**New Imago Forum 10 Sep 2016**

**Shame and Guilt in Ancient Greece**

***Armand D’Angour***

There’s a joke about a man who’s shipwrecked on a remote desert island in the Pacific. Robert makes a home for himself, finds that he can live quite well, and begins to enjoy a good life despite missing his girlfriend and feeling bereft of companionship. One day he sees someone floundering far off shore and swims out to the rescue. It’s a woman who has fallen off a yacht, and on rescuing her and bringing her safely to shore he realises she’s the famous supermodel Claudia, for many years his fantasy object. Thrown together with him on the island, Claudia falls for Robert, and he feels that his wildest dreams have come true. He has to pinch himself: can it really be true that Claudia is his lover? But after a few weeks, she notices him occasionally looking wistful. He tells her that she’s the woman of his dreams, but there’s just something he misses that would make his life complete. She swears she’s prepared to do anything to make him happy, so he thinks hard and eventually asks her: would she play-act at being his old friend Terry, and come down the pub with him for a drink? She unhesitatingly agrees, and they set about creating the scene in their island hut, setting up a table with pints of beer, pinning a dartboard on the wall, and so on. They sit down and Rob lifts his glass and says ‘Terry, mate, how’s it all going?’ ‘Not bad, Rob’, she replies, in the gruffest voice she can muster, ‘How’s it going for you?’ ‘Pretty good, mate’, he replies heartily, then leans up close and says in a confidential voice: ‘You’ll never guess who I’m shagging!’

This joke is clearly a dig at a certain aspect of male psychology and the compulsion to publicise success, and I tell it to make a comparison with a story from the ancient world which has a similar premise but for which the issue of sexual shame is central, and indicative of the cultural relativity of what counts as shameful. Some time around 700 BC, according to the Greek historian Herodotus [*Histories* Bk 1], Candaules the king of Lydia became obsessed by his wife’s sexual allure. [The standard translation of the passage in Greek and the word *ērasthē*, which has puzzled and amused generations of students, reads ‘Candaules fell in love with his own wife’ or ‘Candaules was infatuated with his own wife’, somehow suggesting that such a thing should be a matter of surprise – his own wife! But a better translation is that he was ‘erotically obsessed’ with her]. The king had a trusted bodyguard called Gyges, whom he daily regaled with his feelings. But extolling his good fortune wasn’t enough for Candaules. One day he said that Gyges must confirm his wife’s beauty for himself and that he would arrange for him to see her naked. ‘Now, for the Lydians and for most non-Greeks’, comments Herodotus, ‘even for a man to be seen naked is a matter of great shame’. [Nakedness is of course the first ‘shame’ for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden]. Gyges was naturally scandalised, and protested to the king that such things should remain private. ‘When a woman takes off her dress’ he says to the king, ‘she removes her shame [the Greek word is *aidōs*] with it’.

But Candaules insists that he’ll arrange things so that Gyges can spy on his naked wife completely undetected. On the appointed day he has Gyges hide behind his bedroom door so that he can spy on the queen undressing. Gyges watches as she removes her clothes and walks entirely naked towards the bed, then he slips out of the chamber just as the king has instructed. But the queen sees him out of the corner of her eye, and is furious – though she doesn’t let on –

that she’s been made an object of shame by her husband. The following day she summons Gyges and says: ‘I’ve been put in a position of intolerable shame by my husband, so now I give you a choice. Kill Candaules and marry me yourself. If you refuse, I will order my soldiers to kill you now’. Gyges pleads with her not to force him to make such a terrible choice, but she’s adamant: either he or Candaules must die. So he sensibly chooses the latter route and kills the king. He then marries the queen and becomes king of Lydia, inaugurating a dynasty that will go on to rule over wealthy Lydia for five generations until the reign of Croesus, the richest man in the world, about whom I spoke last year in my paper on Money.

For Herodotus, a key aspect of the tale was the difference in customs between Greeks and non-Greeks with regard to what might be perceived as shameful. The relativity of notions of shame is one of the themes that I will pursue in this paper. The public nudity that was such a mark of shame for a Lydian – to the point that a king had to be killed and and a royal house destroyed – was of little consequence to the Greeks. They were long familiar with the sight of athletes and gymnasts competing entirely in the nude (the word *gymnos* means ‘naked’), a practice that in Sparta extended to women as well as men, and they were surrounded by images and sculpted figures of gods and goddesses, men and women, in all their unabashed nakedness. In Herodotus’ time a drama on the theme of the Gyges story had been composed and staged in the theatre, and the dramatic way that Herodotus recounts the tale in his *Histories*, complete with dialogue and action, suggests that the stageplay (which we no longer have) was in his mind’s eye when he wrote the story down in his opening book.

