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The Case of the Blindfold Aggressor: Seneca, *De ira* 3.11.4

By Kimmo Järvinen, Hamburg

pleraque in lusum iocumque uertantur

Pisistratum certe, Atheniensium tyrannum, memoriae proditur, cum multa in crudelitatem eius ebrius conuiuia dixisset nec deessent qui uellent manus ei commodare et alius hinc alius illinc faces subderent, placido animo tulisse et hoc iniritantibus respondisse, non magis illi se suscensere quam si quis obligatis oculis in se incurrisset.
(Seneca, *De ira* 3.11.4)

incurrisset codd. : *incucurrisset* Reynolds

This short – at first sight rather drab – anecdote seems to contain the earliest instance of the phrase *obligatis oculis*, “blindfold”, extant in Latin literature. Scholars seldom dwell upon the passage. In his Budé edition of *De ira* (Paris 1922), A. Bourgery, who does not comment on *obligatis oculis*, identifies the anonymous *conuiuia* with a man called Thrasippus in Valerius Maximus, 5.1.ext.2; this seems dubious, for the tyrant’s *dictum* is lacking in Valerius¹. Mireille Armisen-Marchetti, the author of a monograph on Seneca’s imagery, sees a novel image in the tyrant’s answer: “une image originale: le tyran injurié répondit ‘qu’il n’était pas plus fâché que si quelqu’un l’avait heurté les yeux bandés’, *obligatis oculis*”². In my view, it is not very likely that Seneca coined the

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1 Bourgery gives no references to earlier scholarship; the identification is, however, to be found in Justus Lipsius’ *Seneca* (Antwerp 1605, 1652), ad loc.: “EBRIVS CONVIVA.] Thrasippus quidam, ex amicis eius. Valerium vide, libro v. cap. i.” Cf. Joannes Meursius, *Pisistratus* (Leyden 1623) 49: “Hoc [scil. Val. Max. 5.1.ext.2] ipsum est, quod breuius, & Thrasippi omisso nomine, narrat Seneca ...”

2 Armisen-Marchetti, *Sapientiae facies: Etude sur les images de Sénèque* (Paris 1989): “Catalogue des images”, s.v. “VUE B – Les défauts des yeux 3) La cécité et l’aveuglement”, p. 176. An interest in *comparés* rather than *comparants* might account for her not tracing the provenance of this

image himself³. Armisen-Marchetti does not tell us to what sphere of human experience the expression belongs when used in its proper, non-metaphorical sense.

When and why was a person blindfolded in antiquity? When was a blindfold person an agent, even an aggressor? In what kind of situation could a blindfold aggressor be tolerated? Answers to these questions should, I think, enable us to see the meaning – literal and metaphorical – of the image *obligatis oculis* more clearly.

First, there was what could perhaps be termed *penal blindfolding*, i.e. blindfolding of prisoners⁴. We possess a valuable piece of evidence in the New Testament:

And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face,
and asked him, saying, Prophecy, who is it that smote thee?
(Luke 22.64)⁵

It is somewhat doubtful whether the Greeks practised penal blindfolding before Roman rule. According to one single source the Macedonian general Philotas was treated thus:

*Dum corripitur, [et] dum obligantur oculi, dum uestis exuitur, deos
patrios, gentium iura, nequiquam apud surdas aures inuocabat.*
(Q. Curtius Rufus, *Hist. Alexandri Magni* 6.11.15)

The blindfolding of Philotas is not to be found elsewhere, though Diodorus Siculus (17.80.2) and Plutarch (*Alex.* 49.11) tell us of his torture; Arrian, generally a better source, does not. Curtius might or might not have invented the particulars inspired by Roman procedure⁶.

image. Cf. Lipsius (n. 1) ad loc.: “OBLIGATIS OCVLIS.] Ad ebrietatem hoc referens, & excusans mentem vino sauciam & cæcā.”

3 Seneca could have invented the whole *exemplum*; he could have embellished a drab story by adding the tyrant's *dictum*; or, he could have repeated the story including the *dictum* faithfully as to essentials from his source (though he might have omitted the name of the *conuiuia*). The last construction has, I think, the ring of truth.

