

# Syloson's cloak and other Greek myths

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## *1. Introduction*

THE TITLE of this paper, 'Syloson's cloak and other Greek myths,' may seem intriguing, as Syloson is not a god nor a hero in what we normally refer to as Greek myth, but the brother of the tyrant Polykrates, who ruled over the island of Samos in the sixth century BC. An historical figure, then, rather than a mythical one (even if he should prove identical with the fox in Aesop's fable, or *muthos*, 'The lion, the ass, and the fox').<sup>1</sup> However, I will discuss the story of his cloak only after a number of considerations, starting with a brief reexamination of the theory of myth proposed fifty years ago by Louis Gernet. To put it more precisely: what I will discuss is an aspect of myth that I have been exploring for a couple of years together with my colleague John Scheid during our joint seminars at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris (Scheid 1995:274-76, Scheid 1996:311-18).<sup>2</sup> When working on various problems related to myth and mythical thought, we discovered that some rather specific principles of ours had in fact already been discretely formulated by Louis Gernet and Jean-Pierre Vernant. This is why I will start with presenting these principles—before proceeding to a couple of representative shorthand analyses, the first of which deals with the name of Orpheus, the second with Syloson's cloak.

## *2. The agalma and the mythical story according to Gernet*

In his article on the 'mythical notion of value' in ancient Greece, Louis Gernet analyses a series of mythical stories which have one common denominator (Gernet 1948): they are all focused on 'objects of value' or, more precisely, on the objects that the Greeks called *agalмата*, *i.e.* objects that constitute a 'source of joy' for the giver and the receiver, if we stick to the etymology of the word. For the word *agalma*, plural *agalмата*, is a noun derived from the verb *agallesthai*, 'take a joyous

1 Aesop *Fable* 209 Chambry; *cf.* Hdt. 3.39 for the historical scenario. *Cf.* also *Fable* 228 Chambry, which seems to be the fabulist's version of the story told in Hdt. 3.142-43.

2 *Cf.* also Vernant 1996:40.

pride in something' (Chantraine 1968:6-7, Gernet 1948:97-98). To anyone who studies pre-monetary value and the status of objects in archaic Greece, Gernet's article on the *agalmata* is a precious take-off point.

But the importance of this article is not only to be found on the level of objects and pre-monetary value. Published in the *Journal de Psychologie*, Gernet's article has a theoretical dimension, anticipating, already in 1948, the transformation in the study of myth that was going to characterise the following decades, notably in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose article 'The structural study of myth' was originally published, in English, a couple of years later (Lévi-Strauss 1955).<sup>3</sup> Quoting Ferdinand de Saussure, back in 1948, Gernet sets out to consider mythology as 'a kind of language,' *une espèce de langage* (Gernet 1948:100; cf. di Donato 1983:337-38).

Even if Gernet's perspective at first sight seems close to the Lévi-Straussian one, we should not exaggerate the resemblance. Gernet simply never developed his linguistic intuition on a large scale. And what interests me in his approach is not the prophetic proposition I just quoted. I am concerned with another aspect of it, which I call the 'generative' aspect. In Lévi-Strauss' analysis, as the reader may recall, the Oedipus story is the narrative answer to a fundamental contradiction in Greek culture between the belief in the autochthonous origin of man and the fact that human beings are born from the union of woman and man (Lévi-Strauss 1958:239). The story is the answer to a logical impossibility, from which it is generated. Now, the way in which Gernet analyses mythical stories focused on *agalmata* also has a 'generative' aspect. But whereas myth to Lévi-Strauss is the story by which a logical difficulty is overcome, Gernet seems to consider a myth as a material object generating stories. As if the myth were an object rather than a story.

