, and to think them possible. The true philosopher gazes upon the shadows on the wall and forces himself to see the sun. Even Plato does not believe that shame ought to be abolished. It is only the guardian class, from which rulers will be derived, that mixes the sexes while exercising. He intends the rest of the polity to live more or less within the same natural and social laws of shame that governed when the dialogues take place. But if the philosopher class is to reproduce, it will need to slough off its pipeline to the received truth of the ages, and be utterly shameless.