It’s likely that in the play the notion of shame or disgrace, *aidōs*, was the subject of some discussion by the characters or chorus, as it’s a theme that, as we will see, is broached elsewhere in Greek tragedy. In fact, a fragment of ancient drama survives on papyrus on which the names ‘Gyges’ and ‘Candaules’ appear. Its authorship is unknown, but its style and subject-matter are reminiscent of the work of the playwright Euripides. Euripides was the most avant-garde and psychologically-minded tragedian of the fifth century BC – many of you will know his *Medea* and his *Bacchae*, both of which have plots which are quite shocking and deal with issues of great psychological power. In a play now lost Euripides put a line into a character’s mouth that seemed so scandalous to the audience of the time that the verse has been preserved out of context. It ran: ‘Nothing is shameful unless it seems that way to the person who does the act’. This sentiment takes the relativisation of shame further than Herodotus, by seeming to make it a matter of moral relativity and individual choice rather than just one of cultural difference. The mostly traditional-minded audience of ancient Athens would have found it deplorable that a person or even a mythical character should deny that some evidently dreadful deed was truly shameful on the basis that, as Shakespeare’s Hamlet was to put it two millennia later, ‘there’s nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’. For appearing to promote this kind of sentiment – and Greeks were very literal-minded in conflating a poet’s words with that poet’s own views – Euripides was censured as immoral by his contemporaries, and was disapprovingly associated with the progressive, ethically inquiring thinkers of the age who are generally grouped under the rather derogatory appellation ‘sophists’ (from which we get the words ‘sophistry’ and ‘sophisticated’). Prime among the sophists was Protagoras of Abdera (where Aristotle was later to be born), who coined the famous saying ‘Man is the measure of all things’. This was considered by moralistic critics such as Plato to be a dangerously atheistic and relativistic proposition, but it was the kind of sentiment that was closely aligned to the world-view Euripides’ characters.

The line ‘Nothing’s shameful unless it seems that way to the person who does the act’ was actually preserved by a commentator writing in the margin of an ancient *comic* play, *The Frogs* by Euripides’ contemporary, Aristophanes. The context in that comedy is not one of sexual shame, but of the shame attached to breaking a promise. Aristophanes had an intense literary relationship with Euripides, regularly mimicking and adapting his tragic style, scenarios, and verses, and creating from them many hilarious moments of comic parody – often by having characters utter Euripidean lines out of context. In the *Frogs*, his most successful comedy produced in 406 BC, the cast of characters centrally include the tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides himself, who were two of the great tragic playwrights of the era and were both then dead. But while Aeschylus had long been dead, Euripides had died just two years earlier than the production of *Frogs*. The main character of *Frogs* is the god Dionysus, the god of wine and drama, who at the beginning of the play claims to be desperate because, he says, there are no smart playwrights left in Athens, and he feels an enormous craving for Euripides. So he swears he will go down to the Underworld to bring Euripides back, just as in the myth Orpheus had descended to Hades to bring his beloved Eurydice back from the dead.

When he gets down to the Underworld, Dionysus finds Euripides and Aeschylus on the point of staging a debating contest. They are each staking a claim to the Chair of Tragedy in the Underworld, so Dionysus himself takes on the role of umpire – reasonably enough, given his role as the god of theatre. In the course of the debate Aeschylus argues for the good old-fashioned style of drama that he represents, and slams Euripides modernism and immorality; while Euripides derides Aeschylus’ antiquated bombast and solemnity, and defends his own outrageously modernist plots and music, not least on the grounds that they are more ‘democratic’ (in that they both dealt with, and presumably appealed to, non-elite groups). The two playwrights battle it out hammer and tongs, misquoting and misrepresenting each others’ plays to hilarious effect. One might imagine a contemporary version of the comedy using William Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw debating their claim to be the best dramatist on similar lines, and in fact in 1974 Stephen Sondheim created a musical of the *Frogs* (which I haven’t seen) using those very authors as the main characters.

