

A Girardian Reading of Herodotus' Gyges Narrative

Noah Diekemper

This paper presents an experimental method, much indebted to the late René Girard, for reading Herodotus' more incredible tales. This paper takes the story of Gyges' accession to power in Book I as a case study. Noting that Herodotus' account is bookended with incongruous details—namely, the ingressive aorist “ἠράσθη” and the politically charged “στασιῶται”—this paper argues that Herodotus is inviting curious readers to question the straightforward account of the individuals he described in almost firsthand detail. Then, noting the remarkable similarities between the psychology of Herodotus' characters and those of Shakespeare's characters explored by the French literary critic René Girard, this paper explores the possible insights into human nature and the cycles of human associations that Herodotus could have embedded in his stories. The paper concludes by positing the theory that this method of reading—identifying hints that stories are less than literal, calling characters' professed motives into doubt, and inferring fundamental mechanisms of human desire and interaction—could also prove fruitful when applied to other accounts that Herodotus “recorded.

The word “history” can mean several different things. Since it was famously inducted into its current scope of meaning by the Greek author Herodotus, who used his native word “ἱστορίη,” the word has encompassed a deceptively broad variety of meaning. Roughly two and a half millennia later, the British author C.S. Lewis distinguished some diverse strains of

meanings which the English transliteration had accumulated. He discussed six.¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* enumerates twelve. Yet, few people stop to reflect on the precise meaning of what “history” really is.

Of compelling interest, naturally, is the progenitor’s perspective, both concerning the word itself and what he was thinking when he first used it. The word belongs to the nascent Ionian vocabulary of science, literally meaning “inquiry” or “investigation.” He amplifies this presentation of facts with word choice (“ἵστορίης,” “inquiry,” and “ἀπόδεξις,” “publication”) that, as Rosalind Thomas contends, is “the new language of scientific research and intellectual enquiry.”² All these choices suggest a critical search for truth. It is certainly curious that Herodotus adopts this tone, then, in a prologue that simultaneously channels strong elements of Homer: preserving the glory of heroes by singing of their glorious deeds. Herodotus professes that he is providing his audience with the inquiries, or results thereof, of his own work, in order that the deeds of men might not remain unsung. In particular, his word “ἄκλεᾶ” is redolent of Homer’s epic poetry.³

This dual nature to his proem seems fitting, though, when one considers the kind of material that made its way into Herodotus’ so-called “investigation.” Many of his stories, especially in the earlier books, have fantastic elements and appear legendary. Curiously, though, Herodotus’ tales sometimes seem deliberately crafted with hiccups that makes swallowing them easy only for the willfully credulous reader. Considering Herodotus’

¹ C.S. Lewis, “Historicism,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1967), 105.

² Herodotus, *Historiae Libri I-IV*, ed. Karl Hude (London: Oxford University Press), I.1.i. Rosalind Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 268.

³ Herodotus, *Historiae*, I.1.iv.

narrative of Gyges' accession to the Lydian throne will demonstrate this curiosity.⁴ The careful reader is forced to ask whether the "inquiry" that Herodotus claims to have published here is meant to be taken at face value, or if Herodotus' publication was somehow calibrated towards a different historical purpose.

On a first reading, the account of Gyges and his king Candaules presents several issues that would cause a skeptical reader to doubt whether the events transpired precisely as Herodotus lays them out. Herodotus offers his reader a detailed and personal view of the proceedings of the Lydian palace, complete with impassioned dialogue. These features of narrative may not have troubled a Greek audience, for whom the subject matter of "history" was in the very act of being created and defined; and, moreover, these features are consistent with Herodotus' general storytelling, as the audience discovers by reading further in his work. What strikes a zealous reader, however, is the word choice with which Herodotus seems to undermine his own story. The complication in Herodotus' brief plot is the act of Candaules falling in love with his wife, communicated with the ingressive aorist "ἤρᾶσθη" ("began to fall in love with") and strengthened by the subsequent participle that now defines him, "ἐρᾶσθεὶς."⁵ While the act of a man falling in love with his own wife could be accepted on Herodotus' credibility or by suspending disbelief, the beginning of Candaules' downfall is definitely set on an unstable foundation. Herodotus deploys a similarly peculiar word choice when he concludes his account, referencing "στᾶσιῶται," "partisans," of Gyges' that seem to

⁴ Ibid., I.8-13.

