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THINKING ABOUT CONTEXT

Susan Mosher Stuard

“The Gendered Nose and its Lack” raises a disturbing question about facial mutilation over time and place, namely whether it has been a stable signifier and is irrevocably gendered. The author has chosen medieval incidents of nose-cutting over a broad swath of Eurasia to compare with the highly publicized nose and ears mutilation of a young Afghani woman, Aisha bibi, when she fled her husband’s home in 2010 in a region controlled by the Taliban. The Western press sensationalized the incident as barbaric and “medieval,” prompting the author to review incidents of nose-cutting from the Middle Ages in regard to vindication of men’s honor through permanent and visible disfigurement of women believed to have brought dishonor to them.

Applying comparisons temporally often implies evolutionary notions about more enlightened societal attitudes in regions that develop into modern societies, an assumption frequently belied by the facts. A husband’s slashing of Tracey Thurman’s face in Torrington, Connecticut in 1983 led to changes in police responses and to funding for shelters for victims of domestic violence in the United States that are as necessary today as they were in any earlier era.¹ There is not much of an argument for facial disfigurement as something others do for those of us who live in contemporary America. Surely the author’s posed question: “does nose-cutting in fact still represent a meaningful, corporal punishment that modernity has not erased?” must be answered in the affirmative, at least in regard to the modernity component. This is a crime that still appeals to some perpetrators. Still the author sees a comparison to medieval times as valuable because of an “over-arching humanity [allowing] characters to learn from one another across the temporal gap.” This may be possible, but only if the *context* of these acts allows for apt comparisons. The author sees the medieval display of a woman’s mutilated face as sado-pornographic and interprets such slashings as retaliation for dishonor when perpetrated by a husband on a wife.

The gendered nose-cutting examples associated with men’s honor the author found begin with the *Book of Ezekiel* (23:23), where God threatens the prostitute Aholibah: “They will cut off your nose and your ears.” The examples continue with mutilated and disobedient nuns in the *History of the Franks* of Gregory of Tours and then the author speaks of Jordanes’s *Getica* in which the first wife of Huneric the Vandal was sent back to her father, Theoderic the Goth, with her nose and ears cut off; all are horrendous examples. The next examples are drawn from Byzantine sources and from the laws of King Canute in eleventh-century England. The Khalila

wa-Dimnah story of a barber and a shoemaker and their wives draws on an incident of nose disfigurement from India. This story circulated through Asia and reached Spain in the Middle Ages. Marie de France's *Bisclavret* tells of a faithless wife who has her nose bitten off by her husband because she condemned him to the life of a werewolf by stealing his clothes while he shape-shifted one night into a beast. Orderic Vitalis recorded nose-slitting and it may be found in rabbinic judgements in thirteenth-century Spain. More examples follow.

"It seems that this sign transcended geographical and temporal boundaries," the author argues, and an interpretation is offered: women who have transgressed by dishonoring men are thought to deserve a permanent and disfiguring sign on their faces. For full impact such disfigurement must be clear to viewers, which creates an interpretive dilemma. Aisha bibi might serve as example to her household but today Afghanistan favors the most impenetrable veiling in Islam, where only women's eyes peer out through mesh when they travel outside the home. The lack of exposure of women's faces in public differs from the examples drawn from medieval times when women's faces were clear for all to see. Even the one example of nose-cutting from India reflects Hindu culture rather than Islam that favored veiling.

Aisha bibi appears to be a strong young woman who allowed *Time* magazine to photograph her mutilation in order to protest this horrendous act. Her choice earned her coverage in the West but didn't it also earn her a place at newsstands all over the Middle East, including her own land? *Time* is an international journal with a Middle Eastern edition that courts readers where there is a literate public. Her choice led to an "outing" of a grave offense against an Afghani woman that could have been kept largely secret through veiling and isolation in her remote southern region. Aisha bibi was able to bring the government and Ulema law into play through her act, although the author's contention that this was a secularized state that condemned the mutilation should be questioned. Theocratic Ulema decrees promulgated into Afghani law bore on Aisha bibi's case. She may have had some knowledge of this law, or learned about it, and found a way to interest authorities in her case through publicity, no matter how personally humiliating it may have been to find her picture plastered over newsstands. She also earned a trip to the West and reconstructive surgery through her efforts, as did the Pakistani school girl shot in the head by the Taliban for attending school more recently. These were acts of great courage unmatched in the evidence drawn from medieval times employed for comparison. Indeed we know very little about medieval women's response to mutilations.²