In the study of ancient Greek and Roman 'myths of weaving and fabric' that John Scheid and myself have been carrying out—the results have been published under the title *Le métier de Zeus* a couple of years ago—we soon reached a point where we had to ask ourselves precisely whether myth, understood as a story, is not an obstacle to the analysis of the mythology of weaving. Would it not be an advantage to define myth as a non-narrative phenomenon (Scheid and Svenbro 1994:10-11 [with n. 8-9], 1996:3 [with n. 7-8])? This was the question we were asking when we came back to Gernet's article. Let me quote a passage from our introduction:

'The difficulties encountered by mythology (in the usual sense of the word), iconology, and the study of rituals, when each, for the needs of its own interpretative work, makes use of the other two, are well known. These problems result in part from the fact that none of the three can claim a privileged position with respect to the other two: the story does not automatically hold

3 Lévi-Strauss' own translation of this article, 'La structure des mythes,' appears as chapter xi in Lévi-Strauss 1958:227-55.

the key to the image or the ritual, for example. Whether we are dealing with stories, images, or rituals, specific rules correspond to each field, requiring more cautious methods on the part of the scholar than mere juxtaposition or naive identification.

Moreover, mythology (still in the usual sense of the word) cannot be confined to the domain of stories: the pieces of information it employs in its analyses come from sources that are too varied to permit us to subscribe to an absolute hegemony of the narrative.

In reflecting upon these difficulties we came to consider the myth not as a story but as a simple linking or concatenation of categories, linking thanks to which it becomes possible, within a given culture, to engender mythical stories, images, and rituals. Thus envisioned, the now-equal relationship among story, image, and ritual is one not of mirroring but of common descent, giving the respective documents an air of close parentage, the origin of which would be this linking of categories we call myth. In a given culture, this myth tends to remain relatively stable, and this stability is particularly evident when it is linguistic in nature' (Scheid and Svenbro 1996:2-3).

It was when we arrived at this point that we realised how close our perspective was to Gernet's (this would not surprise outsiders who know that we are both members of the Centre Louis Gernet, but it did surprise us at the time). As a matter of fact, as he sets out to study the tradition on Eriphyle's necklace, Gernet talks about the 'points of contact' where 'connections regarding the object of value appear [in the narrative imagination that it sets in motion].'<sup>4</sup> To put it in a different way, the associations characterising Eriphyle's necklace in Greek tradition are due to the capacity of this *agalma* to generate stories. The center of gravity in the story is the necklace, embodying a series of meanings that 'the narrative imagination will set in motion.' The story may in fact be seen as generated by the object, triggering, as it were, its own exegesis in the form of narrative.

### 3. *The name of Oedipus in Vernant's analyses*

A return to Gernet, then. But not only to him. Rereading Vernant's seminal article from 1970, 'Ambiguity and reversal: on the enigmatic structure of *Oedipus Rex*' (Vernant 1970),<sup>5</sup> I was struck by the following passage:

'Even the name of Oedipus lends itself to such effects of reversal. In its ambiguity, it is stamped with the enigmatic character that is the mark of the entire tragedy. Oedipus is the man with the swollen foot (*oidos*), an infirmity that recalls the accursed child rejected by its parents and exposed to savage nature to die. But Oedipus is also the man who knows (*oida*) the riddle

4 The American translation (Gernet 1991:81) has curiously left out the most important part of the sentence: 'dans l'imagination légendaire à laquelle il donne le branle' (Gernet 1968:104).

5 Available in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1972:99-131, 1988:113-40.

of the foot ... . *The whole of the tragedy of Oedipus seems to be contained in the play to which the riddle of his name lends itself.*<sup>6</sup>

Let me cut my quotation there. For if this is the case, *i.e.* if the name *Oidipous* 'contains' the whole tragedy of its bearer, are we to believe that Sophocles and his predecessors discovered this state of affairs retrospectively? Shouldn't we rather think that the name has been there at the outset, guiding the construction of the Oedipus story? Is it not necessary, even urgent, to consider the name as prior to the successive elaborations of the story?<sup>7</sup>

