

**University of Alberta**

Shame and Guilt in Chaucer

by

Anne H. McTaggart

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

English and Film Studies

©Anne H. McTaggart

Fall 2009

Edmonton, Alberta

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Libraries to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only. Where the thesis is converted to, or otherwise made available in digital form, the University of Alberta will advise potential users of the thesis of these terms.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis and, except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatsoever without the author's prior written permission.

## **Examining Committee**

Stephen R. Reimer, English and Film Studies

Michael Fox, English and Film Studies

Patricia Demers, English and Film Studies

John Kitchen, History and Classics

Ann W. Astell, Theology, University of Notre Dame

## Abstract

In the penitential ethos of late fourteenth-century England, ideas about shame and guilt were of central concern. Preachers and poets, alike, considered questions such as: what role should shame have in contrition and penance? What is the precise relationship between physical purity and moral or spiritual purity? What are the emotions best suited to eliciting the fullest and most sincere confession? Such questions were posed explicitly in penitential manuals and handbooks, but they also formed the ethical and philosophical soil out of which many of the period's major literary works emerged.

This dissertation examines representations of shame and guilt in the literary contexts and narrative poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. I consider Chaucer's treatment of these ideas in light of his contemporaries, especially the Gawain-poet, as well as a broader historical context, surveying shame and guilt in the Middle English literary traditions of romance and hagiography. I also explore recent developments in affect theory, and draw on work in anthropology and psychoanalysis in order to theorize the ethical dimensions of shame, guilt, and related ideas of agency and purity.

I argue that much of Chaucer's poetry, but especially the *Canterbury Tales*, articulate the private and public facets of these emotions, not only as matters for the confessional, but as representative of opposing ethical systems, and, therefore, as fundamental in shaping possibilities for human social life. I see Chaucer as a poet deeply concerned with ethical questions. His works consistently represent guilt as an ethical ideal whereas shame is often portrayed as the

psychological reality that gets in the way of attempts to realize the ideal. From Dido to Criseyde to Virginia and Dorigen, many of Chaucer's characters call attention to the injustice of "guiltless shame": the way in which the individual's inner moral state conflicts with the external world of honour and shame. Thus, while Chaucer's narratives present us with a full spectrum of ethical responses and psychological motives for evading or claiming moral responsibility, I pay special attention to the many ways in which shame is mobilized in service of social and gendered dynamics of power and victimization.

## Acknowledgements

There are many people who have helped me over the past four years, and without whom I could not have written this dissertation. I offer heartfelt gratitude to my doctoral supervisor, Stephen R. Reimer, whose support gave me the freedom to chart my own intellectual course, and whose guidance kept me on it. Your steadiness, generosity, and understanding have been ballasts in an unsteady world. I thank Patricia Demers, who has been a wonderful teacher and academic role model, from the beginning of my graduate studies to the end. I am grateful to the other members of my dissertation committee, Michael Fox, John Kitchen, Rick Bowers, and Ann W. Astell, for challenging me to think about what comes next with their insightful comments and questions. I would also like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta for their generous financial support during my doctoral program.

I want to thank my family for all of the ways in which they have made my studies possible: my dad, for teaching me how to ask the right questions, how to live the examined life and enjoy it at the same time, and the meaning of faith seeking understanding; my mom, for her unfailing love, her companionship, her cheerful meal-making and babysitting, and the many, many happy hours. Words cannot express fully the gratitude I owe to John, my teacher, loyal friend, and loving husband. With every possible task involved in writing a dissertation, John, you have helped me. Interlocutor, draft-reader, thought-provoker, reality-checker, rant-listener, comfort-giver, dish-washer, laundry-folder, child-minder, cheerleader: you have been all these, and more. I thank you. Finally, I thank—and give thanks for—my two beautiful daughters, Sofia and Isabel. Everything is for you, and nothing makes sense without you.

## Table of Contents

Chapter One:	
Introduction .....	1
Chapter Two:	
Understanding Shame .....	10
Shame and the Self .....	11
The Phenomenology of Shame .....	19
Mimetic Shame .....	29
The Anthropology of Shame .....	41
Biblical Shame .....	49
Classical Shame .....	59
Shame and Sacrifice .....	68
Literary Shame .....	74
Conclusion .....	87
Chapter Three:	
Shame in Medieval Romance and Hagiography.....	90
Historicizing Shame .....	91
Chrétien de Troyes: Chivalric Shame and Identity .....	94
Malory: Honour and Shame as Expressions of Fatalism .....	100
Paradox and Purity in the <i>Lives</i> of the Virgin Martyrs .....	110
Conclusion .....	123
Chapter Four:	
Penitential Shame and Guilt .....	124
Guilt and Grace .....	144
Suspicious Guilt .....	149
<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> :	
Guilt and the Ethics of Non-Perfection .....	160
Conclusion .....	187
Chapter Five:	
Authority and Agency in the <i>House of Fame</i> , <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> , and the <i>Knight's Tale</i> .....	189
Shamed Guiltless in the <i>House of Fame</i> .....	190
Shame and Agency in <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> .....	210
Honour and Violence in the <i>Knight's Tale</i> .....	230
Conclusion .....	255
Chapter Six:	
Mimetic Rivalry, Mimetic Grace: Revenge and Forgiveness in the <i>Tales</i> of the Wife of Bath, the Franklin and the Melibee .....	265

Structures of Reciprocity in the <i>Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale</i> .....	265
“Save oonly deeth or elles dishonour”:	
Undoing Shame in the <i>Franklin's Tale</i> .....	288
“Damages withoute nombre”: Mimetic Rivalry, Melibee's Honour, and	
Prudence's Remedy .....	301
Conclusion .....	318
Chapter Seven:	
“Is ther no grace?": The Economy of Sacrifice in Chaucerian Hagiography .....	321
Chaucer's Good Women .....	321
Chaucer's Good Children .....	333
“Outher deeth or shame” in the <i>Physician's Tale</i> :	
The Shame Dilemma Revisited .....	335
“Damages withoute nombre”:	
Vengeful Sacrifice in the <i>Prioress's Tale</i> .....	353
Conclusion .....	382
Chapter Eight:	
Speech, Shame, and Penitence in the <i>Prologues and Tales</i>	
of the Pardoner, the Manciple, and the Parson .....	384
Falling (Ill)ocution:	
Performing Shame in the <i>Pardoner's Prologue and Tale</i> .....	395
“Shamed Gilteles” Revisited:	
Redemptive Speech at the Close of the <i>Canterbury Tales</i> .....	418
Conclusion .....	447
Chapter Nine:	
Conclusion .....	449
Works Cited .....	455

## Chapter One: Introduction

This dissertation explores representations of shame and guilt in late medieval literature, and brings together a range of insights on the moral affects with close readings of several Middle English texts, devoting special attention to the narrative poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. While my focus has aimed primarily at shame and guilt in Chaucer, the scope of this project has been necessarily wide, touching on several medieval literary traditions as well as several different currents in contemporary psychoanalysis and ethics. In exploring these contexts and their relationship to Chaucer, I have attempted to generate what Shoshana Felman has called “mutual implications”: tracing the ways in which theory and literature echo and illuminate each other, “each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other” (“To Open the Question” 9). The general effect of this approach is to find commonalities and recurring patterns more readily than to perceive historical particularities or anomalies. It also promotes the reconsideration of old problems in new lights, and with an invigorated sense that, as Chaucer would remind us, reading old books is not simply a hobby for those who have time but rather a necessity for imagining future possibilities for a shared ethical life.

One of several starting points for this project was provided by Alcuin Blamires’s recent book *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. Blamires presents new readings of Chaucer’s narratives in terms of a re-assessment of Chaucer’s



relationship with Stoic ethics and medieval discourse on the sins and virtues. In his introduction, Blamires asserts that

hitherto we have only scratched the surface in discovering the extent of Chaucer's creative adoptions of ethical ideas or in discovering how they shape the questions he asks about women's and men's behaviour. It is not a matter of wanting to prove that Chaucer went off to *recherché* didactic sources (a few lines on lordship from a standard Senecan treatise do not qualify as *recherché*). It is a matter of realizing how the main written sources on the moral life, diffused widely through medieval culture and articulating what people understood of positive and negative behaviour, left scope for moral grey areas of the kind Chaucer found it congenial to cultivate. (19)

Over the course of his study, Blamires demonstrates that Chaucer's interest in exploring "moral grey areas" is provisional or even heuristic, in the sense that his poetry tends to raise moral questions more often than it answers them, and yet the kinds of questions it poses are ones that include "a powerful dimension of ethical nostalgia" (237). In this way, Chaucer's preferred practice is to emphasize moral problems or dilemmas rather than to dictate solutions, but his interest in these problems does not necessarily evince a modern, pluralist or skeptical moral outlook. Rather, what often seems superficially to be a "design to destabilize categorical morality" is, on closer analysis and in light of Chaucer's indebtedness to penitential discourses, an expression of moral seriousness and an implicit critique of contemporary abuses of power, "vengeful political factionalism" and the loss of social cohesion and stability (*Chaucer, Ethics* 237). I would add to this insight the idea that the open-endedness of Chaucer's treatment of moral themes is, therefore, an openness shaped to challenge his readers to examine ideals and assumptions and, often, to point out the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality.

The kind of reality that most often contradicts or complicates the moral ideal in Chaucer is a psychological reality: in almost all of his major works, Chaucer is most interested in exploring what motivates people to act as they do, the variety of forms of self-defense, self-deception, and self-aggrandizement, the power of affect to shape moral or empathetic responses to others, and the power of self-interested desire to impede or override the will to obey the moral law. As Blamires observes, even as Chaucer is asserting the validity of a particular moral doctrine, he “tends to make us very aware, not unsympathetically aware, that impassioned humans don’t *listen* to doctrines of [moral rectitude]” (171).

The idea that Chaucer is profoundly interested in the psychological dimension of the moral life, and not just its theoretical precepts, brings me to another one of my starting points for this project. Unlike Blamires, I do not frame my discussion of Chaucer’s concern with moral and ethical questions primarily in terms of the historical, contextual material on the virtues and vices, although I do draw on this material in several important ways. Rather, in reading Chaucer’s poetry through the lens of moral affect theory, I frame the discussion from the perspective of psychoanalytical and anthropological approaches to ethics, a framework that recognizes the historicity and conditionality of moral thought but also one that asserts a shared human psychology and structural patterns of thought and cultural forms that cross historical lines. This choice also reflects a desire to respond, with and through medieval poetry, to contemporary theoretical discourse on the moral affects. Some of the best applications of psychoanalytical and anthropological concepts to medieval literature in recent years, for example, in the

work of Louise Fradenburg and Carolyn Dinshaw, have demonstrated beyond doubt the interpretive fruitfulness of reading Chaucer through Lacan and Lévi-Strauss. But the conversation between modern and medieval has been largely one-sided. The challenge until recently in medieval studies has been one of establishing various theoretical approaches as legitimate in the first place, and one result of this has been a tendency, in what Siegfried Wenzel has called “interpretive” (as opposed to “textual”) readings (“Current” 1), to privilege, in an ideological sense, the theory over the poetry, insofar as the methods employed purport to unsettle or de-centre “authoritative” medieval discourses by means of modern critical insights. But we are currently in a position to acknowledge, with Fradenburg, that “psychoanalysis is simply *in* medieval studies now, in a variety of acknowledged and unacknowledged ways” (“We Are Not Alone” 250)—as is, we might add, gender theory, deconstruction, and every other variety of theoretical approach: the interpretive need no longer defend itself against the textual. Consequently, we are also in a position to begin asking a new kind of question: what might it look like to read Lacan and Lévi-Strauss through Chaucer?<sup>1</sup>

Or, more specifically for my purposes, what might it look like to read Lacan, Girard, Freud, and Nietzsche through Chaucer (and his contemporaries)? In response to this question, my practice in the following pages has been to move back and forth between the theoretical categories of shame and guilt, concepts

---

<sup>1</sup> In posing this question, I am, in part, responding to Erin Felicia Labbie’s comment that Felman’s idea of mutual implication “will lead to an inversion of Fradenburg’s statement, ‘psychoanalysis is in medieval studies,’ to say as well that *medieval studies is in psychoanalysis*” (*Lacan’s Medievalism* 10).

which I define from the perspective of contemporary ethical, psychoanalytical, and anthropological discourses, and the literary texts. In Chapter Two, I begin with a survey of various disciplinary approaches to shame, and argue that, conceptually and culturally, the shame affect can be understood in terms of a causal link with violent sacrifice. Chapter Three constitutes a kind of case study of medieval shame, in which I survey some of the ways in which shame and sacrifice are represented in two main strands of medieval literature that are also foundational for Chaucer: romance and hagiography. In Chapter Four, I posit an understanding of guilt on the basis of medieval penitential practices and literature. In doing so, I challenge the modern, suspicious attitude towards guilt that we find in Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault with a reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, arguing that the Gawain-poet deconstructs the “economic” understanding of guilt as an unpaid debt, in favour of a “non-perfectionist” concern with forgiveness. In Chapters Five through Eight, I move from considering these historical and theoretical contexts to focus on Chaucer in particular. Chapter Five considers Chaucer’s treatment of pagan antiquity in light of the distinction between shame and guilt, while Chapter Six explores how the ethical binary of shame and guilt that is upheld in these “pagan” narratives is complicated by the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, and the *Melibee*, all of which represent analogous ethical paradoxes in which the violence of shame is averted by the acceptance of shame in penitence. Chapter Seven returns to the problem raised in connection with *Sir Gawain* of the ethical “economy”—shame and guilt understood as materialist principles of exchange—in Chaucer’s hagiographical narratives.

Chapter Eight concludes the dissertation by considering the *Pardoner's Tale* and the penitential conclusion of the *Canterbury Tales* in terms of the difference between shame and confession of guilt as performative speech.

Two questions have motivated this project: first of all, how did textual constructions of shame and guilt as ethical categories serve to shape medieval conceptions of self and agency; and secondly, how does reading shame and guilt through the lens of medieval literature shape and create new possibilities in contemporary ethical discourse? The second question is not one that I have been able to address directly, but it has nonetheless been instrumental in shaping my approach to the texts. Like many of Chaucer's readers of the past few decades, I have been struck by the remarkable consonance between the fourteenth-century poet's ethical and epistemological preoccupations and our own. Judith Ferster has used principles of modern hermeneutics in her interpretations of the *Canterbury Tales*, and she comments that it "should be no surprise that the pre-Cartesian Middle Ages has much in common with modern anti-Cartesian philosophy" (*Chaucer on Interpretation* 13). Similarly, in her study of *Lacan's Medievalism*, Erin Felicia Labbie observes that the "scholastic debates about the existence of universals are not over; they are evident actively in even the most apparently 'postmodern' theories" (10). This implicit sense that we in the twenty-first century are, increasingly, "getting medieval,"<sup>2</sup> and the concomitant sense that the

---

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this phrase from Carolyn Dinshaw's influential book, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Dinshaw's work explores intersections between medieval literature and queer theory but also promotes a conception of historical boundaries and periods as highly fluid: in the title essay of *Getting Medieval*, for example, Dinshaw performs a comparative reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the film *Pulp Fiction* in terms of their representations of masculinity and repressed homosexual desire.

paradigmatic theoretical approaches of the twentieth century seem to provide answers to questions that are no longer pressing (and seem not to provide answers to the questions that are) has thus prompted me to turn to Chaucer and late fourteenth-century English poetry as a way of thinking through some of the ways we measure who we are in shame and what we owe to each other in guilt.

Almost without exception, studies of shame and guilt as moral affects have, to this point, been tied in some way or another to arguments about periodization, as attempts to chart the historical progression from shame culture to guilt culture, or, in more recent years, from guilt culture to shame culture. I suggest in Chapter Five that Chaucer himself understood his own poetic vocation vis-à-vis his classical sources in terms of the difference between guilt and shame. But here, notwithstanding my reflections on the pre-modernism of postmodernity, I have purposely avoided making comparative claims about the fourteenth century and other periods: in other words, nowhere do I argue that Ricardian England constitutes a guilt culture that has evolved from the shame culture of pagan antiquity or the early Middle Ages, and thus, is an “other” period that can be understood as prefiguring later, more ethically evolved, stages of modernity. I do, however, tend to agree with what I take as Chaucer’s position, that guilt represents an ethical ideal to which we aspire when we want to liberate human consciousness from various external constraints, while shame constitutes the unavoidable psychological reality that often obstructs this aspiration, and with it the non-violent reconciliation of conflict. My often (but not exclusively) critical view of shame, combined with the persistence of periodization questions, suggests

that it is prudent to distinguish clearly my project from earlier studies (though they are fewer than is commonly supposed) that attempted to trace an historical teleology from shame to guilt, but also from more recent studies that inscribe a kind of reverse teleology. For this reason, I have tried in Chapter Two to present a sufficient amount of evidence to support the notion that, if there ever was a pervasive privileging of guilt over shame as the more advanced moral affect, we have now moved beyond this particular debate: just as the interpretive need not defend itself against the textual in medieval studies, so has the task of refuting the guilt/shame distinction as ethnocentric or teleological become somewhat of a straw debate. My affirmation of the ethical value of guilt and my critique of the tendency to valorize shame are offered, therefore, on the assumption that it is no longer necessary to point out the fallacy of an historical evolution of moral ideas and without any desire to isolate any given period over another as somehow morally superior.

Moreover, the argument that Western culture has evolved from a primitive shame culture to a morally advanced guilt culture contradicts one of the central motivations behind this dissertation: the main reason I have found shame and guilt both interesting and generative for literary and theoretical analysis is precisely because they constitute transhistorical categories that clarify connections between seemingly disparate ideas and phenomena, and because they tend to upset traditional periodization. Thus, for example, to understand the Pardoner as plagued by a sense of shame is to identify him neither as a certain type of medieval sinner nor as an embodiment of modern disenchantment, but to point

out the ways in which the psychology of sin and the psychology of disenchantment overlap and share certain key, structural characteristics. My interest in these ethical categories is, in other words, phenomenological rather than genealogical. Similarly, to understand why and how shame and sacrifice are conceptually and structurally linked allows us to understand why Chaucer reiterates the “shame or death” dilemma so often and, also, what is significant about the attempts of his female characters (Dido, Criseyde, Dorigen, Virginia, the martyrs of the *Legend of Good Women*) to escape it.