After a long debate with lots of twists and turns, Aeschylus and Euripides come out neck and neck. Both have obvious virtues, and both have evident defects. So it’s left to Dionysus to decide who the winner should be. His inclination is towards Aeschylus, but he guiltily remembers that his original promise was to bring back Euripides. His solution to this quandary is a brilliant side-step. He part-quotes another notorious line from Euripides’ *Hippolytus*: ‘My tongue has sworn, but my mind remains unsworn’. So Dionysus says ‘My tongue has sworn, but I choose – Aeschylus’. Euripides reproaches Dionysus bitterly, saying that it’s shameful that he should go back on his word. At that point Dionysus blithely retorts with that other line of Euripides - ‘Nothing is shameful, unless it seems that way to the person who does the act’. Euripides has been hoist with his own petard. But is it true that one can simply *choose* to be ashamed or not?

Plato was in his early 20s when the *Frogs* was staged, and was deeply disapproving (as only a moralistic young man can be) of the ethical decadence such sentiments appeared to espouse. When he later wrote his great work of political theory, the *Republic*, he argued that in an ideal state both comedy and tragedy should be banned for representing lies and immorality. In the *Republic* Plato also gives his own version of the Gyges story, using it as a thought-experiment to consider whether anyone would in fact restrain themselves from doing something wrong or shameful if there were no prospect of being found out. In Plato’s fictional version, an unnamed ancestor of Gygesis a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia. One day an earthquake reveals a cave in the mountainside where he’s feeding his flock. Entering the cave the shepherd discovers that it’s a tomb in which a giant corpse has been laid. On the corpse’s hand he sees a golden ring, which he removes and slips onto his own hand. He soon discovers that by manipulating the ring he can make himself invisible. Using his power of invisibility, he proceeds to seduce the queen of Lydia, kill the king, and take the throne for himself.

The story of ‘Gyges’ Ring’ is told by Plato’s brother Glaucon, who uses it to argue that if people could ‘get away with murder’, literally or figuratively, they wouldn’t hesitate to do so. ‘Imagine’, Glaucon says, ‘someone with the power of invisibility never doing any wrong or stealing or seducing. He’d be considered a fool. People would only praise him for his stance out of fear of what he might do to them.’ So much for Harry Potter and his virtuous cloak of invisibility. Socrates, however, goes on to argue against Glaucon, saying that this reasoning is quite mistaken. His argument is that wrongdoing in itself is what makes a person unhappy, because (in a nutshell) it distorts the psyche by allowing desire or appetite to overcome reason. Reason must rule if a soul is to be truly harmonious, and only a harmonious soul can be happy. So in Socrates’ view it would always be in one’s best interest to avoid wrongdoing and to choose to be fair and just even if one could get away with all kinds of criminality.

Socrates’ answer to Glaucon cuts across the distinction between outward appearance and inward feelings in relation to morally charged actions. This distinction has been famously related to the difference between ‘shame-cultures’ and ‘guilt-cultures’. These terms were first coined by the anthropologist Ruth Benedict to descibe the difference she perceived between Japanese and American attitudes to shame and guilt. In a shame-culture, she suggested, what matters is essentially how one is viewed for one’s actions; in a guilt-culture what counts more is how one feels internally about one’s moral status. The distinction was adopted by the classical scholar E.R. Dodds in his brilliant study *The Greeks and the Irrational*, to characterise the difference between the way the early Greeks, and in particular Homeric heroes, express and act on their notion of honour, compared with that of later, arguably more sophisticated moral theorists such as Socrates and Christian thinkers.

Dodds did not apply the distinction as bluntly as some scholars who cite his use of the notion have done. Even Homeric heroes, as he recognised, may be thought to be driven by an internal (or internalised) sense of what’s right and wrong, honourable or shameful. However, it’s true that much early Greek literature emphasises the concerns of characters who commit crimes largely in terms of how others will view them and the punishments they will undergo in consequence of their actions, rather than how it makes them feel about themselves. So, for instance, the Homeric hero Ajax, who fails in his claim to be the best warrior at Troy after Achilles when he loses out in a contest with Odysseus that is rigged against him, sets out to slaughter his former comrade and commanding officer because he feels he has been dishonoured and humiliated by them. When he’s foiled in this murderous attempt and duped, even more humiliatingly, by the gods into slaughtering a herd of sheep instead of his intended victims, he’s depicted by Sophocles as not in the least guilty or remorseful for hatching his shameful plan, but furious and defiant for not having succeeded. He kills himself because he feels that his failure to fulfil his murderous aims – rather than the fact that he has made such a disgraceful plan at all – is what puts him to shame in the eyes of both his supporters and his enemies.