⁵ Ibid., I.8.i, I.8.ii.

come out of nowhere.⁶ This charged word resurfaces later in Book I, in case the reader has any doubt about what it means to Herodotus, when he writes of the partisans of Megacles and Lycurgus contending with Pisistratus.⁷ Amy Barbour notes of the word's use with reference to Gyges that, "this . . . may point to the true explanation of his accession, *i.e.* that it was brought about by a forcible revolution."⁸ A credulous reader could tacitly fill in the answers to questions that Herodotus never directly poses about where such men came from as he continues reading; to a careful reader, however, such a detail solicits wondering what story Herodotus is really trying to tell.

Recalling Herodotus' prologue, one might expect that Herodotus himself embellished the results of his investigation in order to make them more worth telling. Ultimately, though, nothing suggests that Herodotus is fabricating his narratives wholesale; it is not only because Herodotus' stated words, spoken to the reader by his "authorial I," demand a *basically* reliable narrative, but also because we can observe this idea of inquiry at work in the account itself. "Embedded stories of inquiry" is the name given to a certain genre of story in Herodotus by scholars such as Paul Demont, who have written extensively on them.⁹ These are narratives in which characters themselves conduct inquiries, employing various techniques ("trap interviews, cross-checking of information, . . .") to investigate the veracity of facts.¹⁰ Demont and others have argued that such stories inexorably color our image of Herodotus himself, years before he committed his findings to posterity, hunting and gathering his material

⁶ Herodotus, *Selections from Herodotus*, ed. Amy L Barbour (University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 219.

⁷ Herodotus, *Historiae*, I.60.ii.

⁸ Barbour, *Selections*, 219.

⁹ Paul Demont, "Figures of Inquiry in Herodotus' 'Inquiries,'" *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series 62.2 (2009): 180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

assiduously as he sifted the wheat of fact from the chaff of falsehood. The stories themselves from time to time remark on Herodotus' own methods—more basically, by presenting such elaborate methods of investigation, they compel the inference that Herodotus was familiar with them from firsthand experience.

It should be accepted, then, that Herodotus had labored to attain stories for his audience. Nevertheless, the Homeric component from his prologue must be accounted for: that remarkable and wondrous stories are worth recounting. It is crucial to bear in mind that whatever the consequences that Herodotus' Homeric attitude has for his storytelling, it is impermissible to suppose them unintelligible or inconsequential; Herodotus was no fool.

Taking our cues from the prologue, then, a solution to Herodotus' eccentric word choice in the Gyges narrative is that Herodotus was signaling to curious minds that the personal narrative was at least somewhat invented. That Gyges acceded to Candaules' throne seems clear and historical enough. Next for consideration is the interpersonal narrative, which presents itself as stretching our strict credulity in the first place as Herodotus purports to narrate, scene by scene, the unfolding of a private royal intrigue of generations past. A reasonable conclusion would be that Herodotus devised this story to account for the general political revolution underway. One possible reason this narrative was offered is that on some level Herodotus was bereft of worthwhile detail past the basics ("Candaules," "Gyges," "partisans," "king") which he already offers. Herodotus might have unearthed intricate, and uninteresting, details about troop movements and palace architecture that facilitated the transition of power; he also might only have heard that Gyges killed the old king and became the new one. Either deficiency warrants further material; taking Herodotus as an intelligent

writer who has a purpose, then, it makes sense to wonder with what aim Herodotus crafted this particular tale of envy and deceit. Not unlike the best writers of fiction, Herodotus probably took the opportunity, I suggest, to develop a typical instance of human psychology and desire.

It is here that the theory of mimetic desire, articulated by the late French literary critic René Girard, becomes relevant. Girard's basic theory is that all human desire is *mediated* through some other person serving as a model.¹¹ Contrary to the those who would have all desire be spontaneous, Girard argued that desire is forever borrowed from someone else.¹² The actual object of desire is thus secondary in Girard's framework, while the model is key. One more crucial tenet for these purposes is that desire seeks to replicate itself, both in one's self and in others. When someone discovers something brilliant, one wants to share it with others; likewise, one never wants a fondness for something or someone else to subside, if it can be kept alive.¹³ Of particular relevance for this study is Girard's analysis of Shakespeare's corpus, *A Theater of Envy*, which traces the implications of mimetic desire at work on Shakespeare's stage populated with eternal love triangles and cross-dressers. Girard's premise is that Shakespeare ceaselessly plays with the paradigm of mediated desire and develops it in its complexities. An aspect of human nature as fundamental as this is posited to be, it should be noted, would also have been fair game for the seasoned and wise eyes of the Greek Herodotus.

¹¹ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987), 287 and *passim*. For instance, he remarks that, "Desire can, in fact, be defined . . . as a process of mimesis involving undifferentiation."