Indeed, the questions of purity that inspire the plight of Chaucer’s women and several of his men—of what does it consist, how is it gained or lost, and what is its value—are questions that extend back to the biblical and classical sources that furnished medieval imaginations, but also forward to the recent surge in critical interest in shame and the moral affects. It has been my aim to articulate these questions, their relation to shame and guilt, and thus to violence and reconciliation. In doing so, I hope to establish and clarify Chaucer’s investment in and engagement with these central ethical questions, but also to provide a slightly longer historical perspective in which to evaluate the recent interest in shame and its promise as a “new” ethical foundation.



## Chapter Two: Understanding Shame

Shame is the feeling of an original fall not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have “fallen” into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of others in order to be what I am. (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 384)

Shame is a painful experience of self-awareness in which I imagine myself as if from the perspective of the other, and from that perspective see myself to be less than or other than I had thought or hoped myself to be. Shame is thus an experience of self-objectification and lack; or, as Sartre puts it, the experience of needing “the mediation of others . . . to be what I am.” Often it is the disjunction between our own expectations or desires and the responses of others to us—seeking intimacy but experiencing rejection, desiring control and autonomy but experiencing powerlessness or subjection—that causes shame. This disjunction, rejection or denial provokes an experience of internal, psychic division, in which one’s self is perceived as an object, distinct or displaced from the subject position, and particularly an object whose worth has been measured and found wanting. In the Western imagination, the archetypal scene of shame is that of Adam and Eve attempting to hide their nakedness from God in the Garden of Eden: it is a moment that marks the fall as a movement from perfect union with God in eternity to the experience of divided human consciousness in history.<sup>1</sup> It also

---

<sup>1</sup> That this founding moment in Western culture is also a moment of shame is aptly conveyed in a recent volume of essays on *Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture*, edited by Claire Pajaczkowska and Ivan Ward. The editors chose for the book’s cover a photograph of Masaccio’s 1427 Florentine fresco, *Adam and Eve Banished from Paradise*, in which Adam covers his face with his hands and Eve, her naked body. They weep as the archangel Michael hovers above and behind them with his sword raised, expelling them from paradise. In her chapter on “The Garden of Eden,” Pajaczkowska links the sense of “paradise lost” and its concomitant shame with the capacity not only for consciousness but narrative: “. . . . the loss of

inscribes shame as a kind of spectacle in which the divided self in all its weakness is exposed to the eyes of the Other: the loss of innocence *found out*, and thus the desire to hide or flee. The physiology of shame involves slackened muscle tone and increased blood flow; shame thus appears as a blushing face, slumped shoulders, bowed head, averted eyes. It is essentially an experience of powerlessness and exposure; in shame we feel that we are, with Prufrock, the object of a humiliating gaze, “pinned and wriggling on the wall.”

### Shame and the Self

Because of its fundamental connection to desire and lack, and to the self defined in relation to the other, shame has been steadily rising to prominence in terms of recent currents in psychoanalysis, in ethics and in literary theory broadly defined. But even as it is widely recognized as the “keystone affect” (Broucek, “Shame” 369), it has become commonplace for shame theorists to argue that Western scholars have been guilty of construing shame as psychologically and culturally primitive relative to guilt. While philosophers and psychoanalysts have focused intensely on guilt from a wide range of perspectives, “shame,” writes David Konstan, “has had a bad press for the past century or so” (1031). Comments such as Pajaczkowska’s and Ward’s, that “the literature on shame is small” and that shame remains “a little-explored terrain” (1), are (ironically) nearly ubiquitous, to be found in nearly every study of shame published since the 1950s. Consequently, the idea that we ought now to turn our critical attention

---

paradise is a prerequisite for the beginning of narrative, and of self-consciousness, an ego or subject-self that exists only in a world of language, divisions, rules, time and frustration. Loss is what opens up a space that allows narrative to move forward” (130).

away from guilt to focus on this most long-neglected of the moral affects is rarely questioned. And, indeed, Freud placed the repressive function of guilt at the centre of his theory of development, as the mainspring and driving force of civilization itself. Freud's few, scattered discussions of shame, on the other hand, offer no consistent theory: shame is mentioned alongside guilt as an inhibiting response, mainly as a defense against exhibitionism and other forms of sexual impropriety, and is posited as a feature of an early, preverbal stage which is superseded by the development of guilt.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the ambiguities in Freud's own attitude towards guilt, therefore, recent scholars writing on shame assume that they must first confront the Freudian bias.<sup>3</sup> In fact, this interpretation of Freud's legacy is not entirely accurate. While it is true that his account of shame and guilt is inadequate in several important ways, it has not led to a *privileging* of guilt in the way that is commonly assumed. That the Freudian legacy is one that in fact devalues and misunderstands guilt is a point that I will make more clearly in Chapter Four: ironically, the emerging academic interest in shame, construed as a corrective to Freud's bias, actually builds on Freud's representation of guilt as a repressive function and a potential danger to psychological health. And, in an appropriately Freudian vein, shame is now being reintroduced as a concept the

---

<sup>2</sup> Freud's neglect of shame is well documented by Francis Broucek, *Shame and the Self*: see especially 11-24 and 108-15.

<sup>3</sup> A distinction must be made between a possible "guilt bias" in the practice of psychotherapy and the body of theoretical literature and research on shame and guilt. Many psychoanalysts writing on shame attest to the difficulty of dealing with shame in a clinical setting and the widespread tendency to bypass shame in favour of guilt or affects such as anger and aggression, which are easier for the patient to articulate and for the therapist to analyze. I am not disputing this phenomenon in the clinical context; rather I am addressing the misperceptions about shame's status in theory generally and its literary applications in particular (Broucek, *Shame and the Self* 81-102; Morrison, *The Culture of Shame* 3-10).

investigation of which allows us to access the darkest recesses of our psycho-sexual being.

In this chapter, I will survey theories of shame, and of related concepts such as abjection and pollution, across a range of disciplines, in order to establish both a comprehensive definition of shame and its conceptual status in contemporary critical discourses. I will consider, first of all, what shame is, and, secondly, why shame is quickly becoming a topic of such fascination, an object of study that is “not a coherent object of study” (Pajaczkowska and Ward 3) and yet one that allows us to feel and to explore “the alchemy of the contingent,” to escape and avoid “heterosexist teleologies” (Sedgwick and Frank 502, 503). This discussion will range from clinical studies in psychoanalysis to biblical studies in purity and pollution beliefs to anthropological studies on honour culture; the point of such a survey is not to attempt an exhaustive summary of each of these areas, but to provide a multi-dimensional picture of a moral affect that is wide-reaching in its psychological, spiritual, ethical, and cultural implications. My intention, in other words, is not to over-simplify the various discourses that contribute to our understanding of shame, but to indicate the range of materials needed to theorize adequately the concept of shame itself.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Reading widely on the status and role of shame across disciplinary lines has led me to wonder at the fact that many theorists seem to be unaware of the parallels with their own work in other fields. I have been struck several times by the need for a comprehensive study aiming simply to consolidate the insights produced by the various approaches, both theoretical and clinical—insights that often corroborate and echo each other in fascinating ways. Such a study might also help to check the tendency, especially among literary scholars, to select one approach (the psychoanalytical studies of Lynd and Singer, or more recently, the work of Silvan Tomkins), or even one aspect of one approach, to the exclusion of all others—especially those that present a negative view of shame. See below for my critique of “literary shame.”

Freud considers shame alongside guilt as a means of repression enforced by the super-ego—a kind of ancillary “tension” the precise nature of which he never fully articulates. In “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905), shame represses the “partial drive” of scopophilia in particular—the sexually oriented desire to look.<sup>5</sup> In German, the terms used by Freud, *Scham* and *Schamgefühl*, connote exposed nudity, particularly of the genitals. Thus, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud contends that shame developed alongside man’s evolution to an upright posture: “this made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provoked feelings of shame in him” (99). But in “New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis”(1933), Freud suggests that shame stems not simply from the need to conceal the genitals but from genital deficiency; hence, Freud makes the now-famous comment that shame is “a feminine characteristic *par excellence*” (132).<sup>6</sup> In each instance, shame carries the same connotations as it does in traditional usage, closely associated with sexual modesty, especially in women. The fact that Freud devotes so much of his corpus to the exploration of guilt, calling it “the most important problem in the development of civilization,” while attributing a much narrower significance to the experience of shame, is often cited by contemporary theorists as evidence for a pervasive guilt bias in Western thinking (*Civilization* 91).

---

<sup>5</sup> See vol. 7 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (69-143).

<sup>6</sup> See vol. 22 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (5-182).

It is not so much that Freud emphasizes the importance of guilt at the expense of shame, however, but that he inadequately distinguishes *between* shame and guilt. As we will see, for Freud, as in popular parlance, shame and guilt are often nearly synonymous. Moreover, as early as the 1950s, psychoanalysts such as Gerhard Piers and Helen Merrell Lynd produced full-length studies of shame, working in the Freudian school of ego psychology but recognizing the centrality of shame in the formation of individual identity.<sup>7</sup> These studies were followed by Helen Block Lewis's *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* in 1971, which effectively established shame as a crucial factor in psychoanalytic inquiry. Building on this pioneering work, the past three decades have seen a wealth of psychoanalytic scholarship on shame; in the last ten years, the field has positively exploded.<sup>8</sup> This extensive body of clinical and theoretical scholarship suggests that criticism from outside the field of psychoanalysis, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's perception of a "sodden landscape of moralistic or maudlin *idées reçues* about what is, to the contrary, the most mercurial of emotions," is no longer apt, if ever it was ("Shame

---

<sup>7</sup> See Gerhard Piers and Milton B. Singer, *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study*; Helen Merrell Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*.

<sup>8</sup> There are many clinical studies on shame and on the differences between shame and guilt that attest to the widespread interest in the topic and that support my view here. See, for example, Fontaine, et al., "Untying the Gordian Knot of Guilt and Shame" (2006); Wilson, Droždek, and Turkovic, "Posttraumatic Shame and Guilt" (2006); Ferguson, "Mapping Shame and its Functions in Relationships" (2005); Gilligan, "Shame, Guilt and Violence" (2003). For recent studies that apply these psychoanalytic insights in field anthropology, see Bedford, "The Individual Experiences of Guilt and Shame in Chinese Culture" (2004); Stipek, "Differences Between Americans and Chinese in the Circumstances Evoking Pride, Shame, and Guilt" (1998).

Book-length studies that I have consulted here and that have influenced my own understanding of shame include Kilborne, *Disappearing Persons: Shame and Appearance*; Morrison, *The Culture of Shame and Shame: the Underside of Narcissism*; Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame*; Nathanson, *The Many Faces of Shame* and Wurmser, *The Mask of Shame*. This list, however, does not come near to exhausting the available literature on the topic—complaints about a pervasive neglect of shame notwithstanding.

in the Cybernetic Fold” 500). And in this sense, contemporary studies that attempt to correct Freud by emphasizing the importance of shame and denigrating the (psychological, cultural, ethical) value of guilt end up repeating the same failure of differentiation.

The earliest revision of Freud’s analysis is Gerhard Piers’ collaborative study with anthropologist Milton Singer, which also remains one of the most influential works on the subject. In addition to fleshing out Freud’s scant comments on shame, Piers and Singer revise the definitions used in early anthropological discourse, which distinguish between guilt and shame on the basis of internal versus external sanctions. According to Piers, shame

arises out of a tension between the ego and the ego ideal, not between ego and superego as in guilt. Whereas guilt is generated whenever a boundary (set by the superego) is touched or transgressed, shame occurs when a goal (presented by the ego ideal) is not being reached. It thus indicates a real “shortcoming.” Guilt anxiety accompanies transgression; shame, failure; the unconscious, irrational threat implied in shame anxiety is abandonment, and not mutilation as in guilt. (24)

Piers’ definition, relating shame to failure and guilt to transgression, is still widely accepted. It is also interesting to note that Piers actually declares shame to be the healthier emotion: his clinical findings suggest that the shame-driven individual has better opportunities for “developing potentialities and maturation” while the guilt-driven individual often becomes emotionally and developmentally paralyzed (32). As we will see, this point is echoed and elaborated in more recent texts as well.

With Helen Merrell Lynd’s study of shame and identity, shame theory—but also the project of theorizing more generally the relation between affects and

the self—reaches a new level of philosophical sophistication. Lynd recognizes the centrality of shame for understanding self and ego formation without diminishing the painfulness of the experience and the potential psychological dangers of extreme shame. Lynd's work is also noteworthy for theorizing the way in which shame impels the search for individual identity, by bringing into sharp focus the relation between self and other. In terms of defining the concepts and distinguishing shame from guilt, Lynd contributes two insights that are especially relevant for the present study. First of all, she picks up on the idea of shame as a kind of nakedness (*Scham*) but expands it to include all forms of figurative as well as literal exposure, both to others and to one's own eyes, "of peculiarly sensitive, intimate, vulnerable aspects of the self" (Lynd 27). Guilt, on the other hand, Lynd connects to the idea of debt (in the sense of the German word *Schuld*, which conflates guilt and debt). In accord with Piers, Lynd contends that guilt "is centrally a transgression, a crime, the violation of a specific taboo, boundary, or legal code by a definite voluntary act" (23). Secondly, she argues that shame involves the "whole self" while guilt arises from a "culturally defined wrong act, a part of oneself that is separable, segmented, and redeemable" (Lynd 50). Shame "pervades everything" and as such "cannot be modified by addition, or wiped out by subtraction, or exorcised by expiation. It is not an isolated act that can be detached from the self" but rather one that, to varying degrees, actually *transforms* the self (50).

Helen Block Lewis's study *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* is more clinical in its focus than Lynd's work but also devotes more attention to a comparative



analysis of shame and guilt. Lewis recognizes three distinct groups of the characteristics of shame. The first involves the close, intrinsic connection between shame and denial, which often makes it difficult to identify a shame experience. As Lewis observes, “at the moment that the person himself says: ‘I am ashamed,’ shame affect is likely to be diminishing” (196-97). The second type of shame response centres on the sensations associated with shame experiences: the feeling of being physically reduced or diminished, the desire to hide or withdraw, and various autonomic reactions such as sweating and blushing (Lewis 197). Finally, Lewis notes the relation between shame and hostility. In many shame experiences, the self does not immediately register the pain of diminishment, but only a kind of “jolt” of recognition, a sudden awareness of one’s appearance in the eyes of another, that provokes hostility and even rage towards the witness—which is subsequently re-directed towards the self. “In this characteristic pattern,” Lewis writes, “hostility evoked in shame is trapped against the self both by the passivity of the self and by the person’s value for the ‘other’” (198). In the phenomenology of guilt, however, Lewis argues that “the imagery of the self vis-à-vis the ‘other’ is absent” (251). Indeed, the object of criticism is not the self at all, but specific thoughts or actions committed by the self. In contrast to painful wordlessness of shame, guilt is not necessarily accompanied by affect (physiological responses such as blushing or sweating), and is typically manifest in a pre-occupation with one’s wrongful thoughts or acts, the desire to confess, to make amends—in short, to confront the guilt-experience rather than to flee from it (252).

## The Phenomenology of Shame

In addition to the body of work in the vein of Lynd and Lewis, however, we can also trace the ascendance of shame over the course of the twentieth century (and into the twenty-first) in psychoanalytical theory defined more broadly. The clinical-based studies cited above distinguish explicitly between shame and guilt and tend to stress the unique toxicity of shame and its predominant role in neuroses, as opposed to the relative benignity of guilt. On the other hand, French theorists Jacques Lacan and René Girard tend not to distinguish between shame and guilt or even to use these terms explicitly. But regardless of the differences in terminology and emphasis, Lacan's development of Freud's central insights and Girard's refutation of Freud, provide a phenomenology of desire that runs parallel to and legitimates the understanding of self that underlies clinical studies of shame; this phenomenology also helps to explain the conceptual roots of shame's current theoretical appeal.