While the law or custom sanctioned some nose-cutting examples mentioned in the article, the medieval husband who took retaliation into his own

hands by punishing his wife through maiming her has tended to be viewed as reprehensible and outside the law. In matter of fact, known examples surfaced because authorities condemned men who disfigured their wives' faces. This was true in recorded cases from late medieval German towns, for example.³ Fortunately there have not been an overwhelming number of such cases uncovered; men who did such things were regarded as criminal and abhorrent and appear to have been rare rather than affirmed by society. This appears to be the case regardless of the motive for which a man committed the act: running away, adultery, or other acts.

Apparently Aisha bibi's husband and father-in-law had the support of the Taliban in the incident recorded by *Time*, but that may have been more in support of the father-in-law's authority within his household than support for his son's wreaking damage on a wife's face; we simply lack answers here. As it happened, Aisha bibi was in the act of leaving her home and her marriage, which brings into play the meaning of her act in her society and in Islamic law as upheld by the Afghan state. Although discouraged, divorce is permitted by the Taliban since it is a component of Ulema law.

While it is much more difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce in Islam than the stunning ease with which a man may divorce his wife with the words repeated three times, "I divorce thee," it is still possible for a woman to gain a divorce from a bad marriage *by law*. The first step is leaving home, and then she must collect testimony from family, neighbors, and friends to support her case. It appears that Aisha bibi had already initiated the process by leaving home since other unauthorized absences by wives are such unlikely events. In Islamic law a woman may leave but it is a significant act that requires a support system to sustain her once she has fled (Aisha, an enclosed wife, had been routinely beaten for years before she made her move). The support system required to leave home failed Aisha bibi and she was forcibly returned to her husband's home, maimed, but escaped again. In this light her case might well enrage Muslims more than secularized Westerners: Islam recognizes that it needs laws to protect sequestered married women. The husband's act against Aisha bibi would be read as barbaric by the laws of Islam and her own country and the maiming was roundly condemned within her own country.

This raises the question of why over the centuries nose-slitting instances by husbands who claimed dishonoring have been recorded and publicized: has this been understood as a particularly vile act when a man takes revenge into his own hands? Is it that such personal vengeance tends to be viewed, then as now, as very dangerous to society as a whole? To return to the initial example in "The Gendered Nose," the vision of the prophet Ezekial foresees the fall of Jerusalem, and Aholibah was an extended metaphor for punishing unfaithfulness. Ezekiel 23: 4 reads, "And the names of them

were Aholah the elder and Aholibah her sister; and they were mine, and they bare sons and daughters. Thus were their names; Samaria is Aholah, and Jerusalem Aholibah." The sisters are the progenitors of the Hebrew people and Aholibah represents the falling away of the Chosen People of Jerusalem. All manner of curses were heaped on her head in an elaborate metaphor about punishing the Chosen People's disobedience to an angry God. The prophet intended to convey the enormity of this defection, a betrayal so horrendous it is to be punished by the most extreme measures he can imagine. Thus loss of nose and ears is one of many punishments, each worse than the last. Authority for vengeance sits with God.

In the medieval examples examined next authority issues remain at the heart of the question and the lack of a religiously sanctioned solution like divorce for a failed marriage may have played some role as well; in the Christian West a couple found it extremely difficult if not impossible to separate, which might lead to adultery and violence that threatened not only a wife but the community. In this light nose-slitting as private vengeance may be understood as failure of societal institutions to police marriages and sexual behaviors. Publishing such stories of personal vengeance would then to some extent indicate breakdown of norms. The article notes King Canute's law (reign 1016-1035) extended the customary penalty of nose and ears cutting for thievery by men to women caught in adultery; the woman also lost her property. Perhaps there was unspoken dishonor for husbands involved but the law did not speak of it and husbands did not exact personal vengeance; the law intervened instead.