4 In connexion with some forms of capital punishment, the prisoner was blindfolded and whipped before his execution; v. Theodor Mommsen, *Römisches Strafrecht* (Leipzig 1899) 919f., 922. The old legal term was *caput obnubere*, as we can see from Cicero, *Rab. perd.* 13, and Livy, 1.26.6 and 11.

5 The original Greek: καὶ περικαλύψαντες αὐτὸν ἐπηρώτων λέγοντες· προφήτευσον, τίς ἐστὶν ὁ παίσας σε; In Latin, περικαλύπτειν is rendered *uelare*.

6 Cf. J. E. Atkinson, *A Commentary on Q. Curtius Rufus' Historiae Alexandri Magni Books 5 to 7,2* (Amsterdam 1994), “[6.]11.13–33: the torture of Philotas”, pp. 240f.; Helmut Berve, *Das Alexanderreich auf prosopographischer Grundlage II* (Munich 1926), “802. Φλώτας”, pp. 394ff.; Julius Kaerst, *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (Leipzig 1917) 424 n. 3; August Rüegg, *Beiträge zur Erforschung der Quellenverhältnisse in der Alexandergeschichte des Curtius* (Basle 1906) 84f. The fact that *oculos obligare* is used instead of *caput obnubere* (n. 4) might indicate a non-Roman, i.e. Greek, source; this is, however, rather a weak point.

Secondly, *initiandi* were blindfolded in mystery cults; this we know from the very enemies of such practices, the early Christian writers:

Denique pagani in tenebris mystica sua celebrantes in spelaeo uelatis oculis inluduntur. (Ambrosiaster *ad Eph.* 5.8)⁷

Illud autem quale est, quod in spelaeo uelatis oculis inluduntur? Ne enim horreant turpiter dehonestari se, oculi illis uelantur ...

(Pseudo-Augustinus, *Quaestt. Veteris et Noui Testamenti* 94)⁸

An historian of religion would perhaps give us a different reason why the *initiand* was blindfolded. That he was blindfolded seems certain enough; we can trust our sources, biased as they may be, for there is also archaeological evidence: in the Mithraeum at Santa Maria Capua Vetere, two frescoes, the condition of which is rather poor, show us strange scenes with a naked man whose eyes are bandaged, apparently an *initiand* being led through such grisly heathen rites⁹.

Thirdly and finally¹⁰, there was blindfolding in connexion with games; in Greek lexicography we find descriptions of varieties of *blind man's buff*.

‘Η δὲ χαλκῇ μυῖα· ταινία τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ περισφίγγαντες ἑνὸς παιδός, ὃ μὲν περιστρέφεται κηρύττων “Χαλκῆν μυῖαν θηράσω”, οἱ δ’ ἀποκρινόμενοι “Θηράσεις, ἀλλ’ οὐ λήψει” σκύτεσι βυβλίνοις αὐτὸν παίουσιν, ἕως τινὸς αὐτῶν λάβηται.
(Pollux, *Onomast.* 9.123 Bethe)

Ψηλαφίνδα· παιδιά τίς ἐστιν, ἑνὸς τινος δεδεμένου τοῦς ὀφθαλμοῦς καὶ τοῦς ἐν κύκλῳ ψηλαφῶντος καὶ λέγοντος ἑκάστου τοῦνομα. (Phrynichus, *Praep. soph.* 128.3ff. Borries)

Besides the lexicographi and Herodas 12 (Cunningham)¹¹, there is other

7 Ambrosiastri qui dicitur *Commentarius in epistulas Paulinas* III (CSEL 81; Vienna 1969), ed. Heinrich Josef Vogels.

8 Migne, *PL* 35 (Paris 1902), col. 2348; a better text of this section of chapter 94 in Franz Cumont, *Textes et monuments relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* II (Brussels 1896) 8. Our Pseudo-Augustinus seems to be identical with Ambrosiaster; v. Eligius Dekkers/Aemilius Gaar, *Clavis Patrum Latinorum* (Steenbrugge 1995) 58f.