Both the affective experience of shame and the meanings we ascribe to it are typically understood, first of all, in connection with the primary relationship between infant and mother. Freud's understanding of the mother as the infant's first love object and the subsequent frustration of that desire for the mother in competition with the father becomes, for Lacan, the basis for understanding the subject as a being defined fundamentally by lack—the nothingness of being.<sup>9</sup> The

---

<sup>9</sup>For a succinct explanation of the Oedipal family romance, see "Family Romances"; on the difference between boys' and girls' object-choice, see "Female Sexuality." Both essays are published in *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 5. See also "The Ego and the Id," especially 219-23, in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*.

infant's earliest experiences revolve around a complete dependence on the mother, and the concomitant sense of unity with the mother. Closely involved with this primary experience of unity is the infant's fantasy of perfect reciprocity: that the mother can fulfill all of its needs and desires and that it, in turn, fulfills all of the mother's desires.<sup>10</sup> Gradually the infant begins to perceive that at least some of the mother's desire is directed elsewhere and that there is an essential imbalance in the relationship: the infant needs and desires the mother more than the mother needs and desires the infant. In this moment, the infant confronts both his or her own lack but also the mother's, in the sense that for Lacan, lack and desire are largely synonymous. The emergence of the sense of self coincides with this foundational experience of differentiation and loss of unity, but also with what for Lacan was to become the cornerstone of his entire psychoanalytic theory: the mirror stage.<sup>11</sup>

The mirror stage is the period of infancy (between six and eighteen months) when the child begins to recognize his or her image as it is reflected back, in a literal mirror but also in the mirroring responses of others (the return of

---

<sup>10</sup> Martha Nussbaum presents this idea in a particularly concise and insightful way in *Hiding from Humanity: Shame, Disgust, and the Law*: see especially Chapter Four, Section II ("Primitive Shame, Narcissism, and the 'Golden Age'"), 177-89.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan presented "Le stade du miroir" at the fourteenth congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1936. It was translated several times throughout the twentieth century, perhaps the earliest appearing in the *New Left Review* in 1968, and is one of the most well-known and frequently anthologized of Lacan's texts. Lacan himself, however, published only one book in his lifetime: *Écrits* (1966), which contains "The Mirror Stage" as well as other major texts such as "The Signification of the Phallus." Here, I have relied on Alan Sheridan's English translation, *Écrits: A Selection*. Lacan also supervised the editing of his first seminar, *Le Séminar de Jacques Lacan, Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1973), translated into English by Alan Sheridan in 1977. Other published seminars that I have consulted here include *Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960* and *Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*.

a smile or wave)—any form of “homeomorphic identification” (*Écrits* 77). (The mirror stage corresponds developmentally to what Freud identified as primary narcissism: the period when the child is, so to speak, in love with his own body and does not distinguish the boundaries of his own self from that of his mother.<sup>12</sup>) What is striking about the infant’s response to this mirror image, Lacan observes, is the disjunction between what the infant sees, which is an external, total form or Gestalt, and what she feels herself to be from the inside, that is, anatomically incomplete. The experience of *effecting* the movements made in the image and the reflected environment and seeing the total form of itself from the outside creates a sense of wholeness and mastery, which contrasts with the internal experience of the radical, physical vulnerability of a being who lacks motor control, cannot yet walk or perhaps even stand unassisted:

The jubilant assumption of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. This form would, moreover, have to be called the “ideal-I.” (*Écrits* 76)

For shame theorists, shame emerges out of this disjunction between the ideal-I (or ideal self) and the actual self. Lacan would later refer to this process in terms of “alienation,” in the sense that the child mistakes (or mis-recognizes) the

---

<sup>12</sup> For Freud’s discussion of primary narcissism and the difference between “normal” narcissism and narcissistic perversion, or what later psychoanalysts would refer to as “narcissistic personality disorders,” see “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” vol. 4 of *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*.

mirror image for the self, and in so doing, substitutes the fantasy of wholeness for the reality of fragmentation.<sup>13</sup> The mirror stage is thus

a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an orthopedic form of its totality—and to the finally donned armour of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (*Écrits* 78)

Here, Lacan explains the sense in which the ego is an “imaginary” self of coherence and wholeness that is belied by the impossibility of desire. This impossibility resides in the fact that neither the subject’s nor the other’s desire or demand for love can ever be satisfied; desire always exceeds the objects upon which it fixes, and the (unfulfilled) subject knows that he cannot fulfill the other. While for Freud the central tension that defines the individual (and thus civilization itself) is the one between *eros* and *thanatos*, the pleasure principle and the death drive, for Lacan the central tension is here, between the “imaginary” of wholeness and the “Real” of lack. Indeed, for Lacan, desire is always for that which is not; it always refers to something beyond what can be fulfilled (such as literal hunger or thirst). In this sense, desire has no object *per se*.

That we can locate the emergence of the capacity for shame in the Lacanian mirror stage is corroborated by Francis Broucek, who supplies the clinical terms that elucidate both the fantasy of wholeness and the rupturing of

---

<sup>13</sup> Lacan discusses the disjunction between ideal and actual self that emerges in the mirror stage in terms of alienation in *Seminar II*. But this is the first of two stages of alienation, developmentally speaking. The second occurs in the acquisition of language and the subject’s emergence in the symbolic realm. Lacan’s use of “alienation” in the sense of language acquisition is the more familiar and influential usage, but the mirror stage is also rightly understood in terms of alienation. On the idea of alienation in language and its relation to the constitution of the subject, see also Anthony Wilden’s translation of and commentary on a selection of Lacan’s texts, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, especially 11-13 and 262-84.

this fantasy in desire. Broucek argues that early self development is connected with the infant's experience of efficacy, or the ability to carry out its intentions or will, especially in the realm of interpersonal relationships. The infant experiences shame in the failure of intentionality and efficacy in his or her attempt to initiate and sustain "mutually gratifying intersubjectivity" (*Shame and the Self*<sup>24</sup>). The many studies on facial expression and affect have established the very young infant's capacity for shame: babies as young as six months will whine or cry and by eighteen months will lower their heads if their smiles are met by their mother's frown or indifference—this is the opposite of the "jubilation" that Lacan perceives when the infant experiences perfect mimesis or reciprocity.<sup>14</sup> While Lacan talks about the infant seeing his "total form" and "ideal-I" reflected back to him in the mirror stage (establishing the conditions for his own failure to achieve that total form), Broucek similarly identifies this reflective or mimetic phase with the process of self-objectification. When the child learns to objectify himself, writes Broucek,

he simultaneously acquires the ability to compare himself with others and thus becomes sensitive to his relative smallness, weakness, and lack of competence as compared to parents. . . . If one must view oneself and be viewed by others as an object, then what kind of object one is becomes a matter of some importance. Since it is very difficult (largely impossible) to directly assess oneself as an object, one tries to view oneself through the mirroring gaze of the important others in one's lifespace. Being seen and knowing in what light one is being seen take on enormously magnified importance after the acquisition of objective self-awareness. (41-42)

This is a critical aspect of shame: the sense of "being seen" through the mirroring gaze of the other, with all of the passivity that the phrase implies. As with Lacan's

---

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, E. Virginia Demos, "Facial Expressions of Infants and Toddlers," in *Emotion and Early Interaction*, 127-60.

idea of *jouissance*, which is always glimpsed vis-à-vis the apparent fullness of the other, written into the emergence of self and finding its clearest expression in shame is an experience of a kind of rivalry and failure: the other always has more, is bigger or better, is more complete.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the role of literal or figurative sight in what we might call the mimesis of shame—the experience of oneself as if in the mirror reflection that others are to us—is paramount. But equally important in the experience of shame is the fear of rejection or not belonging. The experience of having one’s bid for intimacy or affection rebuffed or ignored relates to the fear of being abandoned or ejected from the position of oneness, the infantile experience of unity. Martha Nussbaum identifies the myth of desire told by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* as illustrative of the need expressed in shame to “fit together,” and to form, as it were, the proper shape:

Aristophanes portrays shame as a painful emotion grounded in the recognition of our own non-omnipotence and lack of control, and he

---

<sup>15</sup> A thorough discussion of Lacan’s idea of *jouissance* exceeds the bounds of this project. But in summary, *jouissance* (“enjoyment”) is, among other things, a kind of pleasure in pain, a glimpse of the Real behind or underneath reality, that inexpressible, impossible thing that would finally satisfy our desire, and, as that essential thing that we know we lack, *jouissance* is what we imagine the Other to possess and experience—a height of enjoyment that we ourselves can never reach. On this last point, the belief in the Other’s *jouissance* is the linchpin of the social reality that we construct by means of “fantasy,” in which we imagine that the Other (the Jew, the black, the woman, or the homosexual, for example) has in fact stolen and is in some sense an obstacle to our *jouissance*.

But Lacan also distinguishes between masculine and feminine forms of *jouissance*. The feminine basically corresponds to Other-*jouissance*, the unattainable, inexpressible ecstasy that exists outside of the symbolic order and beyond the law of the father. Lacan’s prime example of feminine *jouissance* is the ecstasy experienced by the mystic. In *Seminar XX*, he describes a statue of St Teresa thus: “you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she’s coming. There’s no doubt about it. What’s she getting off on? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it” (76). The masculine or phallic form, on the other hand, is closer to ordinary enjoyment, which is to say failed or not-quite-enough enjoyment. Phallic *jouissance* is thus that which conceives of the Other also in terms of the *objet a* that will be able to fulfill desire. One of Lacan’s most extensive explorations of *jouissance* is in *Seminar XX*, especially 1-11 and 61-77.

suggests that a memory or vestigial sense of an original omnipotence and completeness underlies the painful emotion as it manifests itself in life. We sense that we ought to be whole, and maybe once were whole—and we know that we now are not. We sense that we ought to be round, and we see that we are jagged and pointy, and soft and wrinkled. (*Hiding from Humanity* 182)

What Nussbaum stresses here is the fact that in shame what is lost is not necessarily the experience of perfect communion between self and other, in the sense of two distinct parts in union, but the infantile belief in one's own mastery and wholeness—a kind of narcissism that does not go so far as to distinguish between self and other in a meaningful way. In this way, then, early experiences of shame cannot be said to impede the development of the sense of self, but, paradoxically, to create the sense of self. In other words, the pain of failed intentionality, efficacy, and mutuality mark the self as non-omnipotent and fragmented, but, in so doing, they also mark the self *as a self*, distinct from the mother and from other human consciousnesses. To exist in consciousness is therefore to be able to self-objectify and is thus to be divided from wholeness; to be, in short, is to feel shame. What Aristophanes's myth also illustrates is the extent to which we experience shame in spatial or anatomical terms. Shame may be provoked by any kind of failure, including moral failure, but it is *experienced* as a physical sensation and is typically conveyed in physiological metaphors: the body has been literally *cut off* from its source or the other half that would make it complete; it is smaller or more oddly shaped than it ought to be.

The uncanny sense of one's bodily self as “not quite what it ought to be” similarly leads Lacan to posit the *objet a* as that which is, paradoxically, both the



object-cause of desire and the inaccessible beyond to which desire points. *Objet a* is

the constant sense we have, as subjects, that something is lacking or missing from our lives. We are always searching for fulfillment, for knowledge, for possessions, for love, and whenever we achieve these goals there is always something more we desire. . . . This is one sense in which we can understand the Lacanian real as the void or abyss at the core of being that we constantly try to fill out. The *objet a* is both the void, the gap, and whatever object momentarily comes to fill that gap in our symbolic reality. What is important to keep in mind here is that the *objet a* is not the object itself but the function of masking lack. (Homer 87-88)

Julia Kristeva begins with the nothingness of being identified by Lacan in order to formulate the idea of abjection as the basis of human consciousness but also of the entire social order: the semantic relationship between abjection and shame is close and so it is important to distinguish clearly between them.<sup>16</sup> As Kristeva defines it, abjection is both more general and more specific a concept than shame. It is more general in the sense that it is the key, motivating phenomenon at the heart not only of individual psychic life but also of all institutions and social forms. The abject has to do with ambiguity and “the inaugural loss” and as such is the “object of primal repression” (*Powers of Horror* 12); on the level of culture, it is “the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies” (209). Shame has a narrower significance in that it cannot be defined as ambiguity or loss *per se*, but results only if ambiguity or loss are experienced in terms of a power differential between people—if I experience loss as a personal diminishment compared to another, in the eyes of another, in such a way as to

---

<sup>16</sup>Pajaczkowska and Ward contend that shame “is the greater part of the experience of abjection, precisely where words fail us and where the difference between self and not-self ceases to exist” (3).

make me feel weak or insignificant in comparison. The Kristevan abject rests on the border between consciousness and the unconscious, but the experience or performance of shame can be located squarely in the interpersonal realm, understood as the primary self-other relation but also more broadly in terms of social and political dynamics. Similarly, Kristeva identifies everything from the disgust experienced in food loathing, to the fear expressed in purity laws, to the interiorization registered in the advent of Christian sin as signs of the abject. Shame, on the other hand, although it can be provoked by a seemingly infinite variety of encounters or experiences, can be traced to a highly specific, biologically rooted affect: it is, as Gabriele Taylor has noted, “the emotion of self-protection” (81). Abjection simply *is*; shame depends upon interpretation and is highly context-dependent: what is shameful in one situation is not necessarily in another. Abjection is a kind of universal state of being; shame consists of particular experiences that help to forge a sense of self, but is not an aspect of existence that in any way constitutes selfhood.

And yet “shame” is more general a term than “abjection” in the sense that, in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva is trying to articulate an aspect of existence that lies behind ordinary life, that is truly extraordinary in its depth and darkness. Shame is normal, in every sense of the word; abjection is a limit case, an extreme point, a “culminating form” (*Powers* 5). Abjection is “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady” but it is also “edged with the sublime” (4; 12). Abjection is life’s shadow, something that is both everywhere and nowhere. Shame, however, is more mundane and more obvious. It is an extreme and excruciating form of

embarrassment, but it happens not behind or beneath, gesturing towards the unconscious and the sublime, but right in front of us.<sup>17</sup> That is not to say that abjection is complex while shame is simple or straightforward; rather it is to say that understanding or discussing shame does not require that we consider aspects of existence that are theoretically or linguistically inaccessible, such as the unconscious or the Lacanian Real.

But abjection and shame do have several points in common. If abjection ultimately exceeds signification, shame resists it in the sense that the instinctive movement of shame is away from speech and the cognitive processes involved in speech. In its self-protective function, shame precipitates the flight or fight response, the instinct to either escape the threat or to confront it in order to defeat it. As with abjection, therefore, shame can be manifest in a great variety of contradictory but self-serving behaviours and responses. A person who is ashamed of himself may flout his failure or inadequacy, in self-deprecating humour for example, in an attempt to appear as if he is not bothered by it, to re-establish his mastery and thereby to deny that he has in fact failed. We often see this shame reaction in the archetypal figure of the buffoon or fool.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, a

---

<sup>17</sup> Or rather, shame *can* be an extreme form of embarrassment, but it exceeds embarrassment in structure as well as intensity. Embarrassment is properly understood as a social emotion that results when norms or conventions are breached in certain ways; unlike shame, embarrassment does not have moral content, and consequently it does not have the totalizing, self-transforming potential of shame. Typically, when the source of embarrassment is removed, the embarrassment itself is dissolved. See also Gabrielle Taylor's discussion of the differences between shame and embarrassment (*Emotions of Self-Assessment* 69-76).

<sup>18</sup> For a fascinating exploration of this type in literature, see Michael Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*. Bernstein credits Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky for his seminal representations of what he calls the abject hero, in characters such as Fyodor Karamazov. But cf. my discussion of Chaucer's Pardoner, who is similarly ashamed of being ashamed and attempts to flout his own inadequacies and failures in order to regain a sense of mastery (see below, Chapter 8).

shamed person may attempt to dodge inadequacy by locating it, by way of contempt or disgust, in a source outside of herself (that is, in someone else). This self-defensive move from shame to contempt is perhaps the easiest reaction to identify *in other people*, as it corresponds quite closely to the popularized Freudian notion of projection. Thus, for example, the idea that the man who is virulently misogynist or homophobic is projecting his own feelings of vulnerability and penetrability, or perhaps his own latent perversities, has become virtually stereotypical. But this stereotype does reveal something quintessential about the way that shame functions, even if it is to say that, inasmuch as we are able to detect latency and hypocrisy in others, shame makes it very difficult to recognize the extent to which we too hide from ourselves and our own weaknesses. In this respect, shame is, like abjection, “cunning” (*Powers* 210): it “curbs the other’s suffering for its own profit” and “establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss” (16).<sup>19</sup>

### Mimetic Shame

I identify one crucial difference between shame and abjection as the sense in which shame registers an interpersonal power differential.<sup>20</sup> In order to

---

<sup>19</sup> Broucek explains the variety of shame reactions succinctly: “Shame is so painful that we hope it ends quickly; we have no particular desire to reflect on it or talk about it, because to do so is to run the risk of reexperiencing it. Shame is also somewhat contagious; it is difficult to witness another person’s acute shame or embarrassment without some vicarious twinge in ourselves. Exploring others’ feelings of shame puts us in touch with our own unacknowledged or unmastered shame. We tend to be ashamed of being ashamed and try to deny or hide our shame for that reason” (*Shame and the Self* 4).

<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that Kristeva does not connect abjection with power, or the lack thereof, because in many ways she does. But the point is that shame is always and *only* concerned with the loss or lack of power *in comparison to others*, while abjection might consist of this lack,

understand this central, power-related aspect of shame, I want to turn to René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, which in many ways parallels but also challenges Lacanian theory.<sup>21</sup> Girard first developed the idea of mimetic desire through his study of novelists Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Proust, but he went on to apply the concept of mimesis to a broad theory of human development and culture, as the competitive aspect of human behaviour which produces the scapegoat mechanism. As Girard points out in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, desire as it is traditionally conceived in psychoanalysis but also in Western philosophy generally, is a dualistic affair, a straight line between subject and object. In most cases, desire is imagined as spontaneous, either as a result of the object's inherent desirability or as emerging from the subject's own unique psychology. Girard considers this dualism to be a romantic fallacy. His mimetic

---

but it does not necessarily. For example, Kristeva asserts that "any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject" (4). Conversely, it is not the case that "any crime" is shameful or is motivated by shame, and the fragility of the law does not, in itself, produce shame. Crimes that involve certain kinds of violations, such as rape or assault, do, however, tend to produce shame (and to be motivated by it), because they involve the imposition of bodily powerlessness on the victim and assert the power of the assailant. Similarly, for Kristeva, *all* ambiguity and disorder can cause abjection, but only certain types of ambiguity and disorder tend to give rise to shame, and then only for certain people in certain contexts.

<sup>21</sup> The following discussion summarizes and simplifies the main currents of Girard's thought over the past forty years. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (originally published as *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*) Girard introduces the idea of mimetic desire in the study of literature. In *Violence and the Sacred* (originally *La violence et la sacré*), *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (*Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*), and *The Scapegoat* (*Le bouc émissaire*), Girard formulates the idea of the scapegoat and develops his central ideas into a broad theory of self and culture (see my discussion of these ideas below). *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* contains key sections of earlier texts and also attempts to answer critical response to his mimetic theory.