Other examples of nose-cutting appear to be quite different matters because, as the author notes, nose-cutting held different meanings in medieval times. For example, in Byzantium a man might be denied the throne because of this mutilation. Blinding and castration generally served, but nose-cutting was sometimes employed, as a visible mark of a candidate's deficiency. This appears to have been a stratagem widely understood by the populace who saw their realm in peril if ruled by a man who was no longer perfect, that is, "in the image of God."⁴ Mutilating a candidate for the throne in such a gruesome way proved effective on occasion, but private retaliation of a husband against a wife did not impart such a clear message to society at large. A man seeking private vengeance on his wife like as not acted outside the law by taking the prerogative of punishment into his own hands; he was defying authority. Nose-slitting appears to have been caught up in issues related to the right to administer justice. In the West, it would be necessary to return to ancient times, to the days of the early Roman Republic, to find a time when children and wives were remanded to the *pater familias* for punishment for crimes committed—and that punishment was most often death, not mutilation. Mutilation when practiced by men

against their wives appears to have been widely regarded as vindictive, gratuitously violent, and reprehensible in the Middle Ages.

Analysis of context must take into consideration the community's expectation for flawless faces. The author of "The Gendered Nose" notes that syphilis had yet to mar faces with collapsed cartilages and infections of the boney ridge of the nose, but medieval people lived with leprosy that took a visible toll on noses as well as fingers and toes. There were numerous other contusions, injuries, and diseases that were displayed routinely on the faces of women and men in centuries when work-related accidents like burning, or disease, or warfare were rampant. Where the faces of both sexes were open for all to see facial disfigurement was cruel but perhaps less alarming than we would find it today with our modern recourse to facial reconstruction. The author notes that people made attempts to rectify nose-cutting with surgery early on—in India, for example—but with limited success. Most people in earlier centuries lived with infirmities that marred their faces and the signs were there for all to see. A slit nose was highly noticeable but not the shocking disfigurement it would be on our streets today.

While the role of the Taliban in supporting Aisha bibi's cognates is unclear even they may not have condoned nose-slitting *of an enclosed wife*: it would certainly cost them traditional Muslim adherents if they did. All we can be sure of is that the Taliban supported Aisah bibi's father-in-law in his authority as head of his household. The Taliban's great cruelties to women have been largely reserved for those women who stepped outside accepted roles as wives and mothers and sought education and jobs. Aisha bibi did not do this but instead sought asylum, which brings me to a last consideration: does this desire to permanently deface a woman mark moments of deep insecurity in a swiftly changing world? I find it hard to imagine that Aisha bibi's case would have become international news before the war in Afghanistan. In her remote Pashtun region of Afghanistan, this teenager, who had lost her mother as a child, had been handed over in marriage by her father in order to settle a feud. Her mutilation was the last act in repeated violence and beatings by her husband. Because of war and changes in her society some information about a different course for her life had come through to this young woman. She took her chance to flee with its terrible results, which, ultimately, also presented her a new path for her life, one not by any means a rosy one. In the United States a year later, her mental stability remained very much at issue and as a result her reconstructive surgery was postponed once more at the Grossman Burn Foundation. She has paid a terrible price caught between two places in a fast changing world.

In regard to being a "stable signifier and irrevocably gendered," nose-slitting probably fails those tests, which is unfortunate. If this mutilation

“always” meant a dishonor that society understood and perhaps even condoned, then there might be a way to address the practice, aggressively and convincingly challenging nose-cutting by undermining the thought construction that linked dishonor and this highly visible form of retaliation. Breaking a symbolic link between dishonor and nose-slitting might lessen wives’ suffering at their husbands’ hands. As it is now, this vicious act remains simply gratuitous maiming by a stronger against a weaker spouse through venting anger in a vindictive act.

NOTES

¹Tracey Thursman’s mouth was deeply slashed, not her nose, but this may only indicate that her attacker missed his mark.

²For information on medieval women’s responses to mutilation, see Bonnie Effros’s discussion of the self-mutilation of Radegund and other nuns in “Blaming it on the ‘Barbarians’: Alleged Uses of Nose-Cutting Among the Franks” later in this forum.

³Valentin Groebner, trans. Pamela Selwyn, “Losing Face, Saving Face: Noses and Honour in the Late Medieval Town,” *History Workshop Journal* 40 (Autumn 1995): 1–15.

⁴This is related to the idea of a priest as *Alter Christus*. Physical imperfection barred men from the priesthood as well.