¹² Girard has no tolerance for this idea, which he considers actively dangerous: "[M]odern education thinks it is able to resolve every problem by glorifying the natural spontaneity of desire, which is a purely mythological notion." *Ibid.*, 291.

¹³ For more on mimetic desire from Girard himself, see, for example, his early work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, which traces this theory through the work of four renowned novelists.

As desire is contingent on a mediator, and as desire seeks to perpetuate itself, failing desire will seek out a mediator for the desire. This is presaged, naturally, by a waning of the desire. As Girard explains, “If too securely possessed, even the greatest and rarest possessions—wife, mistress, fortune, kingdom, superior knowledge, everything—lose their appeal. Like a gambler, anxious desire desperately attempts to rejuvenate itself.”¹⁴ This, perhaps, is what we see at the outset of Candaules’ downfall. To understand this as underway, we need only treat the critical “ἠρώσθη” with an extra dose of skepticism and suppose that it is not relating narrative fact so much as protesting what Candaules was telling himself at that point. Such a reading is allowed by Herodotus’ text, which invites skepticism from the word “ἠρώσθη:” it is strange that a man should begin to fall in love with his wife, and strange that this should prompt him to seek Gyges’ opinion (a sign of insecurity) rather than some activity more directed towards his wife herself. Herodotus seems to hint, with the strange language here, that fall *out of* love was precisely what Candaules had done, and was now seeking some means for reigniting that erotic spark.

Such a reading is, moreover, encouraged from the corollary that mimetic desire is an unwelcome acknowledgement—especially from its most zealous practitioners. “Nowhere in the world, Girard tells us, “is mimetic desire at home, anymore than the plague in the Middle Ages of syphilis in the sixteenth century. This dangerous supplement is always perceived as a foreign import.”¹⁵ In other words, the “ἠρώσθη” works not just to alert its audience to something less

¹⁴ René Girard, *A Theater of Envy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 266. Syphilis was famously referred to by such as the Italians and Americans as “the French disease.”

than obvious at work, but reflects the storytelling as Candaules himself was liable to have put it. For a moment, the narrative “focalises” about him and sees the world through the Lydian king’s eyes. After all, the sentence goes on to narrate the world from his, i.e. the Lydian king’s, perspective (“ἐνόμιζέ οἱ”) and the story presently follows him as he seeks and addresses Gyges.¹⁶

The next gesture is also in accord with mimetic desire. Ideally, a weak desire will then single out some preexisting model and implant in the model the desire to be sustained; this makes imitation effortless, and the desire, consequently, thrives. This sentiment is described in some lines that Girard highlights from Hector in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*: “[V]alue dwells not in particular will; / It holds his estimate and dignity / *As well as* therein ‘tis precious of itself / *As in the prizer*” (emphasis mine).¹⁷ This is what we see at work when Candaules goes to Gyges, “of whom Candaules was asking advice, even concerning the most momentous affairs of his empire.”¹⁸

Candaules then proceeds to act like the typical Shakespearean cuckold. The stock character is explained by Girard at one point: “In *Cymbeline*, the ‘bawd and cuckold’ is the exiled Posthumus, a Scot, who channels the desire of an Italian dandy toward his wife by praising her and all Scottish women as excessively as Valentine [of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*], Collatine [of *The Rape of Lucrece*], and others praised theirs.”¹⁹ To invoke one more instance, Candaules hopes to do what the jealous, monstrous Leontes of the *Winter’s Tale* did when he

¹⁶ Herodotus, *Historiae*, I.8.ii.

¹⁷ *Troilus and Cressida*, II, ii, 53-56, quoted in Girard, *Foundation*, 281.

¹⁸ My translation, from Hdts., *Historiae*, I.8.v-vi.

¹⁹ Girard, *Theater*, 260.

first sought out the approval of his childhood friend regarding his wife.²⁰ The trope might be Shakespeare's, but the pattern belongs to the center of human nature—hence its appearance in this ancient Greek historian. With such a reliable model desiring the same object, Candaules hopes to feel his own romantic desire re-kindled.

Of particular interest is Candaules' insistence that Gyges behold his wife with his own eyes. Candaules remarks that "men's ears happen to be less trusting than their eyes." If Gyges merely takes his word for it, Candaules has no real external passion to imitate. Candaules is painfully aware that unless Gyges witnesses every part of the unnamed woman, Gyges cannot really desire her. He wants to imitate genuine interest of Gyges in his wife so that he, in turn, can fall in love with her. Candaules insists that Gyges behold everything so that his desire might be believable.