In general, over the course of his writing career, Girard has moved away from the mainstream of secular academic thought, and from addressing perceived theoretical gaps in the way that the social sciences understand religion and culture, towards a more openly confessional, Christian apologetics. But at every stage in the development of his thought, he has engaged with scholars across disciplinary lines: literary scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and theologians. His work is thus often cited as key evidence in what is being called the re-emergence of religion in the academy.

theory posits desire as triadic, involving a subject, a model or mediator who becomes a rival, and an object. In Girard's understanding, desire is never spontaneous but always borrowed, a highly mobile, mutually reinforcing, contagion that emerges *between* subjects. As such, Girard often substitutes for the term "individuality" his own neologism, "interdividuality."

In subsequent works, and most comprehensively in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard locates the emergence of the mimetic nature of human desire in early child development, but directly contrasts his account with that of psychoanalysis. Girard's account is outrageously simple: the human subject acquires all knowledge and behaviour through imitation, which means that he also learns desire through imitation. Mimesis can be productive, but when it is "acquisitive"—when the child imitates not only non-threatening behaviour but also the acquisitive grasp towards the same object as his model—rivalry begins. Girard observes,

The child is in no position to distinguish between non-acquisitive forms of behaviour—those that are good to imitate—and acquisitive forms, which give rise to rivalry. . . . How on earth is the child to know that his whole process of adaptation is governed by two contradictory and equally rigorous obligations, which cannot be discriminated objectively and which no one will ever mention? . . . For there to be a mimetic double bind in the full sense of the term, there must be a subject who is incapable of correctly interpreting the double imperative that comes from the other person: taken as model, imitate me; and as rival, do not imitate me. (*Things Hidden* 290-91)

The model's response to acquisitive mimesis is to turn the apprentice into her own model-rival, which thus sets up a kind of cybernetic chain of desire, as the desires of each are mutually reinforced through competition. In this way, Girard separates desire, which is purely mimetic and thus has no intrinsic object,

from the family and the Oedipal complex, which reduces desire to desire for the mother and rivalry to rivalry with the father. For Lacan as well as Freud, the subject's initial desire for himself (Freudian primary narcissism, the Lacanian imaginary ego) and for his mother (object-directed desire, *objet a*) are intrinsic—"original, natural, and spontaneous" (*Things Hidden* 353). Lacan's assertion that desire properly speaking has no object is different in this respect from Girard's "desire without object": the Lacanian subject fixes his desire on objects that can never satisfy because of the fundamental void at the core of subject's own being, but desire remains, as it does for Freud, object-directed. But for Girard, the subject's desire fixes upon other subjects *not as objects* but as models or rivals, to have what they have or to be who they are:

Freud imagines that the triangle of rivalry conceals a secret of some kind, an "oedipal" secret, whereas in fact it only conceals the rivalry's mimetic character. The object of desire is indeed forbidden. But it is not the "law" that forbids it, as Freud believes—it is the person who designates the object as desirable to us as desirable by desiring it himself. (*Things Hidden* 295)

Girard's understanding of the obstacle to desire (the rival) and Lacan's (the subject's own lack) are not, however, as diametrically opposed as Girard would have it. Both shift the locus of conflict from the divide between the Freudian ego and superego, and the guilt that is produced whenever the "law" erected by the superego is transgressed, to the humiliation experienced when the way to desire's fulfillment is barred by an embodied other. Girard disputes Lacan's (and the entire psychoanalytic tradition's) emphasis on the capture by the imaginary on the level of the social order as a movement away from difference and toward the same, one's own image. Girard insists that movement is always

towards differentiation, towards the preservation of difference that protects against mimetic contagion. The point is valid, I think, but nonetheless, the yearning of the subject in both accounts is more accurately understood as one for self-sufficiency and, ultimately, *freedom from desire*. Girard's description of this movement and its connection to rivalry is lucid and highly instructive:

Legal prohibitions are addressed to everyone or to whole categories of people, and they do not, as a general rule, suggest to us that we are "inferior" as individuals. By contrast, the prohibition created by mimetic rivalry is invariably addressed to a particular individual, who tends to interpret it as hostile to himself. . . . Once he has entered upon this vicious circle, the subject rapidly begins to credit himself with a radical inadequacy that the model has brought to light, which justifies the model's attitude toward him. The model, being closely identified with the object he jealously keeps for himself, possesses—so it would seem—a self-sufficiency and omniscience that the subject can only dream of acquiring. The object is now more desired than ever. Since the model obstinately bars access to it, the possession of this object must make all the difference between self-sufficiency of the model and the imitator's lack of sufficiency, the model's fullness of being and the imitator's nothingness. (*Things Hidden* 296)

What Girard describes here without naming it as such is shame: the awareness of one's "relative smallness, weakness, and lack of competence" that reflects mimetic desire in the form of desire for wholeness and omnipotence—sufficiency—in contrast to the "law" that does not discriminate between individuals and that instills guilt. Shame, therefore, can be considered mimetic, both in the sense of specular self-reflection and in a Girardian sense, in that it involves the frustration of imitative desire: lack experienced or perceived as the obstacle that another person constitutes for the desiring subject. Similarly, we can also understand the Lacanian subject as fundamentally a subject of shame, whose insufficiency is manifest outward onto the *objet a*.



Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that both Lacan and Girard take as the quintessential instance of desire the medieval ideal of courtly love. For each, courtly love epitomizes the triangular structure of desire. For Lacan, the points of the triangle correspond to subject, object, and the Real experienced by the subject as lack and perceived in union with the object as *jouissance*. Quite explicitly, Lacan invokes the image of the *ménage à trois*, and asserts that it is no less than God, the divine Other, who is “the third party in the business of human love” (*Seminar XX 70*). In *Television*, Lacan refers to Dante’s sublimated love by way of drawing parallels between the infinity of God and the infinity of desire:

A gaze, that of Beatrice—that is to say, a threefold nothing, a fluttering of the eyelids and the exquisite trash that results from it—and there emerges the Other whom we can identify only through her *jouissance*: [the Other] whom he, Dante, cannot satisfy, because from her, he can have only this look, only this object, but of whom he tells us that God fulfills her utterly; it is precisely by receiving the assurance of that from her own mouth that he arouses us. (qtd. in Labbie 107)

Here, as when he contends that “there is no sexual relation,” Lacan is, in a sense, restating the idea of the impossibility of desire, that desire precludes its fulfillment and at the same time “exceeds the limits of signification” (Labbie 98).<sup>22</sup> In the poetry of the eleventh- and twelfth-century French troubadours that Lacan here takes as exemplary of courtly love, the bodily aspects of erotic love are consistently transmuted into a highly spiritualized and idealized adoration of a beloved and essentially unattainable woman. For Lacan, the fact that the obstacle to the fulfillment of desire is desire itself is expressed most clearly in the figure of

---

<sup>22</sup> Lacan repeats this phrase (*il n’y a pas de la rapport sexuel*) throughout *Seminars VII* and *XX*.

the courtly lady, who represents for the subject the “big Other” that is imagined as both excess and nothingness:

The historians of poets who have attacked the problem cannot manage to conceive how the fever, indeed, the frenzy, that is so manifestly coextensive with a lived desire, which is not at all Platonic and is indubitably manifested in the productions of courtly poetry, can be reconciled with the obvious fact that the being to whom it is addressed is nothing other than being as signifier. The inhuman character of the object of courtly love is plainly visible. This love that led some people to acts close to madness was addressed at living beings, people with names, but who were not present in their fleshly and historical reality—there’s perhaps a distinction to be made there. (*Seminar VII* 214-215).

Thus, Lacan concludes that courtly love “is a highly refined way of making up for the absence of the sexual relationship, by feigning that we are the ones who erect an obstacle there too” (VII 69). For Lacan, the obstacle to consummation is not “we ourselves,” who do so for the sake of a higher ideal, but resides in the fact that the perfect union of self and other, male and female, is *inherently* impossible and exists only as fantasy. It is similarly impossible in Girard’s view, precisely because what we desire is not a static object that can be possessed once and for all, but centres on the mimetic relation itself, which can never be exhausted: “desire seeks only to find a resistance that it is incapable of overcoming” (*Things Hidden* 297). What interests Girard more than the Lacanian triangle, however, is the one created by the female object and her suitor-rivals—for example, the wife, the husband (cuckold), and the lover. In Girard’s understanding of mimetic rivalry, the desiring subject and his model or mediator focus primarily on each other, while the object for which they compete is ultimately inconsequential:

As rivalry becomes acute, the rivals are more apt to forget about whatever objects are, in principle, the cause of the rivalry, and instead to become more fascinated with one another. In effect the rivalry is purified of any

external stake and becomes a matter of pure rivalry and prestige. Each rival becomes for his counterpart the worshipped and despised model and obstacle, the one who must be at once beaten and assimilated. (*Things Hidden* 26)

As compelling as I find Girard's account to be, at this point I want to interject a possible qualification, for if we understand triangular desire specifically in terms of shame, a slightly more complicated picture emerges. In the classic love triangle plot, familiar to epic, romance, and novel alike, the object, which is almost always female, is not inconsequential but is in fact central, both revered as the source of male honour *and* reviled as the source of male shame: stereotypically—although not exclusively—the saint or courtly lady who inspires acts of transcendence or heroism, or the temptress who lures men to their doom.<sup>23</sup> In this picture, rivalry between male subjects is important but it is not the only factor. An equally important dynamic is the one between the competitors on the one hand and the object on the other, in the tension created by the desire to possess and the impossibility of possession. This tension resides in the inherent paradox that characterizes the feminine object: her desirability and her shamefulness. Girard acknowledges only the feminine object's desirability, and attributes it to mimeticism, but not her inherent shamefulness, because, for Girard, nothing about the object of desire is inherent.

---

<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, as we will see, there are also many examples of courtly ladies and their lovers that do not fit with either stereotype completely. There are many saintly women and also intensely desirable because unattainable women in Chaucer, for example, but these female characters are also more psychologically complex than this version of the virgin/whore binary suggests. Emelye in the *Knight's Tale*, for example, is not a saint but neither does she intentionally seduce Palamon and Arcite; similarly, Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*, is neither totally pure nor totally corrupt.

On this point, Girard's response to Freud's discussion of narcissism is critical. For Freud, and for much of subsequent psychoanalysis, narcissism stems from the individual's capacity to self-objectify, to regard himself as an object, which is the same capacity that makes shame possible; shame is, according to Morrison, the "underside" of narcissism.<sup>24</sup> According to Freud, the narcissistic individual compounds self-objectification with desire—the desire of the self for the self—rather than projecting his desire outward to an appropriate object (this differs, therefore, from "primary narcissism," which is a normal stage of development). And, as Girard observes, "Freud's example *par excellence* of this intense form of narcissism, where object choice is weakened, is the woman—or rather, a certain type of woman whom he considers to be *the most purely feminine . . .*" (*Things Hidden* 368). Freud considers narcissism, as he does shame, an essentially feminine tendency, and then positions himself as the desiring male subject vis-à-vis the unattainable object: "one person's narcissism has a great attraction for those who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are seeking after object-love. . . . It is as if we envied them for retaining a blissful state of mind—an unassailable libido-position which we ourselves have since abandoned" ("On Narcissism" 46).

Girard's response to Freud is a shrewd turning of the tables, in which he reveals the way in which Freud's own desire blinds him to the truth of the coquette or courtly lady:

Freud thinks he is describing a type of woman that is objectively real and indeed typical; this is the eternal feminine. She is beautiful; she is cold; she has no need to give herself; she occupies an impregnable libidinal

---

<sup>24</sup> I refer here to the title of Morrison's book *Shame: the Underside of Narcissism*.

position; . . . her indifference . . . is both terribly irritating and exciting for the male. (*Things Hidden* 370)

The appearance of indifference, Girard contends, is part of the coquette's game, intended to entice the male, and, in Freud's case, it has evidently worked:

The coquette knows a lot more about desire than Freud does. She knows very well that desire attracts desire. So, in order to be desired, one must convince others that one desires oneself. That is how Freud defines narcissistic desire, as a desire of the self for the self. If the narcissistic woman excites desire, this is because, when she pretends to desire herself and suggests to Freud a kind of circular desire that never gets outside itself, she offers an irresistible temptation to the mimetic desire of others. (*Things Hidden* 370)

As an explanation for the appeal of the cold, indifferent woman (whether coquette or courtly lady) as the supremely desirable female type, Girard's riposte to Freud is brilliant, discerning the fact that the "inhuman character" that Lacan also recognizes as abstracted from historical reality is precisely an *illusory* self-desire. But this does not convey the whole of the matter. It explains the female as object of desire but not as object of revulsion or even fear. If the rivals or models worship and despise each other, they also worship and despise the female other: they desire the prestige that accompanies possession, but they also desire the completeness conferred by possession alone. In this regard, there is perhaps an element of desire that is not mimetic, but that fixes on the object in and for itself. Moreover, the honour sought by winning her is offset by the shame of striving for that which one lacks in the first place. Girard is fully aware of the vulnerability betrayed in desire, but attributes that vulnerability solely to the relationship between rivals. As he writes, desire

will increasingly interpret the humiliation that it is made to suffer and the disdain that it is made to undergo in terms of the absolute superiority of

the model—the mark of a blessed self-sufficiency that must necessarily be impenetrable to its own inadequacy. (*Things Hidden* 327)

The model is perceived as blessedly self-sufficient, but is not the indifferent female object also perceived as such? In both cases, the appearance of self-sufficiency and impenetrability attracts and intimidates, or even humiliates, because it suggests a total freedom from shame, or a state of being in which the actual self and the ideal self are one and the same, a state in which, therefore, the self is without desire. Lacking nothing, she desires nothing, and has nothing—no defect or limitation—of which to be ashamed. Such a state of being, as Girard and Lacan point out, is not humanly possible. But in the experience of shame, we compare ourselves to others, we understand the Other in terms of *jouissance*, or as a rival, model, or inaccessible object, and find that we come up short. Even the relative sufficiency of another has the potential to humiliate because it sets in motion the process of self-objectification, the measuring and comparing of one's spatially conceived self. Furthermore, it seems far *more* typical that the humiliation of desire is not blamed on a rival but on the object itself; possession might be the goal for which the rivals aim, but it is also feared as the “expense of spirit in a waste of shame.”<sup>25</sup> But the female object as the third point in the triangular structure of competition also plays a positive role: she is often the observer and adjudicator of the rivals' performances. Noting that to humiliate is purposely to inflict shame, Broucek points out that “humiliation tends to be a triadic affair, requiring one who humiliates, one who is humiliated, and one

---

<sup>25</sup> It is a curious irony that one of the most pervasive instances of the scapegoat effect in human history—the misogynistic *union* of male rivals against the female object of desire, not an arbitrary scapegoat—is one that seems to escape Girard entirely: see my discussion of Girard's theory of the scapegoat below.

witness (or more) whose good opinion is important to the one humiliated” (75).

Girard’s triangle becomes, in effect, a homosocial duality, but the model of desire underlying honour and shame is truly triadic, with each point of the triangle simultaneously attracting and repulsing the other points.

Regardless of whether we want to expand our conception of desire to include the possibility of non-mimetic forms, however, theorizing shame in terms of the obstacle of Girardian mimetic desire elucidates the central ethical dimension of shame: its causal relation to sacrifice. Anthropologists have frequently observed the imperative of violence in “shame cultures”: in societies built around the warrior ideal, a man’s ability to prove his strength and prowess in battle reflects his ability to defend his family and community and thus determines his social status and worth. Similarly, Girard’s theory of mimetic desire leads him to discover the scapegoat mechanism, the sacrificial principle that shapes all social orders. Girard’s theory is deeply implicated in anthropological discourse, but more directly in terms of the sacrificial rites and mythologies that he identifies as reflective of the social order’s attempt to resolve the violence that results from mimetic rivalry. In order to understand the relationship between the affective experience of shame and sacrifice as a cultural form, we must therefore turn to the anthropological discussion of honour and shame culture, as well as the parallels between this discussion and Girard’s understanding of sacrificial violence.

## The Anthropology of Shame

Among shame theorists, the supposed Freudian bias against shame is often thought to parallel the controversial distinction introduced by the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, between shame cultures and guilt cultures. Just as Freud's progressivist model posits guilt as serving a "higher" psychological function, the story goes, so does Benedict's analysis of the differences between Japanese shame culture and American guilt culture rely on an inherently ethnocentric model. Subsequent anthropologists who adopt Benedict's model are thus considered to be at risk of perpetuating a myth in which the technologically advanced, individualistic societies of the West constitute the only true guilt cultures.<sup>26</sup> Despite the developments in psychoanalysis in the past fifty years, therefore, Freud continues to occupy a large and complex role in popular and academic thought; Benedict's work, on the other hand, has been largely dismissed.<sup>27</sup> As Millie R. Creighton has persuasively argued, Benedict was mistaken in distinguishing between shame and guilt on the basis of external versus internal sanctions (as Piers and Singer established back in 1953), but her discussion of Japanese culture in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) is anything but ethnocentric. Indeed, Benedict was one of the earliest proponents of what has

---

<sup>26</sup> In her introduction to an issue of *L'Esprit Créateur* devoted to critical perspectives on shame, Liz Constable, for example, observes a shift in which anthropologists are now attempting to correct the "guilt bias": while cultural anthropologists once traced patterns of behaviours in shame cultures, "tracing in that same gesture a desired distance between the 'distant' visions of shame as a social regulator and our would-be more complex Judaic-Christian guilt cultures," they now "point instead to the ways in which the structural dynamic of field-work itself is based on a state of shame . . . where the anthropologist is the one 'out of place,' in the position of shame" (9-10).