9 A. Minto, *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità* 21 (1924) 368f.; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I: The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere* (Leyden 1971) 26ff., pls 21–22.

10 A fourth category which I shall not consider in this paper is *iconological* blindness; for it is not part of human experience *sensu stricto*, nor are gods such as Cupid or Justice blindfold in ancient art. On blindfold gods, demons, and allegories, v. Erwin Panofsky, “Blind Cupid”, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford 1939, repr. New York etc. 1972) 95–128, pls xli–lvii: the earliest blindfold figure of this kind known to Panofsky is *Night* in a 10th-century miniature (pp. 110f.; pl. xlv, fig. 76).

11 Cunningham’s Loeb text (in: Theophrastus, *Characters* / Herodas, *Mimes* / Cercidas and the Choliambic Poets, edd. Jeffrey Rusten/I. C. Cunningham/A. D. Knox, Cambridge, Mass./London 1993), Herod. 12, pp. 316f.: ἢ χαλκῆν μοι μυῖαν ἢ κύθρην παίζει / ἢ τῆσι μιλάνθησιον

evidence: a terra-cotta (h. 20.5 cm, l. 31 cm), signed by the otherwise unknown artist ΦΕΙΔΙΠΠΟΣ, representing a satyrisk and three cupids playing blind man's buff¹². In 1886, in his first description, W. Frøhner identifies the game with the Polydeucean variety χαλκῇ μυῖα; the identification, repeated in 1891, seems doubtful. Admittedly, the terra-cotta displays a form of blind man's buff, and χαλκῇ μυῖα is a form of that pastime; but it does not follow that the terra-cotta's game and χαλκῇ μυῖα are one and the same form of blind man's buff¹³. The cupids do not hit the blindfold satyrisk with papyrus whips or with anything else¹⁴. Neither party seems to take the game very seriously: one of the cupids, apart from his playmates, holding a garland (fragmentary) in his left hand, seems to mimic the satyr's awkward movements, and another *putto*, boldly facing the satyr's bandaged eyes, is crawling about quite near his would-be captor; while the *blind man* himself, laughing happily, is pleasantly distracted from his chase by a third party, a semi-recumbent woman, Aphrodite, who is feeding him with fruit, a kind of compensation for his being deprived of the sight of her, or perhaps rather a stratagem designed to allow the cupids time enough to get out of his way; for the same reason – or perhaps just to tease the *blind man* – the third cupid is meddling with the satyr's bandage from behind¹⁵. I do not think that the Hellenistic craftsman meant to represent the players as chanting the

ἄμματ' ἐξάπτων / τοῦ κεσκίου μοι τὸν γέροντα λωβᾶται. "Either he plays brass fly or pot, or fastens ties of my tow to cockchafers and despoils my 'old man'." Κύθηρη = χυτρίνδα (Poll. 9.113); γέρων = *distaff*. A description of χαλκῇ μυῖα similar to Pollux's in Eustathius ad Hom. Il. 1243.29ff. (van der Valk); they are both, I think, dependent of Aristophanes of Byzantium. On χαλκῇ μυῖα v. my article "Who or What Was the *Copper Fly*?" (forthcoming in *Eranos*).