A second article completes 'Ambiguity and reversal' that I just quoted, namely 'The lame tyrant: from Oedipus to Periander,' first published in 1981 (Vernant 1981:235-55).<sup>8</sup> Here, the starting point is the analysis of the Oedipus myth proposed by Lévi-Strauss in 'The structural study of myth' from the mid-fifties, which I have already quoted and which is included in *Anthropologie structurale* (Lévi-Strauss 1958). If Vernant does not mention this article at all in 'Ambiguity and reversal,' he highlights it in 'The lame tyrant,' even if he is cautious to underline its ambiguous character: the article is inaccurate in the eyes of the specialists, he says, but it brought about a profound change in the study of myth. But in fact, Vernant is not interested in the inadequacy of Lévi-Strauss' Oedipus analysis nor in its importance on the methodological or theoretical level. He is only interested in one aspect of this analysis: 'So far as I know,' he writes, 'Lévi-Strauss is the first to have noticed the importance of a characteristic feature of all three generations of the Labdacid lineage: a lopsided gait, a lack of symmetry between the two sides of the body, a defect in one foot' (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1986:45, 1988:207). Coming from the field of Amerindian mythology, Lévi-Strauss saw the 'lopsided gait,' or limping, as expressing the notion of autochthony (Lévi-Strauss 1958:238-39), but Vernant denied that the Greeks ever associated limping with autochthony: in Greek mythology, men born from the earth never show a defective foot or an anomaly in the manner of locomotion.<sup>9</sup>

What is the symbolical signification, then, of limping to the ancient Greeks? In other words, we should ask ourselves if limping may take on a metaphorical meaning in ancient Greece. As Vernant convincingly shows, this is actually the case.<sup>10</sup> In ancient Greece, limping appears as a metaphorical way of expressing the fact that something is wrong in the relation between generations, or in the ancestry. If I am

6 Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1988:123-24 (my italics).

7 Inversely, Nagy 1979:70-71 considers the mythical theme of Achilles as prior to the crystallization of the name \**Achi-lauos*, taken to mean 'whose *host* of fighting men has *grief*.'

8 Reprinted in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1986:45-69, 1988:207-27.

9 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1986:46, 1988:207-208.

10 Two texts quoted by Vernant are decisive: Xen. *Hell.* 3.3.1-3; Plut. *Ages.* 3.1-9.

not mistaken, no Greek hero succeeds in disturbing the normal succession of generations better than Oedipus, whose name in this way becomes almost too appropriate.

Thus, from Vernant's article 'Ambiguity and reversal,' I would like to single out the 'generative' perspective; and from 'The lame tyrant,' the discovery of the symbolical association between limping and genealogical disorder. This association or, to stick to my formula, this 'concatenation of categories,' is in my perspective the myth itself, understood as the matrix, or nucleus, of the story. 'Limping is genealogical disorder' would thus be the 'proposition' or *muthos* from which the Oedipus story is generated.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. *The name of Orpheus*

Is it possible to consider the name of Oedipus as an isolated case? Certainly not. I could quote other proper names of the same kind, e.g. the one of Aesop, the fabulist. According to tradition, Aesop was dumb till he reached adulthood. He is then thought to have received the gift of speech from Apollo and the Muses (*Vit. Aesop.* G 7 Perry). In fact, one may suppose that the name of Aesop, Αἴσωπος in Greek, refers precisely to this 'gift of speech.' Or, to put it in another way: one may suppose that this 'significant name' has provided the germ of the tradition on Aesop's aphasia and its curing: the name seems to be a compound of αἶσα, 'portion, part, lot,' and ὄψ, genitive ὀπός, meaning 'voice' (with the contraction of α and ο into ω). At the same time, Aesop is evidently the person who endows animals with the power of speech, which may be seen as a second exegesis of the same name *Aisopos*.

But in this paper it is not the name of Aesop—nor those of Ajax or the princess Phoinike nor that of a late-comer like Ovid's Vertumnus<sup>12</sup>—but the name of Orpheus that I would like to examine more closely, and precisely in a 'generative' perspective.

What is it that the name *Orpheus* suggests to the Greek ear? In the immediate neighbourhood of it, we find the name of a fish, the 'grouper' (or the 'sea-perch,' as the Loeb translators have it)—*Serranus gigas* is its scientific name—, called *orphos* in Greek, or even *orpheus* (given that the plural ὀρφέες = ὀρφεῖς is attested).<sup>13</sup> Modern Greek still uses this term, with or without an inversion or metathesis of

11 Cf. Barthes 1957:215.

12 For Ajax, see Scheid 1998:296; for Phoinike and Vertumnus, see Scheid 1996:312-16. The presence of Vertumnus here should be taken to indicate that there is no specific mythopoetic age producing once and for all the stories that subsequent generations of Greeks have simply repeated.