<sup>27</sup> Creighton reviews the range of negative response to Benedict's work in "Revisiting Shame and Guilt: A Forty Year Pilgrimage." See, for example, Takeo Doi's critique of Benedict in *The Anatomy of Dependence*, especially pages 47-50; Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behaviour* and *Shame and Guilt: A Psychocultural View of the Japanese Self*.



become the central tenet of anthropological inquiry: cultural relativism. As Creighton argues, Benedict “was one of the initiators of the humanist impulse within anthropology that called for a sensitive awareness of the meaning of culture in the human experience” (“Revisiting Shame and Guilt” 284). To this end, one of the central motives behind Benedict’s work was to assist cross-cultural understanding after World War II, to account for differences between American and Japanese cultures in a non-judgmental and constructive way. In anthropological discourse since Benedict, analyses of shame cultures and guilt cultures remain under the suspicion of ethnocentrism, but this suspicion is typically voiced by theorists outside the field of anthropology, and in spite of confirmation from non-Western scholars who have themselves adapted and refined Benedict’s distinction.<sup>28</sup>

Generally speaking, cultures in which guilt feelings predominate tend to be individualistic, emphasizing rights and freedoms. Cultures in which shame feelings predominate tend to be group-oriented, to define the individual relationally, and to emphasize situational ethics, personal duty, and communal harmony. These distinctions stem in part from the different anxieties represented by shame (fear of abandonment, or ostracism and exile) and guilt (fear of mutilation or castration, in Freudian parlance). Creighton’s study focuses on child-rearing practices in the United States and Japan as an indicator of shame or guilt predominance. American “guilt-culture” parents often spank their children as a means of discipline. In Japan, however, spanking is considered cruel and

---

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Bedford and Hwang, “Guilt and Shame in Chinese Culture: A Cross-Cultural Framework from the Perspective of Morality and Identity,” a study that rehabilitates Benedict’s distinction with some modifications.

primitive, where parents prefer to use various shunning practices (ignoring, giving the “silent treatment”) to discipline their children (Creighton 300-7).

J. G. Peristiany’s and Julian Pitt-Rivers’ work on honour and shame in Mediterranean culture has shown the analytical fruitfulness of the “shame culture” designation, while shifting the focus entirely away from comparisons between West and East. *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* has become virtually paradigmatic in Mediterranean anthropology, and is therefore not without its detractors.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, Pitt-Rivers’ discussion of the social and political dimensions of honour as a nexus between social ideal and individual action remains a powerful and elucidating description of the dynamics of social status, in which honour “fulfils the function of social integration by ensuring the legitimation of established power” (38)—in contemporary North America as well as in 1960s Andalusia. One of the chief values of this text is the recognition that honour codes co-exist alongside, and in tension with, the legal and ethical systems of a given culture. An underlying assumption in the work is that “honour and shame are universal aspects of social evaluations,” and thus that we can find structural parallels across cultures (Introduction 11). While psychoanalytic studies focus on the role of shame and guilt in affective experience, the anthropological

---

<sup>29</sup> For example, Amanda Weidman reflects critically on the influence of Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers from the perspective of gender, arguing that the “canonical” status of *Honour and Shame* has led to pervasive stereotyping of Mediterranean men and women, in anthropology and the popular press, where, Weidman contends, “men were portrayed as obsessed by maintaining honor and upholding the family name at all costs, while women were represented as ‘silent, passive, and marginal figures who were secluded in their houses’” (Weidman 520). Weidman advocates instead the approach of ethnographer Lila Abu-Lughod, whose study of Bedouin poetry explores the ways in which men and women living within a traditional shame-culture actively challenge and negotiate with the dictates of (male) honour and (female) modesty. The critique offered by Weidman (and Abu-Lughod), therefore, constitutes an elaboration or development rather than a rejection of the “shame-culture” designation.

approach stresses the socio-political dimensions of that experience. But, for both, shame (or dishonour) is intimately tied to understandings of personal identity, especially in relation to others or to one's social role. As Pitt-Rivers points out, "to be dishonoured is to be rejected from the role to which one aspired. 'I am who I am' is answered: 'You are not who you think you are'" (72). Painful as such a disjunction may be, it speaks not only to the divide within—between self and self-image—but also to the contested ground of social precedence and political power.

In the essay entitled "Honour and Social Status," Pitt-Rivers begins by laying out the "general structure" of the idea of honour in the literature of Western Europe, and then analyzes the variations in this general structure in Andalusia, a small town in the Sierra de Cádiz, in Spain (38). He identifies one of the central characteristics of honour as the primacy of competition, and the tendency for such competition to give rise to violence. At the root of honour competition, as with the experience of shame, is the essentially physical conception of the person, which is materially enhanced or diminished through the winning or losing of honour. The physical basis of honour leads to a pervasive awareness of its finitude—that there is only so much honour to go around—which in turn gives rise to the notion that one man's honour is another man's shame. If honour is a measurable and limited quantity, like money, then if I have more, someone else necessarily has less. Consequently, as Pitt-Rivers notes, the "victor in any competition for honour finds his reputation enhanced by the humiliation of the vanquished" (24). The legitimacy of one's claim to honour resides in one's ability to assert and defend it through physical means: "on the field of honour might is right" (24-25). The

combination of these factors—the limited amount of honour to go around and the basis of honour in the physical person—renders vengeance inevitable. Any physical affront, “regardless of the moral issues involved,” constitutes a reduction in the honour of the affronted person, and must be answered or reciprocated, for to “leave an affront unavenged is to leave one’s honour in a state of desecration and this is therefore equivalent to cowardice” (26). One’s own humiliation can only be alleviated by the humiliation of someone else, whether verbal or physical. Apology is “a verbal act of self-humiliation” and as such is sufficient for many types of offenses. Failing that, however, the “ultimate vindication of honour lies in physical violence” (29).<sup>30</sup>

Pitt-Rivers also discusses the differences between male and female honour and shame. He points out that when honour and shame are understood as synonymous—when to be dishonourable is to be “shameless”—the terms are both

---

<sup>30</sup> Compare Pitt-Rivers’s observations of Andalusian society with more recent work on inner-city gangs. In his discussion of “Shame, Guilt, and Violence,” James Gilligan reports on the findings of sociologist Elijah Anderson, and connects these observations to the idea that much—perhaps most—violence in the contemporary world, including urban crime and terrorism, is caused by shame. Anderson makes the following points about gang violence in Philadelphia:

the street culture has evolved a “code of the street,” which amounts to a set of informal rules . . . of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect, that governs public social relations, especially violence. . . . At the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated “right” or being granted one’s . . . proper due, or the deference one deserves. . . . [R]espect is viewed as almost an external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost—and so must constantly be guarded. (Anderson 33)

Anderson further notes that there

is a general sense that very little respect is to be had, and therefore everyone competes to get what affirmation he can from what is available. The resulting craving for respect gives people thin skins and short fuses. (Anderson 75)

The aptness of Pitt-Rivers’s discussion of Mediterranean shame culture for what Anderson describes here is remarkable, and further supports the idea that “what is called shame represents a universal human capacity that everywhere reveals its generic core” (Epstein, qtd. in Probyn, *Blush*, 30).

ethically charged and gender-neutral. In this sense, “shame” actually denotes the proper fear of shame. To have no regard for one’s own reputation, for instance, is ethically negative for both men and women. Similarly, the virtues of loyalty and honesty relate to honour *as* shame (or fear of shame) and are virtues appropriate for both sexes. Conversely, when honour and shame are understood as semantically opposite, the terms are ethically neutral and gender-specific. Shame as timidity or shyness is a naturally feminine trait and therefore non-ethical, whereas concern for precedence and willingness to offend another man are both ethically neutral and belonging naturally to men. But, arguably, the gender-specific types of honour and shame do take on ethical significance when the traits appropriate for one sex are applied to the other. For instance, sexual modesty is considered honourable in a woman but not in a man, for whom sexual prowess is a sign of virility and hence a source of honour. Logically, therefore, to the extent that what is honourable for men and women is designated by natural sexual difference, what is shameful becomes equated with what is unnatural.

The close relationship between the categories of honour and shame and the maintenance of sexual difference provides a likely explanation for the special ridicule reserved for the cuckold—in southern Europe but also, for my purposes here, in medieval literature. Indeed, almost every facet of honour that Pitt-Rivers identifies can be traced back to the idea that female sexual purity is the highest value in a shame culture—for men (as defenders of women) as well as for women. As he observes, the

honour of a man is involved therefore in the sexual purity of his mother, wife and daughters, and sisters, not in his own. . . . The manliness of a

husband must be exerted above all in the defense of the honour of his wife on which his own depends. Therefore her adultery represents not only an infringement of his rights but the demonstration of his failure in his duty. . . . His manliness is defiled. . . . The responsibility is his, not the adulterer's, for the latter was acting only in accordance with his male nature. (46)

The various forms of male competition for honour, then, are united by the underlying motivation of proving one's ability to protect one's wife and female relations. Furthermore, honour

is a hereditary quality; the shame of the mother is transmitted to the children and a person's lack of it may be attributed to his birth, hence the power of the insults, the most powerful of all, which relate to the purity of the mother. After this, the greatest dishonour of a man derives from the impurity of his wife. On the other hand, if his own conduct is recognized as dishonourable, then the honour of his family has no protector. (52-53)

In this discussion, Pitt-Rivers implies a distinction between the *illegality* of adultery and the *defilement* caused by it, which amounts to an implicit distinction between guilt as moral error and shame as pollution. Legally, adultery was once considered a crime (especially for women), and, in Catholic teaching, it is a sin. In both contexts, it is the adulterer who is at fault and the injured spouse who is the victim. The code of honour, on the other hand, deriving "from a sacred quality of persons, not from ethical or juridical provisions," may actually contradict the "law of the Church and the law of the land" (47). Only where the concepts of shame and honour overlap are they ethically charged. If, however,

we view the adulterer and the cuckold, not in terms of right and wrong, but in terms of sanctity and defilement, we can see why the latter, the defiled one, should be the object of contempt, not the defiler. Through his defilement he becomes ritually dangerous and the horns represent not a punishment but a state of desecration. (47)

This point is a part of Pitt-Rivers' larger discussion about the place of honour

codes within Christian, European culture—a point that is rightly emphasized and directly apposite to my general project as well. And yet it seems to me a mistake to distinguish here between ethical and non-ethical systems, or to designate as ethical only that which has been formalized. I would argue that the code of honour and the code of law both correspond to ethical systems that sometimes overlap and sometimes contradict, and the importance of my divergence from Pitt-Rivers on this point will become more apparent when we come to discussions about shame and guilt in biblical and classical studies. The precise nature of the relationship between the conflicting ethical systems in twentieth-century Mediterranean society is beyond the scope of this project to determine: that is, whether or not the honour code in this context is some kind of pre-Christian vestige or something else entirely. Nonetheless, it seems clear that ideas of sanctity and defilement are in no way *essentially* non-ethical, and while they may not play much of a role in the “law of the land,” they certainly do in the “law of the Church.” The point, therefore, raises two very important questions: that of the moral or ethical status of shame as compared to guilt, and the semantic relationship between shame and pollution or defilement, ritual or otherwise. Pitt-Rivers’s discussion implies that the distinction between shame and guilt corresponds to, or can be mapped onto, the distinction between purity (shame) and morality (guilt), that shame confers pollution but that guilt demands punishment.

## Biblical Shame

Both of these questions bring the current discussion beyond the purview of anthropology proper, to the intersection of anthropology and the Bible, and especially the seminal work of Mary Douglas. Douglas's classic text *Purity and Danger*, includes her ground-breaking structuralist reading of Leviticus, in which she argues for the symbolic integrity of the book as a whole and the dietary laws in particular. Here, and more recently in *Leviticus as Literature*, Douglas develops one of her most significant insights: her reading of Leviticus centres on her refutation of the "anti-ritualist" bias in anthropology.<sup>31</sup> Douglas argues that beliefs and belief-systems that are rooted in ideas about purity and pollution reflect creative impulses, are symbolically meaningful, and, above all, are not evidence of benighted primitivism but are shared by all cultures as attempts "to make unity of experience" (2). Douglas's systematic re-evaluation of purity rituals and taboos addressed an anthropological community which, in the late 1960s, was still being influenced by Frazer and other nineteenth-century social scientists (*Purity and Danger* 7-29).

In many cases, the transgressions which incur shame coincide with those that Mary Douglas has identified as sources of pollution or danger. Douglas does not focus on shame *qua* Pitt-Rivers' discussion of honour and shame, but her

---

<sup>31</sup> Douglas has produced an impressive volume of scholarship on shame-related cultural phenomena and ideas all of which has influenced my project, either directly or indirectly. In addition to *Purity and Danger* and *Leviticus as Literature*, see also *Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation*; *Into the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of "Numbers"*; and *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*. In the latter, see especially Chapter Five, "Witchcraft and Leprosy: Two Strategies for Rejection," where Douglas points out that the dynamics around accusations of causing "insidious harm" are often much more complex than a case of the group suppressing or rejecting the weak and marginal. Rather, Douglas points out that the designation of harm is as much a dynamic *within* the established boundaries of the group, as "the community constitutes itself also in a struggle for power between its members" (99).



understanding of pollution and danger is pertinent for several reasons. Douglas points out that pollution ideas can be both “instrumental,” by reinforcing social pressures, and “expressive,” reflecting symbolically or analogously the social order’s general view of the cosmos, of the relationship between the sexes, of the social and political hierarchy, and so forth. Structurally, the ideal order of society involved in danger-beliefs parallels the ideal self-image involved in shame.

Instrumentally, the attribution of shame to a person or an act is closely akin to the attribution of danger: both mark off the transgressor or transgression as polluting and thereby seek to safeguard the ideal order of society. As Douglas writes, these

danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness. They are a strong language of mutual exhortation. At this level the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code: this kind of disease is caused by adultery, this by incest; this meteorological disaster is the effect of political disloyalty, that the effect of impiety. The whole universe is harnessed to men’s attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbours or his children. (*Purity* 3)

Shame as a moral category operates in much the same way as danger: moral shame, too, acts as a strong language of mutual exhortation. And both function in a similarly paradoxical way in relation to personal, social, conceptual boundaries. On the one hand, danger and shame are deeply engaged in the task of drawing boundaries with clarity, keeping things separate and maintaining differentiation; on the other hand, the moral force of each as forms of “mutual exhortation” resides in its tendency to blur personal, social and conceptual boundaries, in the sense that transgression in one domain causes a breakdown in the others. Shame,

therefore, may be understood as the affective dimension of pollution and danger beliefs. When a person has transgressed a boundary or broken a taboo, and thus represents danger to the community, pollution is the effect that radiates outward, spreading contamination, while shame is the effect that penetrates the transgressor: he or she is shamed (held in contempt, feared) and, consequently, is likely to *feel* shame as well.

Douglas seeks not only to describe the dynamics of purity and pollution, but to re-evaluate their significance and meaning. She points out the widespread assumption in mid to late twentieth-century biblical studies “that primitive peoples use rituals magically, that is in a mechanical, instrumental way,” and the way in which the “history of the Israelites is sometimes presented as a struggle between the prophets who demanded interior union with God and the people, continually liable to slide back into primitive magicity” (*Purity* 26). Douglas counters this opposition between external form as primitive and interior spirituality as inherently superior by arguing that the two are in fact interdependent, and that “interior union” without the social dimensions of law and ritual is in fact meaningless. Douglas’s reading of Leviticus, for example, illustrates the coherence of the priestly and the prophetic traditions by attending to the book’s metaphorical richness:

the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple. (*Purity* 58)

Because Douglas counters stereotypes of primitive beliefs in “mechanistic” ritual, her insights can be brought in to complicate what might otherwise tend towards an overly simplistic dichotomy between shame as non-moral and guilt as moral—a dichotomy that Pitt-Rivers invokes implicitly. Shame, more often than not, *does* have moral content, in the same way that ritual is expressive of and not opposed to interior faith. Douglas’s discussion of Leviticus differs from Pitt-Rivers’ implicit contrast between shame and guilt, however, in that she is discussing different emphases within a single paradigm: the point of dispute between Douglas and her interlocutors is whether the Hebrew Bible *progresses* from the priestly tradition to the spiritual tradition of the prophets, or whether the two traditions are to be understood as complementary. The defilement of the shamed cuckold and the punishment of the guilty adulterer, on the other hand, correspond to two different ethical paradigms. In the case of the honour culture described by Pitt-Rivers, the cuckold is shamed because the sacred quality of his person has been violated, but he is also the one *responsible* for the violation, insofar as he was not “man enough” to keep his wife in her place, to fend off challengers, etc. In the case of secular or religious law, the adulterer is guilty because he has broken an objective, written law; any shame felt by or ascribed to the adulterer falls outside the rubric of the legal system.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Catholic teaching, shame is an optional but laudable emotion attached to

---

<sup>32</sup> This is true in the sense that a modern court of law technically cannot assign blame because a person fails to live up to his or her ideal self, or because a person has transgressed the boundaries of an ideal social order. Whether or not evidence of a convicted criminal’s sense of shame influences decisions about sentencing or parole in the same way as demonstrations of remorse, for example, is arguable, but does not change the essential point.

the awareness of wrongdoing, as part of the process of penitence. In other words, in the shame paradigm, guilt (in the sense of moral culpability) follows shame, but in the guilt paradigm, shame is one possible effect of guilt. As we will see, this difference is ethically significant.