- 12 W. Frøhner, *Terres-cuites d'Asie de la Collection Julien Gréau* (Paris 1886), pl. 115; id., *Collection Julien Gréau. Troisième partie: Terres-cuites grecques, vases peints et marbres antiques* (Paris 1891), pl. 36. The collection belongs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; v. *Bull. of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 13 (1918) 3; I do not know whether this particular terra-cotta is in the possession of the Museum. In 1886 Frøhner abstains from dating the object; in 1891 he dates the *signature*: "en lettres du III^e siècle".
- 13 The discrepancies between Pheidippus and Pollux and between his own description of the former and his interpretation of the latter do not seem to worry Frøhner (n. 12). His identification of the game is repeated in Gerard van Hoorn, *De vita atque cultu puerorum monumentis antiquis explanato* (Amsterdam 1909) 80.
- 14 According to Eustathius (n. 11) the blindfold player is hit βύβλοις (= σκύτεσι βυβλίνοις?) ἢ καὶ ταῖς χερσὶ.
- 15 Most details are uncertain: I have only seen reproductions, not the real thing. Another possible scenario: the satyrisk is just being blindfolded by the cupid behind him, and the cupid in front of him is testing whether he can see, which test (not mentioned in the Greek descriptions) was to become an important ritual in later times – cf. Iona and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford 1969) 117: the blindfold player "is repeatedly asked if he can see, and tested with questions, 'What colour is my coat?' 'Who is the tallest here?'" –; the fragmentary garland could be an equivalent of a σκῦτος βύβλινον. If this interpretation is correct, Pheidippus depicts *preparations* for blind man's buff (χαλκῇ μυῖα or some other variety) rather than the actual game.



Plate 1

Blind man's buff in the 3rd century B.C.: "The Blindfold Satyrisk" by Pheidippus (from the Collection Julien Gréau; no information as to the terra-cotta's present whereabouts available).

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children's song quoted in Poll. 9.123¹⁶; a terra-cotta is of course mute, but a skilled artisan would have devices to convey an idea of sound: Pheidippus makes us hear laughter and giggle.

In the two former sets of circumstances, the blindfold man – the prisoner and the *initiandus* alike – cannot possibly be called an agent. Things are done to him, but – hindered by fear or obstructed by fetters – he cannot do much himself. Allusion to the mysteries by the tyrant must be ruled out: religious awe would certainly prevent such jesting; religious awe would have prevented the *initiandus* from any impious assault in the first place. Alluding to a blindfold prisoner would be rather a grim joke; the tyrant in our story being Pisistratus, this seems out of character: in most anecdotes he is a gentle, affable man¹⁷. Moreover, a prisoner at large would hardly attack anyone while still having his eyes bandaged. Nor would an attack by a prisoner – blindfold or not – be tolerated.

In the game situation, on the other hand, the *blind man* is an agent of a sort: he pursues his playfellows in order to seize any one of them who is to be blindfolded in his stead¹⁸. The player thus attacked and seized, then blindfolded himself, might be a bit annoyed, but – playing the game – he would not take offence; for the *blind man* cannot pick and choose whom he attacks. Nor is an intoxicated person able consciously to choose what he says to whom. Aware of this, Pisistratus takes no offence when insulted by his drunken guest but likens his behaviour to an attack by a blindfold aggressor, i.e. he treats the embarrassing incident as though it were an innocent game¹⁹.

If the tyrant's *dictum* could be warranted authentic, the history of blind man's buff would be more ancient by some three centuries²⁰. We know for certain that the game was played in Hellenistic times, thanks to Herodas' mention of χαλκῇ μυῖα (hardly the oldest variant) in a mime, fr. 12 (Cunningham); "The Blindfold Satyrisk", Pheidippus' terra-cotta, which does probably not depict

16 *Blind man*: "I go a-hunting a copper fly!" Playmates: "Hunt you may, but you'll never come nigh!" J. M. Edmonds's translation, *Lyra Graeca* III (London/Cambridge, Mass., revised ed. 1940) 537. Eustathius (n. 11) quotes the second line without Θηράσεις.

17 Pisistratus the gentle tyrant makes his appearance, for instance, in Arist. *Ἀθ. πολ.* 16.6; Plut. *Mor.* 189 B–D, 613 E; Val. Max. 5.1.ext.2.

18 In the variety ψηλαφίνδα the *blind man* has to guess the name of the player whom he catches to be allowed to change places with him, I presume, though Phrynichus does not say so explicitly; whereas in χαλκῇ μυῖα the blindfold player need not identify his successor, as we can see from Eustathius (n. 11): οὗ δ' ἂν λάβηται, καθίστησιν ἐκεῖνον εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ χώραν. Though Pollux omits the fact that the player whom the *blind man* seizes is to take his place, we might well assume so, even if Eustathius did not give us a full description.