What’s at stake in this kind of shame-culture, then, is not a sense of responsibility in the face of a consciousness of wrongdoing, but a culturally specific demand for respect and honour. It’s important that the individual who makes the demand is already conscious of his status as, say, a warrior, king or queen, or just as a good and honourable person. The earliest Greek literature, the epics of Homer and Hesiod, explicitly speak about different kinds of shame as depending on status and even class. Both poets have verses in which they say that shame - *aidōs* - can be either a good or a bad thing, both harmful and beneficial, and, more specifically, that it’s something that tends to be harmful to the poor or lowly man and of benefit to the noble or rich man. This duality has given rise to varied interpretations. The context of Hesiod’s poem, *Works and Days*, is an exhortation to his lazy brother to stop wasting his time and get down to the hard work of farming and tending his land. In this case, then, the so-called ‘bad shame’ that harms the poor man seems to refer to the disgrace of being seen not to undertake the necessary steps to make a respectable living. Conversely, the ‘good shame’ that benefits the rich nobleman seems to mean the sense of shame, based on due self-regard for status, that drives such a man to seek to maintain or improve his situation and to be successful in the eyes of his peers.

Claims to honour and status are also central to the dual notion of shame that’s raised in the main text I will now briefly consider, Euripides’ brilliant tragedy *Hippolytus*.

The play is set in the town of Troezen where Theseus, king of Athens, has left his wife Phaedra and his illegitimate son, Hippolytus (a young man in his 20s), while he serves out a year’s exile from his home. At the start of the play Aphrodite, goddess of love and sex, appears and explains that Hippolytus has sworn himself to chastity and refuses to revere her. Instead, he exclusively honours Artemis, the virgin Goddess of the hunt. This slight to her honour has led Aphrodite to initiate a plan of vengeance against him, for which she’s using his stepmother Phaedra simply as a pawn. When Hippolytus had visited Athens two years earlier, Aphrodite had inspired Phaedra to fall in love with him, her own stepson; shame and tragedy must inevitably follow.

When Hippolytus appears with his throng of male followers from a hunting party, he shows exaggerated reverence to Artemis and none to Aphrodite. His pious attendant warns him about slighting the love-goddess, but Hippolytus is far too proud and refuses to listen – ‘I do not honour those whose work is done in the dark of night’. The chorus, consisting of young married women of Troezen, now enter the theatre and describe how Phaedra hasn’t eaten or slept for three days. Phaedra herself then appears, accompanied by her nurse, and gives a soliloquy on pleasure and on shame which I will discuss further. She eventually confesses why she’s sick: she’s in love with her stepson Hippolytus. She knows it will bring terrible shame on her if Theseus finds out the nature of her desire, which she acknowledges to be a kind of madness. [l. 241 f.]

The nurse and the chorus are shocked by her admission, but Phaedra explains that she intends to starve herself to death to keep her honour intact. The nurse then changes her mind and tells Phaedra that Love cannot be resisted, and that she knows of a magical charm to cure her condition. Phaedra allows herself to be persuaded. The nurse goes to Hippolytus, and after extracting an oath of silence from him tells him of Phaedra’s desire, and suggests that he might consider yielding to her. He reacts with a furious, misogynistic tirade and threatens to reveal all to Theseus. When the Nurse reminds him of his oath, the most binding utterance that an ancient Greek can make, he pronounces the scandalous line ‘My tongue has sworn, my mind remains unsworn’. In the event, he will scrupulously keep his oath; but Phaedra, who hears the altercation offstage, is not to know that. She can only assume that disaster will ensue, and determined to preserve her honour, she hangs herself.

Theseus returns to discover her dead body together with a letter in her handwriting falsely asserting that she was raped by Hippolytus. In furious rage he curses his son to death and exile, calling on the god Poseidon, who had once granted him three wishes, to fulfil his curse. Hippolytus enters and protests his innocence, but can’t say what the true story is because of his oath. Theseus forces him to go into exile, and Hippolytus departs on his chariot. A messenger then enters and describes a terrible scene; as Hippolytus was driving along the coast, the sea reared up in the shape of an enormous bull, terrifying the horses, who dashed the chariot among the rocks and dragged Hippolytus behind them. Theseus reacts coldly in the belief that Hippolytus has been duly punished for his crime, until the goddess Artemis appears in person and tells him the brutal truth. Theseus is devastated, and of course prostrate with guilt, as Hippolytus is carried in physically battered and barely alive. They exchange tender words and Hippolytus forgives Theseus before he dies.