Douglas's reformulation of the opposition between the external forms of ritual purity systems and interior, "higher" spirituality has been instrumental in changing anthropologists' attitudes toward "primitive" religion, but it has been equally influential in biblical and Old Testament studies. Recent work by Hyam Maccoby and Jonathan Klawans, for example, reflects an important engagement, if not uniform agreement, with Douglas's structuralist approach, and offers significant insights, albeit indirectly, to the study of shame and guilt.<sup>33</sup> Following Douglas, Maccoby and Klawans strongly object to the devaluing of ritual in biblical scholarship. In *Ritual and Morality*, Maccoby criticizes Christian commentators who overestimate the importance of ritual in Judaism for the purposes of portraying it "as a religion of formalism and ritual, as opposed to the free operation of the spirit in Christianity" (151). Klawans, in *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple*, also identifies a strong supersessionist bias in biblical studies, not only among Christian scholars regarding the supposed progression from Judaism to Christianity, but also among Jewish scholars who have accepted Douglas's re-evaluation of the purity laws but still dismiss priestly sacrifice as primitive vis-à-

---

<sup>33</sup> Jacob Milgrom's *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* also deals extensively with questions of ritual and morality but in terms of a more technical and specialized exegetical analysis. On the sacrificial system, see especially pages 17-67; on the relationship between ritual and moral purity, 212-45. Milgrom similarly advocates for a deeper understanding of the ethical significance of Leviticus. "Ritual," he writes, "is the poetry of religion that leads us to a moment of transcendence" (1).

vis modern Judaism. Klawans argues that the “view that ancient Jewish sacrifice was destined to be replaced by a morally superior mode of worship like prayer is, in fact, structurally akin to the argument that the temple was destined to be spiritualized by the eucharist” (*Purity, Sacrifice* 9). Maccoby explicitly links this scholarly bias to deeply entrenched antisemitism; Klawans focuses more on the ways in which this bias impedes the progress and integrity of scholarship of religion in particular.

These critiques call to mind the importance of avoiding reductionism in our definitions of shame and guilt, and of problematizing the association of shame with primitive external forms and guilt with historically advanced, interiorized morality. But in light of these critiques, how are we to understand the distinction, if there is one, between shame and guilt in relation to pollution? In the case of the Bible, Maccoby and Klawans offer different answers to this question. Klawans distinguishes between ritual and moral impurity in a way that associates both moral guilt *and* danger or defilement with pollution. Ritual impurity is, in itself, morally neutral, and results from direct or indirect contact with a variety of natural sources. As Douglas phrases it, this kind of impurity is “not something that the bad guys do. It happens to everyone by virtue of their shared biological condition” (*Jacob’s Tears* 167). But Klawans argues that the Hebrew Bible is also concerned with moral impurity: certain sins, such as idolatry, incest, and murder, actually defile the sinner, the land of Israel, and the sanctuary (*Impurity and Sin* 26-31). Klawans points especially to Leviticus 18: 24-30 as evidence of the moral impurity caused by sexual sins; this passage, he argues, shows that, while ritual

purity is “never conveyed to, or contracted from, the land,” moral impurity ultimately results in exile as a way of purifying the land (27). Thus pollution and punishment are not conceptually distinct and are attached to defilement or shame and moral guilt alike. In this view, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between shame and guilt in terms of pollution and punishment.

Maccoby, however, disagrees directly with Klawans on this point. Where Klawans distinguishes between ritual and morality in a way that identifies them as structural parallels, Maccoby argues that they are qualitatively different categories. Maccoby, therefore, understands the pollution of the land caused by grave sins to be a metaphorical pollution, and thereby one that “cannot be ‘cashed’ in terms of location in a system of graded impurities or procedures of purification” (200). Regarding Klawans’ point that expulsion from the land in fact constitutes purification, Maccoby contends that this too is to be considered figuratively: the “expulsion of the Land’s inhabitants is not a purification but a (metaphorical) retching. The Land’s inhabitants, too, are not purified by their expulsion, but only rehabilitated by their subsequent repentance. The expulsion itself is not a purification but a punishment” (201). The difference between morality and purity is, for Maccoby, “all-important,” for without it “we would have to conclude that there is no concept of morality in Judaism at all, only of pollution and its purification” (199). But, here, pollution is associated with non-moral defilement only: Maccoby argues that the ritual purity laws demand “priestly conduct” from the community of Israel, and that laws of morality, which

have nothing to do with purity and pollution, apply universally. In Maccoby's formulation, ritual

is about holiness, not about morality; yet it is also about morality at a second remove, for holiness is for the sake of morality. . . . The ritual marks out the Israelites as a holy people. But this holiness would be of little use if it did not result in a higher moral standard. (204-5)

If in the honour culture described by Pitt-Rivers, shame follows guilt, and in a guilt paradigm, shame is a possible effect of guilt, then on the basis of Maccoby's discussion, we must conclude that in spite of the emphasis on ritual purity in the book of Leviticus, the Hebrew Bible does not fit comfortably within the honour culture designation. Once again, Douglas offers a helpful insight. In *Jacob's Tears*, she reminds us that ideas of pollution and danger or shame-provoking taboos can operate at several different cultural and phenomenological levels (161). In accord with Maccoby, she points out that the "Levitical system of defilement is focused on the desecration of the temple; in doing so it honours the design of God's universe" (161). This system differs radically from ancient Greek ideas about pollution, for example, which operate mainly at a judicial level: the level at which pollution in the form of cosmic or natural disasters constitutes punishment for "gross injustice" (161). Pollution also works at the social level, where "people are vehemently warning each other of the dangers of pollution," which, in turn, "allows the rank and file to control each other or attack oppressive leaders" (161). Another way in which pollution enforces social conformity is by "monitoring cognitive boundaries as well as physical ones. Pollution debates perform a particular kind of policing function: they patrol the mind" (161). Not all of these types of pollution relate to shame to the same degree. As we have seen,

ritual impurity in Leviticus does not imply moral shame, or even shame in the sense of an awareness of one's personal inadequacy. Pollution ideas invoked in service of social conformity are perhaps most closely allied with shame, both in the sense of exerting external pressures on the individual to embody his or her honour (thereby avoiding defilement) and in the interiorized fear of shame, which amounts to the cognitive "policing function" of pollution fears.

It is helpful, therefore, to distinguish, not only between shame as an affect or a basic human experience, on the one hand, and, on the other, shame or dishonour as the socio-cultural manifestation of that shared human experience, but also between shame or honour cultures as specific historical or ethnic groups of people (ancient Hebrew, Japanese, Mediterranean) and what I propose to call *shame ethics*.<sup>34</sup> To designate certain cultures as shame or guilt cultures is a task for the anthropologist, and one that is difficult to achieve with any degree of precision. By contrast, I suggest that the terms shame or guilt ethics represent

---

<sup>34</sup> In the field of psychiatry, James Gilligan has also argued in favour of the terms "shame ethics" and "guilt ethics," as "two opposites types of moral value system" ("Shame" 1175). Gilligan places special emphasis on the mutually exclusive nature of these systems: "What is positively valued in one of these value systems is negatively valued in the other, and vice versa" (1175). This aspect of Gilligan's definitions derives from his psychological (as opposed to cultural or anthropological) focus, as his clinical work with violent criminals has shown that, on the level of individual psychology, shame and guilt are diametrically opposed: "Considered in terms of their relationship to each other, shame and guilt form a negative feedback or homeostatic system. By this I mean that, for example, the conditions that increase or intensify feelings of shame (for example, punishment, humiliation) decrease feelings of guilt (that is, increase feelings of innocence)" (1173).

As Gilligan points out, the majority of violent criminals and all violent psychopaths live with an overwhelming amount of shame but are incapable of feeling guilt or remorse (1149-54). Because he focuses on extreme, pathological cases, Gilligan's distinction, while helpful, is a little more clear-cut than the one I make here. I agree that shame and guilt correspond to two, fully distinct ethical approaches; I also agree that the more shame one feels the less guilt he will feel and vice versa, and that feeling a lot of guilt makes it almost impossible for an individual to inflict violence on others. This is why I believe guilt to be a superior ethical foundation. But I also recognize that in everyday life, people tend to feel a complex mixture of guilt and shame, in addition to many other mitigating emotions.



trans-cultural, trans-historical ethical modes that co-exist in different forms, often within the same social group—much as Pitt-Rivers identifies the co-existence of the honour code, rooted in shame ethics, with Catholicism and Spanish law, which in themselves, we might argue, constitute a combination of shame and guilt ethics. In guilt ethics, shame as an affect is one possible (and often salutary) response to the awareness of wrong-doing; thus, shame remains a prominent aspect of human experience, but as a spontaneous *consequence* of guilt rather than a sign or antecedent of guilt. Conversely, in shame ethics, the *feeling* or awareness of guilt does not typically play a significant role, but the *attribution* of guilt, legally or socially, as in the labeling of an individual as a “wrong-doer,” follows as a logical consequence from the attribution of shame. From a guilt-based perspective, the attribution of guilt in a shaming context is called “blaming the victim,” as in the case of a man who is wronged by a cheating spouse but held responsible and mocked as a cuckold, or in the case of a woman who is shamed by rape and then, consequently, blamed because she was “asking for it.” The important point is that both shame and guilt are important categories in each case; what differs is the way in which the (causal) relation between them is conceptualized.

## Classical Shame

As Douglas suggests, a comparison between biblical and classical shame-guilt distinctions is fruitful for understanding the role of pollution and purity ideas in shame versus guilt ethics. But of course, for Douglas as for Maccoby and Klawans, shame and guilt are not formally defined as they are in psychoanalytic and mainstream anthropological discourse, although I have tried to show how the debate about purity and morality in the Hebrew Bible is conceptually related to shame and guilt. In classical studies, on the other hand, the anthropological categories have been adopted in a more direct and explicit way. E. R. Dodds first introduced the distinction in his 1951 discussion of the transition from the Homeric Age to the Classical Age, and classical scholars have been debating its legitimacy and applicability ever since.<sup>35</sup> For Dodds, the shift to a guilt culture is apparent in an increasing inwardness and religious anxiety, from the Homeric princes who “bestride their world boldly” to a “deepened awareness of human insecurity and human helplessness” in later Classical writers (29). But the upshot has been to interpret these changes in the same vein as the supercessionist argument in biblical Studies: as evidence of progression from a kind of moral infancy to the cultural maturity that culminates in the development of Christianity. The discussion of shame and guilt, therefore, becomes charged with the

---

<sup>35</sup> In general, recent classicists have been less inclined to adopt the “shame culture” designation than have, for example, field anthropologists. The issue in classical studies revolves around the translation of the Greek word *aidōs*, which has been often translated as shame but which is actually a slightly different concept. See, for example, David Konstan “Shame in Ancient Greece”; J. T. Hooker, “Homeric Society: A Shame Culture?” See also Cairns and Williams (discussed below).

implication of weighing the relative worth of the Classical and Christian worldviews.<sup>36</sup>

This is explicitly the case in Bernard Williams' examination of the ethical ideas of the ancient Greeks in his book *Shame and Necessity*. Here, Williams offers an impressive refutation of the progressivist model of ethical evolution, according to which the "Greeks had primitive ideas of action, responsibility, ethical motivation, and justice, which in the course of history have been replaced by a more complex and refined set of conceptions that define a more mature form of ethical experience" (5). According to Williams, our basic understanding of the legacy of the ancient Greeks and of our indebtedness to them has been skewed by centuries of Platonist Christianity. Williams takes his inspiration from Nietzsche, who joined "in a radical way the questions of how we understand the Greeks and of how we understand ourselves" (10). Williams argues that, in some ways, "the basic ethical ideas possessed by the Greeks were different from ours, and also in

---

<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Douglas Cairns (*Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*), denies that the distinction carries any fundamental meaning to begin with. In particular, he disputes the argument offered by psychoanalysts that shame involves the whole self while guilt focuses on a particular action:

It may be tidy to claim that shame involves thoughts like "What a terrible person I am!" and guilt thoughts like "What a terrible thing to do!" and to argue that "What a terrible person I am to do such a terrible thing!" indicate a concurrence of shame and guilt, but it is unlikely that the real world can admit such a sharp conceptual distinction, particularly when even the "pure" case of shame qua evaluation of the whole self will frequently contain an integral reference to some action perpetrated by the self as agent, and the "pure" case of guilt will inevitably encompass a reference to the overall ideal of the self. Quite simply, self-image will constantly be called into question by specific acts, and in such situations the sharp distinction between shame and guilt will begin to disappear. (24)

I trust that the sheer volume of clinical studies that support a clear distinction between shame and guilt offers an adequate refutation of Cairns' position here. Lynd, Lewis, and others (to whom Cairns is explicitly responding) do not claim that shame and guilt are completely unrelated, or that people can never feel both emotions simultaneously, but rather that, in terms of affective and psychological experience and the behaviours that each emotion produces, we can nonetheless distinguish between them with a fair degree of clarity and certainty.

better condition. In some other respects, it is rather that we rely on much the same conceptions as the Greeks, but we do not acknowledge the extent to which we do so” (4). Williams shares expressly with the nineteenth-century philosopher a deep admiration for the Greeks, and comments, “It is beguiling to dream about a history in which it was not true that Christianity, in Nietzsche’s words, ‘robbed us of the harvest of the culture of the ancient world’” (12).

To a great extent, Williams’ understanding of shame and guilt agrees with the picture presented in psychoanalysis and anthropology. But, for Williams, it is precisely the embodied, all-encompassing nature of shame that makes it a “better” foundation for ethical theorizing. Williams’ critique of guilt rests on the assertion that guilt implies a “characterless” moral self, a criticizing self that remains distinct from the rest of one’s desires, needs, and self-image. He also agrees that guilt is what directs us towards the victims of our actions, so that we can make reparations. But, he argues, that is all that guilt can do; it cannot by itself “rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live. Only shame can do that, because it embodies conceptions of what one is and of how one is related to others” (95). In this way, shame can “understand” guilt and actually subsumes it, whereas modern ideas attempt to separate guilt from shame in a way that falsely represents real ethical experience. Guilt also presupposes an objective or transcendent moral law that, along with the “characterless moral self,” remains distinct from the real social world. Guilt thus implies a reductive either/or: the rational, criticizing self apprehends the moral law and can choose either obedience or disobedience. Shame, on the other hand, embeds the

individual in the complex field of human, social relations, and implies a more nuanced ethical situation which requires ongoing negotiation rather than an absolute law. Williams thus makes explicit the contending views of selfhood at the core of arguments about the “superiority” of shame or guilt:

the [characterless moral self] can be separated from everything that a person contingently is—in itself, the criticizing self is simply the perspective of reason or morality. The idea of the characterless self is implicit, too, in the original motive for the critique. If I have acquired my values and outlook through mere contingency, from the way I have grown up and, more generally, from what has happened to me, then—the argument went—it is as though I have been brainwashed. But who is the already existing self that is brainwashed by such a process? It can only be, once more, the characterless self. In truth, however, it is not that such a self is misled or blinded by the mere process of being socialized; one’s actual self, rather, is constructed by that process. (159)

What we might call the “Platonic fallacy” of the self (although Williams places the blame equally on Christianity, and, for our specifically post-Enlightenment misconceptions, on Kant), therefore, lies at the centre of our ideas of moral guilt and shame, and it is this fallacy that Williams rejects in favour of a concept of selfhood that is contingent, socially constructed, and socially embedded:

In not isolating a privileged conception of moral guilt, and in placing under a broader conception of shame the social and psychological structures that were near to what we call “guilt,” the Greeks, once again, displayed realism, truthfulness, and a beneficent neglect. . . . The conception of the moral self as characterless leaves only a limited positive role to other people in one’s moral life. Their reactions should not influence one’s moral conclusions, except by assisting reason or illumination. (95)

Williams also emphasizes the profound differences between the existential orientations of guilt and shame. The shame ethos of Greek tragedy is preferable because it “represents human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible

to human agency and in itself is not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations” (164). In this way, we moderns have much more in common with the ancient Greeks than we may think; certainly, for Williams, shame ethics are much better suited to our contemporary existential situation than guilt ethics. Like the heroic Greeks, we

know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities. . . . In important ways, we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime. More particularly, we are like those who, from the fifth century and earlier, have left us traces of a consciousness that had not yet been touched by Plato’s or Aristotle’s attempts to make our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible. (164)

These broad, philosophical reflections offered by Williams are, I would argue, representative of recent thinking on shame and guilt, and elucidate the underlying assumptions that guide contemporary debates on the issues. Positing the relation between shame and guilt in terms of the difference between understanding the moral self as embodied versus characterless is also apt, although I will argue that it is precisely the “characterlessness” of guilt that makes it a valuable ethical concept.

Margaret Visser is another classicist who attempts to clarify the relationship between shame, honour, and guilt; like Williams, Visser too compares the ethical situations of the ancients and the moderns. But in fundamental disagreement with Williams, Visser argues that, to the extent that we do rely on the same “basic conceptions” as the Greeks, we are at risk of sliding

into an ethically problematic fatalism.<sup>37</sup> Visser's book, *Beyond Fate*, consists of her 2002 Massey lecture series; it addresses a general audience and is strongly polemical (but no more so than Williams' book), as Visser presents a wide-ranging critique of both contemporary culture and academia, and argues that only a reinvigorated belief in transcendence, and in particular the Christian ideals of love and forgiveness, can save Western culture from the morass of consumerism. But Visser's analysis of the cultural dynamics of honour is instructive regardless of her larger polemic: she offers an intelligent counterbalance to Williams' dream of a cultural history without Christianity, and brings together several key ideas that are relevant for my project.

Visser's discussion of honour and shame is a part of her critique of the fatalistic thinking that she sees becoming endemic in contemporary culture. She begins this discussion by considering ways in which our metaphors for time can influence the way we think about ourselves, about human possibilities and morality. Fatalism is often expressed through diagrammatic metaphors, in which time is imagined spatially, as a line or as a circle. Time imagined spatially "makes one's fate into a thing, a lifespan applied to but separate from the person who has to live it, like the road a person cannot but walk. Fate is bestowed like an object" (12). Thinking about time and fate in terms of diagrams and lines, moreover, lends itself to thinking about the human person in terms of an outline, a boundary that may imprison or protect—the ideally inviolable area allotted to each person.

---

<sup>37</sup> See also Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions; Hiding From Humanity: Shame, Disgust and the Law*. Nussbaum writes about the role of shame in law, but was also trained as a classicist, and, like Visser, is deeply concerned about the ways in which shame but also disgust impede our ability as a society to defend justice and human rights. But Nussbaum, unlike Visser, critiques ethical shame from the perspective of secular liberalism.