19 Armisen-Marchetti (n. 2), s.v. "JEUX et AMUSEMENTS", p. 128: "Les jeux des enfants en général sont surtout l'image des vaines occupations des *stulti* ..." The use of the image in *De ira* 3.11.4 seems more sympathetic towards human frailty. This is probably due to the fact that it is not a Senecan image proper, but an image within a ready-made anecdote.

20 I am talking of *Western* blind man's buff. The game is world-wide as well as age-old: it is known in India and China; v. Opie & Opie (n. 15) 117ff., 302ff.

χαλκῇ μυῖα, but which if genuine ought to be the earliest representation of blind man's buff (a *Rococo* motif) extant in Western art, shows various style elements characteristic of the same period, c. 250 B.C. Whoever first coined the anecdote had no scruples about putting the allusion into the mouth of Pisistratus, the 6th-century tyrant of Athens, who might indeed have played ψηλαφίνδα, χαλκῇ μυῖα, or some other variety²¹, as a boy, youth, or man²².

We do not know for certain whether the Romans enjoyed blind man's buff; probably they did: the game has been played in most parts of Europe from time immemorial. Seneca's casual use of the *exemplum*²³ – without any comments on the phrase *obligatis oculis* – indicates, I think, that some kind of blind man's buff was known in Imperial Rome²⁴.

To sum up, the image *obligatis oculis* belongs neither to the awesome sphere of religion, nor to the sombre realm of crime and punishment; on the contrary, it displays the gay colours of merriment and leisure. The original – oral or written – Greek source of Seneca's anecdote might have been quite old, even contemporary with Pisistratus himself; there is no obvious anachronism that betrays a much later date – *se non è vero, è ben trovato*.

21 Several varieties shared the name μυῖνδα (< μύειν = *not to see*); v. Poll. 9.113 (three variants), Hsch. M 1815 (Latte), Phot. 279.3ff. (Porson). The first variant in Poll. 9.113: ἡ δὲ μυῖνδα, ἥτοι καταμύων τις “φυλάττου” βοῶ, καὶ ὄν ἄν τῶν ὑποφευγόντων λάβῃ ἀντικαταμύειν ἀναγκάζει. In the so-called *Etymologicum Genuinum* (unedited; information given by Prof. Alpers) and in its descendant *Etym. Magnum*, 286.48ff. (Gaisford), the variety is called δραπετίνδα, the warning by the *blind man* being “τηροῦ, φυλάττου”. The bandage is not mentioned in these descriptions. However, using a headband (ταινία, cf. Poll. 9.123) for blindfolding would have been a natural thing to do: ταινία (στεφάναι, *uittae*) were habitually worn by children; v. van Hoorn (n. 13) 52.

22 Adults may well have enjoyed such games in antiquity, as we know they did in much later times: King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, for instance, is known to have played *blindbock* with his colonels in the early 17th century; in his once-famous genre “Blind Man's Buff” from 1813, Sir David Wilkie, RA, shows us an assembly of children (not many), adolescents, and adults, playing that game in a great hall, teasing the *blind man*, a gawky young man, making fun of his stumbly movements, and trying to avoid him so as not to have to take his place. Παις means perhaps *player* rather than *child* in descriptions of games (e.g. Poll. 9.123).

23 The story illustrates the tenet that the wise man should be patient of insults and turn them, if possible, into play and jest; *De ira* 3.11.2: *Circumscribenda multis modis ira est; pleraque in lusus iocumque uertantur*.

24 There are no ancient texts extant that give us the Latin for *blind man's buff*. Oddly enough, *musca caeca* is supposed to be the ancient Roman name of the game in Walter Endrei, *Spiele und Unterhaltung im alten Europa* (Hanau 1988) 102: “Bei den Römern nannte man sie [scil. χαλκῇ μυῖα] *musca caeca* (blinde Fliege), woraus der italienische Name des Blindenkuhspiels *giocare a mosca cieca* abgeleitet ist und vielleicht auch die deutsche Blinde Maus.” The Latin name is clearly derived from the Italian, not the other way round.