13 See *LSJ* s.v. ὀρφεύς. The formal (dialectal) diversity of this fish-name (along with ὀρφεύς, one finds ὀρφός, ὄρφος, ὀρφός and ὀρφῶς) seems to indicate that it is not a learned term inspired by the proper name Ὀρφεύς.

the first syllable: *rophos* or *orphos*. In Turkish it is called *orphoz*. In French, *mérou* (Davidson 1972:80). Between Ὀρφεύς and ὀρφός, the distance is the same as between e.g. Achilles' father Πηλεΰς and πηλός, between 'Mud-man'<sup>14</sup> and 'mud.' The association between Orpheus and the grouper is even made explicit in a comedy by Alexis, the *Crateias*, quoted by Athenaeus: 'And Callimedon-the-Crayfish came along with Orpheus-the-Grouper' (Ath. 8.340c).

At first, one may think that this is nothing but the pun of a comic poet, without any consequences for our understanding of the Orpheus figure. But let us not be too sure. Actually, I think that it is in our best interest to pay attention to the characteristics of the fish in question. Athenaeus has a whole little article under the entry *orphos* (7.315a-c), from which I would like to quote a few lines:

'The *orphos* ... is ... solitary as well. A peculiarity of the fish is that no seminal ducts are found in it, and it stays alive a long time after its dissection. It belongs to the class of animals which hibernate during the most wintry days ... . Dorion says that the young *orphos* is by some called *orphakine*.'

This passage needs a short commentary. First we may note that the grouper (1) 'stays alive a long time after its dissection, *anatome*.' The same observation is made by two other ancient writers, namely Aelian and Oppian. In Aelian we find the following passage: 'The *orphos* is a marine creature, and if you were to catch and cut it up, *anateinois*, you would not then and there see it dead, but it retains the power of movement, and for a considerable time' (Ael. NA 5.18). Oppian also mentions 'the race of the late-dying *orphoi*, which of all others on the earth remain longest alive and wriggle even when cut in pieces, *tmethentes*, with a knife' (Opp. H. 1.142-44).

The importance of this characteristic is easily understood: like Orpheus, the grouper lives a long time after having been reduced to pieces. If the fish called *orphos* is related to Orpheus, it is not only because of the lexical proximity (or identity) of *Orpheus* and *orphos* (or *orpheus*), but also because the singer and the fish both live long after their 'dissection.' To this we should add the fact that the singing head of Orpheus travels over the sea, as if to underline the resemblance even further.

Once we realise the relation between Orpheus and the grouper, even the fact that the fish is 'solitary,' *moneres*, becomes significant (2): it is with the adjective *solus* that Virgil's classical version of the Orpheus legend in the *Georgics* characterises the singer after his return from the Netherworld (Verg. G. 4.517).<sup>15</sup> One may also note Virgil's expression *solo in litore*, 'on the lonely beach,' before the descent (Verg. G. 4.465).

14 *Batr.* 19; cf. 206. For the suffix change, cf. *Bakchos/Bakcheus*, *Neilos/Neileus* and, more particularly, *oinos/Oineus*, 'wine'/'Wine-man.'

15 Cf. below p. 283 with n. 21.

The third characteristic of the grouper is the fact that (3) 'it belongs to the class of animals which hibernate.' The fact is equally attested in Aristotle (*Arist. Hist. an.* 8.15.599b2-6), as well as in Aelian: 'All through the winter it likes to remain at home in its caverns, *en tois pholeois*, and its favourite resorts are near land' (*Ael. NA* 5.18). If the grouper hibernates, this only underlines one important aspect of Orpheus' visit to the Netherworld. In this context, we may consider the fact that it is the tortoise that provides the sound-box of the lyre, which is a specifically Orphic instrument, without which, according to Varro, it is impossible to make the souls ascend from the Netherworld:<sup>16</sup> exactly like the grouper, the tortoise hibernates, *pholeuei* in Greek (*Arist. Hist. an.* 8.15.599a30-33; *cf. Parv. nat.* 475b22-23), and the descent to the Netherworld may actually be considered as a kind of hibernation.