The initial shame – *aidos* - with which the story deals, then, is the lack of reverence paid to Aphrodite. The goddess of love is of course a personification of sexual desire. So we might interpret this as indicating that it should be counted a matter of shame – in a man’s world as was ancient Greece – for a handsome, able-bodied young man such as Hippolytus to deny his sexual desire to such an extent that he altogether refuses sex and the company of women. However, far from showing due shame and reverence, he doesn’t even listen sympathetically to his concerned servant’s pleading. His single-minded, proud, devotion to the virgin goddess, rather like his rant against women in general, are surely meant to be understood as excessive to the point of hubris – the kind of excessive pride that goes before a fall.

The more central shame of the drama, however, is that of Phaedra herself, who has been afflicted by her unseemly desire for Hippolytus. Despite the absence of any blood relationship between stepmother and stepson, it was felt by the Greeks that it would be unnatural for a stepmother to sleep with or even desire her stepson, The simple fact of family structure might seem to mark it as incestuous and taboo. Phaedra expresses both a sense of guilt at the betrayal of her absent husband and a sense of shame at the thought of her illegitimate desire. She hasn’t actually done anything, just thought it, but she speaks of her incestuous desire as if it were itself a deed of shame. When she first addresses the women of Troezen, she posits a distinction with these words: [380 f.]

We know and understand very well what is virtue and what is evil but, unfortunately, we fail to act virtuously. Some of us do so because we are lazy, others because we give priority to pleasure rather than virtue.

Life has many pleasures: lengthy and idle chats, for example, and indolence, a pleasurable vice. And then there’s shame, which has a double face: one, to be sure, is not an evil thing to possess; but there’s the other shame, whose weight crushes whole households. And if the good and the bad shame were easy to distinguish, the word describing them would not be the same.

This passage has caused much perplexity, and I can only touch on some of the varying interpretations it has elicited. First of all, why does Phaedra list ‘shame’ as one of lifes pleasures, here the third in a series of pleasures after ‘long chats’ and ‘indolence’? And secondly, how can we explain the one kind of shame that is not a bad thing to possess and the other that allegedly can destroy whole households? There is no scholarly unanimity about either question, but I will suggest some tentative answers.

Phaedra’s distinction of two kinds of shame clearly recalls, in my view, the one previously mentioned, the distinction raised by Homer and Hesiod. If so, it’s possible that the pleasure of which she speaks refers to the kind of pleasurable *aidos* the earlier poets identify as the good shame, the one which encourages successful people to acquire and maintain their success. In this respect, a feeling of *aidos* can be called a pleasure because it implies due reverence, almost of a religious nature, for one self and for others. To be respected and to show due respect are ways of affirming one’s privileged status, which is itself a source of pleasure. One might also recall Gyges’ comment that when a woman casts off her clothes she casts off her *aidos*. The clear implication of that statement is that *aidos* is a good thing, something that a person with self-respect should seek to retain.

What about the bad shame that destroys households and families? I think it’s too simplistic to assume, as some have suggest, that Phaedra just means something that brings disgrace on a family, i.e. a deed of shame. Although this could be a possible translation of *aidos*, it would make her statement a purely semantic quibble (a bit like saying of a brazen liar ‘he has no shame’ and being corrected ‘oh, but surely he shames himself by lying? That means he’s *full* of shame’). I would argue that what Phaedra must be talking about when she speaks of the destructiveness of shame is a feeling, not a deed (though as we have seen she equates her shameful feeling with a shameful deed). By contrast to the shame that ensures due reverence and thereby brings pleasure to those who have it, she seems to mean that there’s a more negative sense of shame. Given that at this stage of the story she is still fully resolved to kill herself to preserve her honour, presumably she could be referring to the shame that is felt in the face of one’s own shocking deed or scandalous thought that will in turn lead to a self-destructive act. The sense that one has overstepped the bounds of acceptability and must pay the price for it may even be pleasurable, since it allows an actor to assert their autonomy in the face of a terrible dilemma. It can also, of course, wreck a family or household as surely as it did in the case of the Homeric hero Ajax mentioned earlier, whose shame at his failure led not only to his suicide but to the abandonment to an unhappy fate of his wife, child, and comrades.