Such an image, of one's life as following a linear path and of one's self as an area bounded by a line, Visser contends, "is essentially flat" (20); it lacks a vertical dimension that would allow us to imagine worlds or selves that do not yet exist but that could. More importantly, the circle enclosing one's inviolable self can become constraining. Trapped within a boundary or traversing a two-dimensional path, we may become unable to imagine a way out of or beyond the status quo.

Visser points out that, to a large extent, we owe these spatial metaphors to the fatalism of the ancient Greeks. The Greek idea of *moira* encapsulates simultaneously the idea of life as a line and of the self as an outline. The word *moira* derives from a verb meaning both to receive as one's portion and to be divided from: "the portion is area, divided from other portions by lines. *Moros* in Greek means fate (like *moira*) or death. . . . It is the metaphor of a rope or path or line that makes it possible for portion (area) and death (a moment or dot in time) to be linked the same concept: fate" (35). *Moira* as portion, in turn, brings together the ideas of time and self as fate with the classical notion of honour. *Moira* or fate indicates the outlines demarcating one's portion, but *timé* or honour constitutes the measure of that portion. As Visser explains, the

Greek word *moira* could also mean a piece of meat, cut from a whole roast . . . The piece represented one's rank within the group, how much one counted. . . . In these images . . . there is only a limited amount—of money, of jobs, of dinner, and then, when the diagram is used to describe social relations, of honour—to go around. . . . Fatalistic thinking insists always upon the defining outline, upon "that's all there is." (35-6)

The diagram of fate and the diagram of the self thus form a picture of the social world that is "a jigsaw of contiguous identities. . . . Each area, surrounded by a line, is a part of the whole. It is jammed up against—indeed formed out of



the lines surrounding—other pieces, other fates. Each area simultaneously represents the honour—the *amount* of honour—permitted to the human being” (37). To claim greater honour, or a larger portion, is to diminish the portions of those around you.<sup>38</sup> Such diminution is called shame. The key idea here is that, in this schema, a moral wrong diminishes the victim rather than the perpetrator; the one who moves his own boundary line outward aggrandizes himself by violating another. The social consensus might be that such aggrandizement is morally wrong, but the violator gains in power nonetheless, in stock of honour, while the victim is humiliated. This is, thus, another way of approaching the idea that in shame ethics, guilt follows shame. The sense of being physically reduced in shame is correlative with the sensation of vertigo described by Lynd; or, rather, one’s perception of reality is suddenly undercut (the ground gives way beneath one’s feet) as a direct result of the experience of diminution. The spatially conceived area of one’s self is no longer what it was, but the overall structure of human relations, the jigsaw, is altered too. Diagrammatic or fatalistic thinking thus reifies human identity, making it possible to calculate and quantify the worth of one person in comparison with another, and the units of measurement used are varying degrees of honour and shame.

---

<sup>38</sup> The work of William Ian Miller is also relevant here. Miller is a legal scholar by training who has written extensively on honour and shame as well as interrelated concepts such as humiliation and revenge, both in Old Norse literature and from a more general, cultural anthropology perspective. With Visser, he observes that honour is, “as a matter of social mathematics, acquired at someone else’s expense. When yours [goes] up, someone else’s [goes] down” (*Bloodtaking and Peacemaking in Saga Iceland* 30). See also Miller’s *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort and Violence*, which includes a very astute discussion of honour in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Eye for an Eye*, which explores the concepts underlying theories of justice in honour cultures.

Visser explores another danger of fatalistic thinking in the close connection between honour and vengeance. That vengeance and cycles of reciprocal violence often plague societies that are “deeply invested in honour and shame” has been well-established by historians and anthropologists alike (38). As we have seen, Pitt-Rivers observes the imperative of violence in Mediterranean societies, where “to leave an affront unavenged is to leave one’s honour in a state of desecration and [is] therefore equivalent to cowardice” (26). Similarly, William Ian Miller discusses the ubiquity of reciprocal violence in Saga Iceland, where competition for honour was, “for people of self-respect, coterminous with social existence itself” (31). Miller notes, “it was by getting even that one established the inviolability of one’s honor, that is, by getting even, paradoxically, one person reasserted superiority relative to the other” (302). While Pitt-Rivers and Miller emphasize honour and competition as means of organizing the social hierarchy, Visser also points out the social chaos—sometimes mythical, sometimes historical—associated with unchecked vengeance. The model, she writes,

was that of invasion, despoiling by an enemy, occupation—and its result, its ineluctable result, was warfare. . . . If a man, then, whose honour had been reduced could not take it back from his attacker, he looked elsewhere for a replacement. He invaded—shamed, reduced—some other man’s honour instead, adding that, of course, to his own. And so the trouble spread, like a raging fire or boat crashing against boat in a tempest at sea: both images were used to describe this horrifying spread of disorder and destruction. (96-7)

The disorder, or the threat thereof, was so horrifying, in fact, that the Greeks imagined special punishments for those guilty of transgressing the boundaries of *moira*—those who sought more honour than was their due. The transgression committed in *hubris*, however, is not against a particular victim (the

shamed) but against the social and cosmic order itself. It was not so much a question of moral wrongdoing in a Christian sense but of infecting the social order with contagious violence, as each individual tries to recover his lost honour at the expense of his neighbour. The Furies, Visser points out, were mythological figures who enforced the dividing lines of fate: “they saw to it that vengeance was carried out for crimes that were thought of as not only shameful but also polluting. The function of the Furies was to keep categories clear, which is to say unmixed, unpolluted” (52). Shame *is* the infection that is spread through these polluting crimes, and the violence that rips through the social order like a raging fire is a response to the spread of shame, rather than constituting the contagion itself.

### Shame and Sacrifice

The crimes that are considered fatally polluting are those that break archetypal taboos: incest, patricide, sacrilege. These are the same crimes that signal, for René Girard, the scapegoat mechanism, and Visser quite rightly draws a parallel between the Furies and Girard’s theory of violence (*Beyond Fate* 54). Girard, like Douglas, applies an anthropological approach to the study of religion.<sup>39</sup> But, like Visser, Girard approaches the comparative study of religion

---

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Klawans, who highly esteems Douglas and is profoundly critical of Girard, sums up their differences this way:

while Douglas is an anthropologist, speaking about what various peoples do (or did), Girard is a literary critic, analyzing first and foremost the myths that various peoples have composed. . . . Where Douglas seeks to understand the symbolism and function of purity systems by placing them in their social contexts, Girard takes his cue from Freud and Lévi-Strauss, and seeks to uncover the fundamental idea that lies behind all sacrificial rituals, . . . [and] where *Purity and Danger* seeks to rehabilitate purity rituals from the

with the ultimate aim of doing Christian apologetics. According to Girard, the primordial myth of the scapegoat underlies all of human culture and religion. When the conflict that is generated by the competition for the limited supply of honour, or mimetic rivalry—boat crashing against boat in a tempest—reaches a crisis point and threatens to destroy the social order from within, the group turns and unites against a single victim. The victim always bears one or more of the traditional marks of the scapegoat: physical disability, ethnic or religious minority, kingship—the scapegoat is typically the outsider *or* the supreme insider, who is also marginal vis-à-vis the group. The victim is then charged with one or a variety of the archetypal polluting crimes, and expelled or killed, thus purging the group of its violent frenzy and drawing it together against a common enemy. Girard argues that whether or not the victim has actually slept with his mother or killed his father is beside the point. The victim is blamed because what Girard calls “false guilt” has been attributed to him: the group sincerely believes that he alone is responsible for the divine judgment (or the vengeance of the Furies) raining down in the form of plague, failed crops, chaos in the streets. These events are attributed specifically to the polluting presence of the scapegoat, and the violent sacrifice that ensues is meant to appease the angry deity and restore social and natural order. Girard’s apologetics come in when he compares the scapegoat mechanism evident in all myths to the gospel narratives, which for Girard are the only texts in human history to reveal fully the innocence of the sacrificial victim. “Texts of persecution” are those which record the sacrifice of the victim from the

---

slanders heaped upon them, *Violence and the Sacred* is nothing short of an indictment of sacrificial rituals. (*Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple* 22)

self-justifying perspective of the group, and thus occlude the truth of the victim's innocence and even the group's involvement in the violence. In contrast, for Girard, Christian revelation is essentially a kind of hermeneutic that allows us to deconstruct the myths that disguise violent persecution and protect the perpetrators of violence from the truth about themselves. The gospels in particular record the event of sacrificial violence from the perspective of the victim, exposing the guilt of the group and the true source of violence in human psychology, rather than divine retribution or the polluting presence of the outsider.

Girard talks about the perpetrators and victims of sacrificial violence in terms of guilt and innocence, and does not explicitly distinguish between guilt and shame. In fact, the collective belief in the *guilt* of the scapegoat is of paramount importance for Girard's theory: according to the mob, in Girard's narrative, the victim really has committed these deity-provoking crimes, and that is the justification for committing violence against him.<sup>40</sup> Visser's discussion clarifies the distinction between guilt and shame in this regard, and suggests (implicitly, for Visser does not herself make this claim) an important qualification to Girard's theory. In the classical model of honour-bound social relations, an individual's status is measured by the amount of honour he possesses; and yet to transgress the

---

<sup>40</sup> Girard's discussion of the historical phenomenon on the one hand, and his analysis of "persecution texts" on the other, stress different aspects of the group's psychology. Often, in cultural, religious or literary representations of sacrificial violence, the group's responsibility is occluded to such a degree that the death of the victim is represented as (for example) an accident or as the result of divine intervention. That is, we do not *see* the attempt to justify the violence in persecution texts because sometimes the fact of the violence is itself denied. This point becomes crucial when we come to Chaucerian texts that describe or represent sacrificial violence. In the *Prioress's Tale*, for example, the punishment of the Jews is actually exaggerated rather than downplayed, and is issued not by the hand of God but by the provost—the representative of earthly justice.

boundary lines around one's spatially conceived self (in the attempt to increase one's honour) is a polluting act because it threatens the stability of the entire "jigsaw" of social relations—the ideal social order enforced by danger beliefs. The ethical significance of the transgression, therefore, lies in its shamefulness. The person who commits the act of over-reaching or taboo-breaking would also be considered guilty of the act, but the fact of guilt does not bear on the objective, ethical structure of honour. Visser clarifies the distinction further in her discussion of the conclusion of the *Oresteia*:

from that point on, murdering someone could begin to be thought of as breaking . . . a written rule, rather than piercing physical and categorical boundaries so that automatic pollution, in the shape of filthy and spreading disorder and confusion, would ensue. (54-55)

The difference between breaking a written rule, which incurs guilt, and the piercing of physical and categorical boundaries, which creates shame (for the transgressor, for the victims of the act, for any bystander close enough to the shame to be tainted by association) is one that Girard does not take into account. Rather, Girard considers the modern judicial system to be a version of the codes of prohibitions and taboos that structure "primitive" societies. Both share the aim of keeping the peace, as it were, by placing limits on mimetic desire; both seek to replace non-legal prohibitions brought about through rivalry with legal prohibitions, which "are addressed to everyone or to whole categories of people, and [which] do not, as a general rule, suggest to us that we are 'inferior' as individuals" (*Things Hidden* 296). But the question of guilt that lies at the centre of the modern concept of law assumes that the autonomous individual constitutes the basic unit of society, and that the legal code is established on the grounds of

human reason and social expediency. This is a secular parallel to the Christian understanding of guilt, which also assumes that the individual alone, endowed with God-given reason and conscience, is responsible for his or her sins—guilt cannot be contagious—and that punishment for guilt consists in the individual’s (largely self-imposed) alienation from God. Thus, it is more accurate to consider the scapegoat phenomenon an act of shaming—of casting shame upon the victim—rather than a collective belief in the guilt of the scapegoat. Because it is “embodied,” shame is experienced as a tangible thing—a stain, an infection, a physical burden—and so it can be displaced onto another, and purged through the sacrifice of a scapegoat, in a way that guilt cannot.<sup>41</sup>

We are now in a position to return to the question of the causal relation between shame and sacrifice. We have traced the phenomenology of shame at the site of human consciousness and the development of self, in the painful process of differentiation and the recognition of a fundamental inadequacy, in conjunction with the idea or illusion that one ought to be adequate, sufficient, whole and

---

<sup>41</sup> I do not mean to imply here that I accept Girard’s scapegoat theory, even with the modification I suggest, as an explanation for the origins of Western religion and culture—let alone *all* religion and culture. Girard’s theory provides a remarkably fruitful explanation of certain aspects of human and social psychology, but I resist its totalizing scope, especially in the sense that it reduces religious expression and ritual solely to means of controlling violence.

As Mary Douglas argues, while the Greek rite of *pharmakos* involves the punitive aspect on which Girard focuses, in which the victim “is a representative of the evil that is being expelled [and] carries the blame and guilt with him,” the scapegoat ritual in Leviticus, for example, is different in nearly all salient points (*Jacob’s Tears* 42). The biblical scapegoat is, literally, the goat that escapes. In her reading of the Hebrew Bible, Douglas rejects an overly material understanding of sin as a physical burden. In her interpretation of the language describing the transfer of sins, the “goat which bears the sins of the congregation would, by having them transferred to itself, simply lift them off, blot them out, remove or eliminate them, etc. There would not be any scope for interpreting the rite as making the scapegoat materially carry the sins on its shoulders to the desert” (*Jacob’s Tears* 50). The scapegoat is not punished by exile in the desert but is set free, and thus parallels the figures of Ishmael and Esau (49-60). This is but one example of a religious rite that is elucidated in part by Girard’s theory but also exceeds it in terms of its complexity and possible resonances.

without desire. Secondly, we have traced the anthropology of shame on the social and political level, the manifestation of the ideal-I as an externalized “total form” in the material, social conception of self operative in shame culture, or what I propose to call shame ethics. Girard’s insight into the mimetic nature of desire, and thus the competitive, aggrandizing instinct expressed in shame, leads him to postulate a new understanding of Freud’s founding murder, that we can here restate again in terms of shame: it is not guilt for having killed the primal father that drives modern man’s unhappiness and also the tenuous order of civilization itself; it is rather shame that cannot be confronted, articulated or absolved that impels the need for compensatory violence against an innocent victim. The fundamental conflation of the material and the ethico-spiritual that makes it possible to make good one’s name with one’s body and that experiences insult or violation as physical diminution also makes it necessary to preserve the integrity of one’s spatially conceived ideal-I by means of expurgation and sacrifice. The alleviation of shame requires sacrifice, a pound of flesh, or at the very least, the exclusion or forcible expulsion of one who is imputed to be the source of pollution. If such externalization is not possible, shame can be alleviated by self-inflicted punishment too. The key is that propitiating blood must be shed, in literal sacrifice or the figurative sacrifice enacted in contempt and humiliation, in suicide, in banishment, or self-mutilation: this is the economy of sacrifice.



## Literary Shame

Girard, Douglas, Visser, and Williams position their work in relation to the anthropological approach to shame and guilt. In recent literary and cultural studies, however, anthropological research seems to have fallen off the radar screen entirely, and despite much evidence to the contrary, the idea that shame has been under-theorized in comparison with guilt continues to hold sway. Indeed, far from a guilt bias, a comparable body of *current* psychoanalytic research on guilt simply does not exist; or rather, in clinical studies of the last twenty years, it is difficult to find research on guilt that does not also consider shame—but the converse does not hold true. At the same time, Piers's view of shame as a more "productive" emotion than guilt has gained much currency in philosophical and literary discussions. Consequently, in the past ten to fifteen years, a significant gap has opened up between the aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical interpretations of shame and guilt, on the one hand, and clinical research, on the other. Despite the work of psychoanalysts such as Frances Broucek, June Tangney, and Andrew Morrison, which tends to stress the special potency of shame in psychological disorders versus the relative benignity of guilt, cultural studies critics such as Elspeth Probyn, and literary scholars such as Ewan Fernie, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Noah Guynn continue to work out of an earlier, Freudian paradigm which associates guilt with repressive morality, while at the same time claiming to correct Freud by exploring the complexities of shame. As Fernie contends rather boldly,

a consideration of shame hurries us towards the central and most puzzling questions of human nature and ontology. By working against the illusion

and the tyranny of the self, pointing the way to a Levinasian “otherwise than being,” it may also offer a key to ethics and the problem of happiness. (225)

Along similar lines, Elspeth Probyn argues for the ethical urgency of reconsidering shame. While guilt ethics tend to reinforce moral normativity, she argues, shame acts as an ethically disruptive force that “dramatically questions taken-for-granted distinctions between affect, emotion, biography, and the places in which we live our daily lives” (“Everyday Shame” 328). Probyn’s work exemplifies the remarkable enthusiasm that shame and affect theory seem to elicit from contemporary scholars. As with Sedgwick’s promotion of Tomkins, Probyn’s discussions of shame are part theoretical scholarship, part personal testimony, and part impassioned call for change in academic business as usual. Arguing for the potential of shame to prompt “self-transformation,” Probyn writes,

Sometimes [shame] leads to reactionary acts, sometimes it compels close inspection of how we live, and becomes the necessary force to catalyse an ethics of the everyday: “a visceral . . . commitment to more generous identities, responsibilities and connections. . . .” Let us be shameless in this project. (346)<sup>42</sup>

The phrase “ethics of the everyday” suggests the underlying opposition between shame and guilt on which Probyn’s argument rests, and recalls Williams’ distinction between the characterless moral self and the socially embedded moral self. While guilt ethics presuppose an objective moral law distinct from the

---

<sup>42</sup> Probyn quotes here from Connelly, “Brain Waves, Transcendental Fields, and Techniques of Thought” (21). See also Probyn’s book-length study, *Blush: Faces of Shame*, which combines autobiographical writing with psychological and sociological analysis of different forms of shame. Here, Probyn develops further her central argument that shame, and specifically shame understood as a biological affect, “gives us a way to rethink the types of oppositions that have become entrenched in popular debate” (xiv).

individuals subject to it, shame ethics are rooted in immediate, lived experience: in our bodily reactions, in our interpersonal relationships, in the complex and ever-changing fabric of social life.