The fourth detail to be taken into account is contained in the following phrase: (4) 'Dorion says that the young *orphos* is by some called *orphakine*.' In other words, the young grouper has a feminine name, *orphakine*, derived from the masculine noun *orphos* (as *delphakine* is derived from *delphax* or \**delphos*, 'pig').<sup>17</sup> If I insist on the question of gender here, it is because the grouper is a transsexual fish. Let me quote an article by a French specialist, Roger Cans:

'At some point between the age of nine and sixteen-seventeen, the female grouper becomes male. All older groupers—the fish may attain the age of fifty—are males, who live as hermits deep down in their caverns, which they only leave for a couple of hours during the day in order to eat' (*Le Monde*, January 31, 1990).'

I believe that the term *orphakine* could indicate that the ancients knew that the grouper is born female and turns male only later. For according to Dorion, it is precisely the 'young *orphos*' that is called *orphakine*. And this is probably the context in which we should consider another of Athenaeus' affirmations: (5) 'A peculiarity of the fish is that no seminal ducts are found in it.'

If we are to believe the pattern suggested by marine zoology, Orpheus did not mourn his wife Eurydike—whose pre-Virgilian name is *Agriope* (*Hermesian. fr.* 7.2 Powell = *Ath.* 13.597b)<sup>18</sup>—but the young girl he was before becoming Or-

16 For the fragment of Varro, preserved in a scholium to Verg. *Aen.* 6.119, see Nock 1927; *cf.* West 1983:30.

17 I follow the Loeb translator, C.B. Gulick, who makes the accusative ὀρφακίην in our text depend on a feminine nominative ὀρφακίη, although it is possible to make it depend on a masculine nominative ὀρφακίης (preferred by the Liddell-Scott-Jones; but one would have expected \*ὀρφακίως in analogy with masculine κορακίως, 'young raven'). Unfortunately neither nominative is attested. For δέλφαξ, see e.g. Epicharm. fr. 100.4 Kaibel (masc.); for δελφακίη, *ibid.* 124.2 (fem.). For the hypothetical form \*δέλφος, see Chantraine 1968:260-61, s.v. δέλφαξ.

18 See Svenbro 1992:150 with n. 72.

pheus. That is: he mourned himself. This mourning seems to belong to a stage in the development of the Orpheus figure of which we do not, to my knowledge, have any other traces.

But a parallel story immediately presents itself to one's mind: the one about Narkissos. According to Pausanias, the famous story of the young man who fell in love with himself had a less 'absurd' version than the one generally associated with the name of the hero (Paus. 9.31.7-9).<sup>19</sup> According to this version, Narkissos had a twin sister who looked exactly like himself. He fell in love with his sister, and when she died, Narkissos went to the spring to seek consolation by looking at his own image in the water—not because he was in love with himself but because his image bore perfect resemblance with his dead sister. If we assume that the current version of the Narkissos story is prior to the one told by Pausanias, this means that its development is a perfect parallel to the development I assume for the Orpheus story. In both cases, the 'self' of the hero is replaced by his 'other.' But whereas Eurydike became a figure of primary importance, Narkissos' twin sister did not have the same success: in the classical (Ovidian) version of the story, it is the self of the hero that is the object of his love, not his dead twin sister. Inversely, in the classical (Virgilian) version, Orpheus loves his dead wife, not his own self.

I should add that Greek popular etymology associated the name Νάρκισσος with the word νάρκη, which is the name of a fish: the 'torpedo,' or 'numb-fish' (*Raia torpedo*), producing a numbing effect comparable to the impact of Sokrates' words (Pl. *Meno* 80a-c, 84b-c; *Resp.* 6.503d.)

