A MINUTE’S MIRTH
SYLOSON AND HIS CLOAK IN HERODOTUS*

BY

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In a recent lecture, John Gould has called attention to the importance of the gift in Herodotus. He calls the exchange of gifts, and more generally the pattern of action provoking reaction, "far and away the most pervasive pattern of historical causation in Herodotus' narrative." In this view, historical action in Herodotus is "repayment of what is owed." In Herodotus, according to Gould, things happen because they are "owed" and the stories are built up according to a variegated and often intricate pattern of action and reaction, both on the purely human and on the theological level.

The story in which Herodotus relates the Persian capture of Samos (III 139-49) is a case in point of Gould's thesis (although in the lecture he mentions it only in passing). Since the story stages a good many characters and has a rather complicated plot, it is

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2) O.c., 19: "the logic of the gift is fundamental to Herodotus' whole understanding of the human experience that he narrates in his History." Cf. further Gould's Herodotus (London 1989) 82-5, to which book Gould calls his lecture "a kind of coda" (note 46). In Herodotus the story is not treated in much detail either (pp. 66-7).

3) O.c., 19: "the obligations of reciprocity implicit in the acts of giving and taking are a powerful explanatory tool in Herodotus' hands when it comes to answering the question: 'why did these things happen?' They happened because they were 'owed'" (Note 46).


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perhaps best to begin with a short summary. The purpose of the story is indicated in its very first words: it is to tell us for what reason Darius conquered Samos, the importance of the conquest is indicated in the same sentence by its being called Darius’ first.
The story starts in the market-place at Egyptian Memphis. The Samian exile Syloson is having a stroll there, wearing a flame-coloured cloak, catching sight of him Darius, as yet a guardsman of king Cambyses, sets his heart on the cloak and asks Syloson to sell it to him. Syloson for unstated reasons does not want to sell his cloak; he makes a gift of it. Syloson blames his “foolish good nature” (σωφρόνεια, 139 3) for the loss of his cloak, but when he hears of Darius’ accession, he travels to Susa and after reminding the king of the cloak he is promised possession of his native Samos in return for his gift. Darius appoints Otanes as commander of the army which is to settle the affair (140-141). It is expressly stipulated by Syloson, and granted by Darius, that there is to be “no bloodshed nor enslavement” (140 5-141).
Now the scene shifts to Samos. After Polycrates’ death his secretary Maeandrius has taken over power, by order of the deceased tyrant himself. But Maeandrius disapproves of tyrants and proposes democracy (ισοστάσεως, 142 3)—a proposal which is rebuffed by the aristocrat Telesarchus, who says Maeandrius is “not fit to rule” in the first place, being “a crook and of miserable descent”, he demands an account of Maeandrius’ management of Polycrates’ money (142 5). On hearing this, Maeandrius realizes...