It has also been suggested that Phaedra is here not only hinting at the prospect of her own death and its sad consequences for her family, but unconsciously foreshadowing the terrible tragedy that her desire to retain her honour will unleash on her innocent stepson. But it’s a further puzzle in relation to the play that she should go on to wreak vengeance on Hippolytus by laying out a vicious falsehood about his having raped her, knowing that her deathbed statement will be bound to be believed by Theseus and cause terrible consequences. Surely this vengeful act is itself an act of shame, diminishing or even annulling any honour that she might have preserved by killing herself?

It’s an interesting historical perspective that the surviving play *Hippolytus* was the second of Euripides’ attempts to tell the story of Phaedra. In an earlier version, perhaps composed and staged a decade earlier, he had portrayed her as a brazen seductress, determined first to seduce Hippolytus and then to take revenge on him for spurning her – the so-called Potiphar’s Wife motif (from the biblical story of Daniel and Potiphar). That first play had not been a popular success, whereas this one was approved of by the audience and awarded the first prize for tragedy. The reason for its success, we are told, is that it presented Phaedra in an ‘honourable’ light. The surprising literalness of Greek audiences meant that if the character in a drama was seen to be good, the drama itself could be considered good – and vice versa. But though the dishonourable and destructive act of Phaedra’s dying falsehood might clearly have suited her character better in the earlier version of the story – which is one scholarly solution to the question of her honour being preserved – why did Euripides think it could be retained in the revised version?

I think an understanding of the psychological dynamics of shame and guilt can help to suggest why Phaedra’s deathbed misdemeanour doesn’t entirely cancel out her attempt to preserve her honour. Shame as she experiences it involves a purely narcissistic syndrome: what matters in her sense of shame is that she feels bad about how her actions have diminished or will harm *herself*. Guilt, by contrast, requires that one has a sense of psychological discomfort in knowing that one’s actions have harmed or will harm another. In Phaedra’s case, Euripides has correctly portrayed the way her sense of shame about her own feelings, her own narcissistic self-regard, has completely driven out any prospective guilt in relation to the harm she may wreak on both Theseus and Hippolytus.

Shame, then, may be construed as largely a matter of self-regard. In this respect the saying that ‘there’s nothing shameful unless it seems so the person who does the act’ can acquire a less morally dubious meaning than it was heard to have, and simply sound like a statement of fact. I will finish with a story from a different cultural context which highlights that, as in the story of Gyges and Candaules’ wife, under certain conditions what might seem of little concern to some can seem debilitatingly shameful to the person who ‘does the act’. This is the bittersweet story of Abu Hasan told in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, a compilation of Arabian and Indian fables that go back to the 8th century AD but were first translated into English in 1706.

Abu Hasan was wealthy, clever and generous, and the most eligible bachelor in Baghdad. When his friends would reproach him for remaining single, he would reply: “I am free, why must I become a slave?” But eventually he agreed to wed and everyone rejoiced. A fabulous ceremony was prepared, the greatest Baghdad had seen in years. Tables were laden with chickens stuffed with pistachios, whole roast goats with fresh dates, pastries with walnuts and cream, and sherbets and sweets of all varieties. Abu Hasan and his friends reclined on silk cushions smoking pipes of honey tobacco. The bride came forth wearing the first of seven dresses, a turquoise gown dripping with gems and silver, and each following dress was more lovely than the last. She retired to the chamber to await her husband, who entertained his guests with a great store of wit and fable.

At last, when his duties as host had been fulfilled, Abu Hasan bid his guests good night. But he had eaten and drunk so heavily that as he rose from his cushions he released a thunderous fart that echoed from wall to wall and silenced every voice in the room. The guests at once began talking, pretending they hadn’t noticed, but Abu Hasan was covered with unbearable shame. He slipped out of the house, saddled his horse and rode to Basra, where he boarded a ship bound for India. There he soon secured himself a position in the services of a Rajah, and came to be loved and respected by all in the court. But he was never seen to smile, and every evening he would climb to the highest tower to gaze in the direction of his homeland. After ten years had passed, he packed up his belongings and set sail back to his native country. Once on land, he rode to Baghdad and paused at the outskirts of the city, hoping to find out whether anyone remembered him any more. Eventually he passed a hut where a mother was putting her daughter to sleep. He heard the girl ask: “Mother, what year was I born?” “Oh, that’s easy to remember, dear,” her mother replied, “You were born in the year that Abu Hasan farted.” Hearing these words, the shame returned and all hope died in Abu Hasan’s heart. He fled the country, never to be seen again.