All of this tallies with Girard's thoughts on Shakespeare, who, he notes, contrasts the element of sight with report. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, for example, Shakespeare has an uncharacteristically reflective Proteus ask himself, "Is it mine eye, or Valentinus' praise . . . that makes me reasonless, to reason thus?" (II.iv.196-98). The two are comparable explanations so long as both are possible; Candaules, however, agitated by the thought of imitating obviously false desire, ensures that Gyges be exposed to the sight of his wife herself. Such a sight would cleanse Candaules of the doubt that troubles Proteus: whether the desire is authentic or merely communicated.

²⁰ Ibid., 314, *passim*.

The culmination of this created model, of course, is rivalry with the model. This is the fate that awaits virtually every Shakespearean figure who offers up his beloved as an object for a friend or comrade to covet; the titular two gentlemen of Verona are at odds not because they elevated romance over their friendship but because their friendship and kindred sentiments demanded that they both desire whatever the other desires—even if only one could enjoy that object when it is Candaules' wife. In Herodotus' story, Gyges' voyeurism leads him inexorably to a choice between himself and his king. This climax is the point where desire, ripened in two mutual models and pursuing final consummation of the passion, leads one ultimately to destroy the other. Naturally, Gyges preserves his own life.

One final mimetic nod, perhaps, is patent in the telling of the whole account: from beginning to end, Herodotus refrains from giving Candaules' remarkable wife a name. This denial of such a basic human feature suggests that she is not as important as one might expect. While Herodotus undoubtedly makes her initiative the crux of the entire transfer of power, one is also directed by the suppression of the name to look less towards her and more towards Gyges and Candaules. This shift of emphasis reinforces a key tenet of mimetic desire: the fundamental importance of the model of the desire, over and against the object of desire. If Candaules falls in love with his wife here, it has far less to do with anything she has done and far more to do with the actions of the man he looks up to: Gyges. Since, as Herodotus informs us, Candaules is prisoner to Gyges' opinion to the extent that they discuss "the most momentous affairs of the empire," it should come as no surprise that eventually Candaules would demand Gyges' approval of his wife. Such are men, Girard argues. If Herodotus had

such a grasp of mimetic desire, this is exactly the kind of emphasis that one might expect him to integrate into his story.

The final choice to reference “στασιῶται,” then, could be Herodotus’ way of suggesting to the careful reader that the recounted events are not exactly what he discovered. The word choice suggests that Gyges already had armed political followers, which the story does not lead us to expect. If he did, though, then the entire story of Candaules’ wife could perhaps be read more easily as allegory: Herodotus paints for his reader a distilled paradigm of mimetic desire in very human terms. That Gyges and Candaules actually grappled over control of the empire, after Candaules showed Gyges its inner workings and boasted of its prestige, is of less immediate narrative interest to Herodotus.

Observing the remarkable precision with which Herodotus’ narrative of Gyges and Candaules tallies with the Shakespearean exercises on the theme of mimetic desire as lucidly explicated by Girard suggests that Herodotus may have had such a far-reaching and insightful idea in mind. He surrenders to history his account of great and wonderful deeds which relates the development of the conflict between the East and the West, but that also cooperates with the facts to illustrate the most basic principles of human desire. While this paper has limited itself to a close look at just one of Herodotus’ numerous anecdotes, applying this paradigm to other stories of his might prove a useful enterprise. It might offer insight, for instance, into his opening retelling of the Persian account of beginnings, where the East and the West take turns stealing women from each other. Other stories that might be illuminated include the story of

Solon visiting Croesus, or Arion being saved by the dolphin. If Herodotus truly had such a profound understanding of what actuates human beings, and depicted it in fables adorning a narrative of the world, then he undoubtedly bequeathed to posterity one of the richest histories the world has ever known.

Noah Diekemper
Hillsdale College
ndiekemper@hillsdale.edu

Bibliography

- Bravo, Benedetto, and Marek Węcowski. "The Hedgehog and the Fox: Form and Meaning in the Prologue of Herodotus." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 124 (2004): 143-64.
- Demont, Paul. "Figures of Inquiry in Herodotus' 'Inquiries.'" *Mnemosyne, Fourth Series* 62.2 (2009): 179-205.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Girard, René. *A Theater of Envy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Herodotus. *Historiae Libri I-IV*. Edited by Karl Hude. London: Oxford University Press.
- Herodotus. *Selections from Herodotus*. Edited by Amy L Barbour. University of Oklahoma Press, 2011.
- Lewis, C.S. In *Christian Reflections*, 100-13. Edited by Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967.
- Thomas, Rosalind. *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.