Now, if we admit my hypothesis on the development of the Orpheus story for a moment, we may observe that Orpheus is not the only Greek hero to have started his existence as a girl: *Kainis* was the maiden name of king *Kaineus*, killed by the Kentaurs (Apollod. *Epit.* 1.22).<sup>20</sup> And we may add that the childhood of a Greek hero like Achilles has clearly feminine connotations—he was dressed as a young girl at the court of Lykomedes at Skyros (Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.13.8)—as if the puberty of the boy marked the passage not from childhood to adulthood but from the female to the male sex. In any case, the name *Agri-ope*, meaning 'Wild-voice,' belonging to Orpheus' wife before she became Eurydike, is a very appropriate name for a child born to Orpheus' own parents, *i.e.* to *Oi-agros* and to *Kalli-ope*. *Agri-ope* should in fact have been the name of the daughter born to *Oiagros* and to *Kalliope* rather than the name of their daughter-in-law. It would in fact have been a perfect name for their daughter.

To conclude this rapid excursion into Orphic territory, I would like to add that the association between Orpheus and the grouper, between *Orpheus* and *orphos*,

19 Cf. Frontisi in Frontisi and Vernant 1997:217-21.

20 Cf. Kirk 1970:201.



does not exclude the singer's association neither with *orphne*, 'darkness, in particular of the Netherworld,' (Eur. *HF* 46, 353), nor with *orphanos*, which is a term used not only to mean 'orphan' but also to designate a person who has lost children, husband, or wife, e.g. a 'widower.'<sup>21</sup> Taken together, these words, along with the Greek name for the 'grouper,' have all contributed, at various stages, to the development of the Orpheus story, which may thus be considered as an exegesis, in the narrative mode, of the proper name *Orpheus*, or as a narrative exploitation of its semantic possibilities which, at the same time, becomes an exploration of Greek culture.

### 5. *Syloson's cloak*

So much for the name of Orpheus. I would now like to return to the 'generative' perspective which characterises Louis Gernet's approach to myth, to which I briefly referred at the outset. For it is not only proper names but also objects—and more specifically *agalmata*—that may constitute the element capable of guiding the elaboration of mythical narrative. In other terms, words and things are here equals, particularly when the object is as significant as a piece of weaving.

Every four years in ancient Athens, two young girls assisted by married women weave a spectacular *peplos* which will be carried in procession to the Acropolis. The symbolism of this piece of cloth does not leave any room for doubt: it is the political unity of the city that here takes the form of a woven piece of cloth, or fabric (Scheid and Svenbro 1994:27-30, 1996:18-21). A similar celebration in Elis, in the Peloponnesus, is founded on the same principle. In order to celebrate the Festival of Hera, a group of sixteen Elean women weave a garment, or *peplos*, for the goddess, an operation that Pausanias explains in the following way: after a period of hostilities in the past, the sixteen Elean cities decided to make peace and chose one venerable woman from each of the sixteen cities to participate in the collective weaving of a new *peplos* for the goddess. The 'federation' thus created renews its political unity every four years by making the Sixteen Women repeat the original operation, furnishing a new dress for the cult statue of Hera (Scheid and Svenbro 1994:18-23, 1996:10-15).

The political symbolism of weaving and fabric is thus very ancient. And this suggests that the very elaborate exploration of the metaphor of weaving in Plato's *Statesman* is not a philosopher's invention but his use of a traditional exegesis in which weaving, or fabric, becomes one of the most important figures of the city-state (Scheid and Svenbro 1994:32-42, 1996:22-33). The magnificent fabric woven by the Weaver King in Plato's dialogue is nothing but the figure of the best city-state. In fact, crossing the 'warp,' which is virile and solid (the Greek term *stemon*

21 The meaning of ὀρφανός is fundamentally 'bereft of.' Cf. Eur. *Or.* 1136. Cf. also Hsch. ὀρφο-βόται, 'who bring up orphans,' showing the equivalence of ὀρφο- and ὀρφανο-.

is masculine), with the 'woof,' which is female and supple (the Greek term *kroke* is actually feminine), is the fundamental gesture of this myth, the meaning of which is union.

It is precisely in the light of this 'myth' that we should read a story, told by Herodotus, with which I would like to conclude. We find it at the end of Book iii in his *History of the Persian Wars*, in a passage dealing with the conquest of the island of Samos by king Darius (Hdt. 3.139-49).<sup>22</sup> Syloson was the brother of the tyrant Polykrates, who had banished him from Samos. During the Egyptian campaign of Kambyses, king of Persia, Syloson was one of the many Greeks who joined the expedition. One day when he was walking in the market-place of Memphis, Syloson had put on a remarkable 'red cloak' (*chlanis purrhe*). At this time, Darius was but the body-guard of Kambyses; on seeing Syloson's cloak, he wanted to have it and asked if he could buy it. 'Syloson perceived how anxious he was,' writes Herodotus, 'and by a lucky inspiration answered: "There is no price at which I would sell my cloak, but I will give it to you for nothing, if you wish it." Darius thanked him, and accepted the garment. Poor Syloson felt at the time that he had fooled away his cloak in a very simple manner' (Hdt. 3.139-40; transl. by G. Rawlinson).

Some years pass by. Kambyses dies and Darius, his ancient body-guard, becomes king in his place. When Syloson learns that the man to whom he had given his cloak has become king, he goes to Susa and sits down at the gate of the royal palace, telling the doorkeeper that he is an ancient benefactor of the king. On learning that a Greek who pretends to be his benefactor is sitting in front of the palace, the king is at first puzzled. But then he calls for Syloson to come. Syloson tells him the story of the red cloak and Darius perfectly remembers it. Even if the gift had been small, he says, he still appreciates Syloson's generosity and declares that he is willing to give Syloson as much gold and silver that he wants from the royal treasure so that he 'may never repent of having rendered a service to Darius.' Syloson answers in the following manner:

'Give me not, O king, either silver or gold, but recover me Samos, my native land . . . Give me Samos, I beg; but give it unharmed, with no bloodshed—no leading into captivity' (Hdt. 3.140).

And this is how Syloson—not without complications, however—came to power in Samos.

In an analysis that takes the system of reciprocal gift-giving into account, there is nothing surprising with the lack of symmetry between the objects exchanged, as is well-known.<sup>23</sup> But even if we admit that the gift in return should be more valuable than the gift it answers, the disproportion between the cloak and the city of

22 Cf. Scheid-Tissinier 1994:66-67.

23 See for example Bourdieu 1972:13-44.

Samos is too great to be considered as normal. On the level of the 'toil' or 'labour' necessary for the making of an object, *i.e.* on the level of *kamatos*—the Greek verb *kamnein* applies to the manufacture of a cloak as well as to the construction of ships or of a whole city (*astu*)<sup>24</sup>—, the exchange of the city for a cloak seems to be sheer folly: at first sight, there does not seem to exist a common standard for the objects exchanged.

But as soon as we place the story in the perspective of Gernet's article on 'mythical value,' which provided me with my starting-point, the absent parameter falls in place. For if the 'concatenation' of the notions of garment and city—which transforms the city into a metaphorical fabric—constitutes one of the most deep-rooted myths in ancient Greece, it is this myth that we have to take into account if we want to discover the mythical reason for the apparently insane exchange that takes place in the story. For the story of Syloson, which no doubt could have been included among the stories used by Gernet, makes the existence of a mythical, non economic value perfectly clear, a 'mythical value' in the light of which the exchange of gifts between Syloson and Darius appears completely reasonable. When Syloson learns that Darius has come to power, he may say to himself that it is his red cloak—the colour is not indifferent here<sup>25</sup>—that has made a king of the one-time body-guard.

In other terms, this is the moment when the object 'sets the narrative imagination in motion,' to use Gernet's formula: in a certain way, I would say, the investiture of the king took place on the market-place down in Memphis, long before Darius became king. Retrospectively, Syloson's gesture becomes a gesture of investiture. In other words, the myth of the cloak—or, more generally, the myth of weaving and fabric—has made it possible to construct the past in the light of the present. Under these circumstances, what is more normal than demanding the city of Samos in exchange of the red cloak? In any case, the kingdom of Darius is infinitely bigger than the island of Samos. If there is a lack of symmetry in this exchange, it is rather to the advantage of Darius and not the other way around. In any case, the city of Samos was well worth a cloak.

24 *LSJ* s.v. κάμνω, 1.

25 See Heraclit. fr. A2 Diels-Kranz; cf. Gernet 1957, Gerschel 1966, Ellinger 1993:202-203.

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