With the publication of Gail Kern Paster's *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* and Ewan Fernie's *Shame in Shakespeare*, early modern scholars have been alerted to "shame's importance," in literature, theory, and ethics (Fernie 5). In medieval literary studies, too, what I would call a pervasive receptivity towards shame, whether it is theorized explicitly or not, increasingly characterizes academic inquiry. Foucault-influenced theories and discourses "of the body," an interest in the incongruous, seemingly perverse or grotesque—in short, in areas once considered "shameful"—have become normative in all areas of literary studies. Such interest both coincides with and represents a departure from feminist, queer, and postcolonial criticism of recent decades (also informed by Foucault) that have sought to expose and deconstruct the political mechanisms of shame, of which racial and gender minorities have been the victims. Thus, while Fernie complains that the treatment of shame in late-twentieth century scholarship is "typically one-sided, wholly missing the . . . ecstasy of shame as enlightenment or salvation," it would seem that scholarship of the early twenty-first has made strides in this direction. So much so, in fact, that Judith Halberstam, reflecting on "Shame and White Gay Masculinity" in 2005, cautions against an overly enthusiastic *embrace* of shame in queer studies, citing with some concern several influential projects in which shame figures prominently as "the deep emotional reservoir on which adult queer

sexuality draws” ( 221).

Similarly, historians Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel have charted the progression from “old medievalism” to “new medievalism” in terms of the “rediscovery of alterity”: a shift from an early-mid twentieth-century emphasis on continuity between medieval and modern to a rejection of that view as humanistic and sanitized. Recent trends in medieval studies seek to “demodernize” and “defamiliarize” the Middle Ages in a way that is reminiscent of the romantic fascination of nineteenth-century medievalism:

Postmodern tendencies may subvert canonical periods of modernity such as the Renaissance, but for the Middle Ages they strangely reassert an older tradition of the grotesque, intolerant character of the epoch, a dark irrationality that popular opinion never quite abandoned but that in scholarship marks a radical turn in contemporary historical approaches. (Freedman and Spiegel 693)

This “radical turn” coincides with what I am identifying as a surging interest in shame: while it is hardly news to point out that the historically marginal has for some time occupied the centre of academic attention, it has been rarely noted that historical sources of shame have also become hot topics for investigation, to the point that we may identify an enthusiastic “shamelessness” in contemporary studies. Freedman and Spiegel, writing in 1998, point out that “the most popular topics in medieval cultural studies in America at the moment . . . are death, pus, contagion, defilement, blood, abjection, disgust, humiliation, castration, pain, and autopsy” (699-700). Anecdotal evidence suggests that this trend has only intensified in the past decade (entering search terms “death,” “desire,” and “abjection” into the MLA Bibliography database results in close to 2500 titles for the past seven years alone). The renewed interest in shame, therefore, is not

merely to refine definitions and theories: it is also manifest in a pervasive curiosity—some might say a morbid curiosity—about the especially excruciating or potentially disgusting aspects of being embodied.

The divergence from anthropology and the enthusiasm for shame stems in part from the influence of Silvan Tomkins's theory of the affects on cultural and literary studies of shame. Tomkins's theory of the biological basis of affects, which he posits as a set of nine "sub-cortical programs," was intended to complement Freudian drive theory and to trace the connections between affect and other mechanisms such as cognition, perception, memory, and motor functions. Tomkins's affect theory, unlike Freud's theory of the drives, is consistently materialist, appealing to purely physiological or even autonomic functions to account for affective experience—without the theoretical encumbrances that accompany the primal family myth of cultural origins. But one of the most important aspects of Tomkins's theory for psychology is the way that it accounts for affective experience independently of cognition, as well as the relationship between affects and drives. One of the main weaknesses in biologically based affect theories prior to Tomkins was their failure to account for pre-cognitive emotions, emotions that seem to occur for no reason, rapid changes in emotional states, and the emotional expressions of young infants (Demos 18-20). According to Tomkins, the correlated responses involving "the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalizations" are not merely the physical manifestation of emotion

or affect; rather these responses *are* affect (Demos 19).<sup>43</sup> An infant cries, for example, whether it is hungry, thirsty, lonely, cold or hot. As Tomkins explains,

Any affect may have any “object.” This is the basic source of complexity of human motivation and behavior. This multiplicity of affect investment is guaranteed both by the innate pluralism of activators of affect, by the fact that any moving object, or a sex object, or a sudden thought may equally well activate excitement and by the pluralism of activators which may be learned. (*AIC* 1.347)

The innate pluralism of affect activators—the fact that, biologically speaking, “any moving object” has the potential to excite, disgust, shame, arouse fear or interest—effectively frees human motivation and behaviour from the limitations and reductionism of the object-based drive model and the primal family drama. In this way, for his enthusiastic supporters, Tomkins’s theory not only answers many questions, it also opens up many new horizons and possibilities for psychoanalytic imaginings and practice.

Tomkins’s discussion of shame in relation to guilt is particularly relevant here. He first distinguishes between shame as an “auxiliary affect” and shame as a “theoretical construct.” Tomkins argues that shame differs from guilt only as a theoretical construct; at the theoretical level, we may distinguish between “feelings” of inferiority and awareness of wrong-doing. But in terms of affect, guilt is one of several variants of shame, and although failing to succeed “feels” very different from hurting someone, the difference lies only in object and source: “the component affect is nonetheless identical in both cases” (*Exploring Affect*

---

<sup>43</sup> Of these correlated sets of responses, facial expression has the received the most attention by researchers studying human emotions, going all the way back to Darwin’s 1872 work *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*. More recent studies include Demos, *Facial Expression of infants and Toddlers*; and Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Understanding Faces and Feelings*.

398). Whether we cognitively deem an experience to be shame, guilt, discouragement, or shyness, the affect in each case is shame.<sup>44</sup> Shame is an auxiliary affect because it depends upon the positive affect of interest-excitement; that is, shame is experienced only after interest-excitement has been activated: “the innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy” (*Exploring* 399). One has the capacity to experience shame, in other words, because one desires approval, contact, communication, or belonging, and the interest-excitement that precedes shame is only partially reduced because in shame “the individual wishes to resume his or her commerce with the exciting state of affairs, to reconnect with the other, to recapture the relationship that existed before the situation turned problematic” (*Exploring* 400). Shame as an affective state that combines vulnerability and desire distinguishes it from disgust (in which the “bad other” is spit out) and what Tomkins calls “dissmell” (in which the “bad other” is kept at a distance). Morally, when the shame affect is interpreted as guilt, it also differs from the moral varieties of disgust and dissmell such as outrage. Because guilt is a variant of the shame affect, it requires a continuing interest or enjoyment which is only partially or temporarily attenuated. Thus, shame “is experienced as guilt when positive affect is attenuated by virtue of moral normative sanctions experienced as conflicting with what is exciting or enjoyable” (*Exploring* 404). In other words, guilt understood as a biological affect is merely the clash between what one desires and what is permitted, or the

---

<sup>44</sup> As Tomkins explains, shyness “is about strangeness of the other; guilt is about moral transgression; shame is about inferiority; discouragement is about temporary defeat; but the core affect in all four is identical, although the coassembled perceptions, cognitions, and intentions may be vastly different” (*Exploring* 400).

frustration of desire by external sanctions or pressures. In this sense, although his definition of shame is impressively complex and nuanced, Tomkins's understanding of guilt is not entirely different from Freud's, as guilt becomes, once again, a repressive force that impedes "natural" enjoyment and desire.<sup>45</sup> And, on the other hand, while Freud conflates the two by making shame a variant of guilt, Tomkins simply reverses this and makes guilt a variant of shame.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers the most comprehensive and impressive adaptation of Tomkins's theory to the pursuits of cultural studies.<sup>46</sup> For Sedgwick, it is precisely the unerring materialism of Tomkins's account that offers a welcome departure from the well-worn assumptions of contemporary theory ("Shame" 496).<sup>47</sup> At the top of her list of "what theory knows today," Sedgwick identifies the following, widely-held assumption:

The distance of any [account of human beings or cultures] from a biological basis is assumed to correlate almost precisely with its potential for doing justice to difference (individual, historical, cross-cultural), to contingency, to performative force, and to the possibility of change. ("Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" 496)

Sedgwick challenges this tendency towards a reductive, too-easy antinaturalism in theory-as-usual, and explores the possibilities in Tomkins's work for disrupting

---

<sup>45</sup> Tomkins's distinction between moral shame as guilt and moral disgust or outrage is helpful, however, in that it allows us to recognize the difference between the reparative impulse of guilt and the totalizing rejection involved in disgust: shame as guilt "is in contrast to moral outrage, moral disgust, or moral dissmell. In the extreme case immorality may be judged 'beneath contempt,' 'inhuman,' or 'animalistic.' All such feelings and evaluations differ from shame as 'guilt' in totally and forever condemning what is judged immoral, whether by the self against another, or by the self against the self, as in 'I can never forgive myself for what I did'" (*Exploring* 404).

<sup>46</sup> Other "disciples" of Tomkins include, most notably, Paul Ekman (*Emotions Revealed: Understanding Faces and Feelings*); Donald Nathanson (*Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*); and Carroll Izard (*The Psychology of Emotions*).

<sup>47</sup> Sedgwick understands "theory" here "as a broad project that now spans the humanities and extends into history and anthropology; theory after Foucault and Greenblatt, after Freud and Lacan, after Lévi-Strauss, after Derrida, after feminism" ("Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" 496).



the by-now automatic alignment of naturalism with essentialism and thus with cultural hegemonies. Sedgwick acknowledges the “highly suspect scientism” of affect theory, but argues that we would do well to overlook the marks of Tomkins’s “technological moment” in order to grasp the radical implications of the biological basis of affect (497). Sedgwick and Frank note Tomkins’s appeal for self psychology in its project of moving beyond Freudian repression and the Oedipal Complex, but they argue that appropriation by mainstream psychoanalysis can only obscure “how sublimely alien Tomkins’s own work remains to any project of narrating the emergence of a core self” (502). Sedgwick and Frank trace Tomkins’s intrinsic anti-essentialism to the crucial insight that affects have multiple—indeed, potentially unlimited—objects. In this regard, Tomkins offers a radical alternative to Freudian drive theory, in which, for example, the sex drive is understood as “an on/off matter whose two possibilities are labeled express or repress” (“Shame” 504). By replacing the binary of sexuality (or hunger, or aggression) with the multiplicity of affective response, Tomkins’s work remains not only alien to the idea of a core self, but even “resistant”—and thus resistant also to “heterosexist teleologies” (“Shame” 503).<sup>48</sup>

Tomkin’s account of shame interests Sedgwick because it “generates and legitimates the place of identity—the question of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity space the

---

<sup>48</sup> Technically, however, Tomkins understands the Freudian drives and affects to function simultaneously: indeed, much of our emotional life is generated by their conflicts and mutual “amplifications.” See the chapter on “Drive-Affect Interactions” in Volume 1 of *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*.

standing of an essence” (*Touching Feeling* 94).<sup>49</sup> Shame makes it possible, in other words, to achieve what has always seemed an unattainable ideal: the theorizing of identity on the basis of pure difference, or lack, or abjection. Shame

is an affect that delineates identity—but delineates it without defining it or giving it content. Shame, as opposed to guilt, is a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but what one is. . . . Shame is a bad feeling attaching to what one is: one therefore is something, in experiencing shame. The place of identity, the structure “identity,” marked by shame’s threshold between sociability and introversion, may be established and naturalized in the first instance through shame. (*Queer Performativity* 12)

Shame, that is, posits identity as material (“what one is”) rather than moral (“what one does”) but avoids biological reductionism and, above all, the circularity of the Foucauldian “repressive hypothesis”: the mode of critique and identity politics that ends up enforcing and reproducing the dualisms it opposes.<sup>50</sup> By contrast, “shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove” (*Touching* 38). Rather than constituting one term in an oppositional binary, shame is itself the interface between self and other, is itself “a form of communication” (*Touching* 36).

Sedgwick thus offers some of the most vivid and compelling writing on affect and ethics in recent decades. But in the enthusiasm about the bodily, performative, and revelatory aspects of shame, there is a danger of losing touch with ethical realities: the positive, transformative value of shame is only maintained, I argue, when it is kept in a careful balance with guilt. Simply to

---

<sup>49</sup> For more discussion of shame as performative, see Chapter 8, below.

<sup>50</sup> For Sedgwick’s critique of the repressive hypothesis, see “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” and, more recently, “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes.”

invert the perceived guilt bias in the hopes of cultivating an “ethics of the everyday” risks neglecting those aspects of our ethical lives—those connected to guilt—that impose necessary limits on the power of shame to victimize, and which have the potential to paralyze rather than liberate: history tells us that the “ethics of the everyday” often become a vehicle for the banality of evil. In her recent book *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*, Ruth Leys raises critical questions about “shame’s rise to prominence” in theory and cultural studies and she does so specifically in regard to Tomkins and Sedgwick’s work.<sup>51</sup> Leys’s critique runs parallel to my own in that she argues that what is

crucially at stake in the current tendency to replace guilt with shame is an impulse to displace questions about our moral responsibility for what we do in favor of more ethically neutral or different questions about our personal attributes. . . . Shame theory displaces the focus of attention from action to self by insisting that even if shame can be connected to action, it does not have to be, since shame is an attribute of personhood before the subject has done anything, or because he is incapable of acting meaningfully. (131)

Indeed, the tendency to replace guilt with shame is not only an impulse to displace questions about responsibility in favour of personal attributes and identity, but more specifically, to replace responsibility with *desire* as the key motivating force in ethics. The question becomes, *not* what do I owe to other people and how should I respond to them, but what excites or interests *me*, what are the forces that shape or obstruct the course of my desire?

Leys also criticizes Sedgwick’s position on the “autotelism” of the affects

---

<sup>51</sup> Leys is the only scholar working in the humanities (of whom I am aware) who questions the primacy of shame from the perspective of ethics. Martha Nussbaum does so in regard to legal ethics, but specifically in terms of the legal status of shaming and humiliation tactics, which is quite different from what Sedgwick is proposing. Nussbaum’s main target is the American political right and she does not take on the challenge of cultural studies and critical theory as does Leys.

and shame in particular. For Sedgwick, the fact that shame is “non-teleological,” or an end in itself (auto-telos), carries positive political implications because it suggests a radical contingency in the subject-object relation and our “tendency to be wrong about our objects and wishes” (Leys 149); it also undermines the “heterosexist teleologies” implicit in Freudian drive theory. But despite Sedgwick’s obvious commitment to the social and political world—indeed, despite the fact that sociality seems built into the shame experience—Leys argues that Tomkin’s account of the affects as autotelic actually gives primacy “to the feelings of a subject without a psychology and without an external world” (Leys 148).<sup>52</sup> Not only does Leys find that this model is not supported by the clinical data (a fact which, she acknowledges, likely would not be of much concern to Sedgwick), but, more importantly, that it seriously undermines the possibilities for understanding human responsibility—a point that takes on deeper significance in light of Leys’s work on shame and guilt in trauma in general and in the trauma of the Holocaust in particular. At stake in the valorization of shame and the critique of guilt, writes Leys, “is a shift of attention away from questions of human agency to questions about the attributes of a subject, a subject that can incidentally attach itself to objects but which has no essential relation or intention toward them” (150). Although Leys does not cite the clinical studies on the connection between shame and narcissism (which would be highly relevant for her case), the point is that the autotelism of shame renders it literally and ethically

---

<sup>52</sup> Leys comments, “what is most interesting about the theory is the way it make it a delusion to say that you are happy because your child got a job, or sad because your mother died, for the simple reason that your child’s getting a job or your mother’s death are merely triggers for your happiness or sadness, which are themselves innate affect programs that could in principle be triggered by anything else” (147).

self-centered.

Another way of stating the ethical problem that follows from the valorization of shame is to compare the psychological or affective understanding of shame with the anthropological analysis of honour as an ethical system in which shame feelings predominate over guilt feelings. What is missing from the picture in cultural studies' appropriation of the idea of biologically-based shame is any sustained consideration of the conceptual relationship between the individual experience of shame and the broader cultural patterns that play a large role in determining who feels shame when and why, who is the shamed and who is the one who shames—in short, the relationship between the experience of shame and structures of honour and political power. One of the great ironies of the recent mobilization of shame for the purposes of liberating identity from fixed essences and moralisms is that shame ethics *in practice* (in our own culture as much as any other)—ethical systems in which failure and wrong-doing elicit shame more readily than guilt, or in which the assignation of guilt *follows* from the assignation of shame—tend to be highly traditional and hierarchical, emphasizing duty and social role over individual freedom. Shame indeed “generates and legitimates the place of identity at the origin of the impulse to the performative . . . without giving that identity space the standing of an essence,” but performative identity emptied of essence—the positing of identity as pure difference—is a theoretical precept only; in reality, this precept translates into an automatic absorption of identity by the social codes that dictate honour and shame. In other words, precisely because shame empties a socially constructed

identity of an internal essence that might oppose or resist—or, as Visser would say, *transcend*—when shame is posited as a *value* rather than something to be overcome, limited, kept in perspective in relation to one’s guilt or innocence—opposition and resistance, or agency of any kind, become constrained entirely by the social imperative to conform, to keep up appearances, to sacrifice (desire, need, the good of others) for the sake of one’s honour.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

Shame is a moral affect that emerges developmentally in the painful process of alienation and individuation, and is therefore the key affect in the formation of selfhood. As a result of this genesis, shame is mimetic, experienced as a physical, material reality, and, in turn, can be highly “contagious”: in this, shame bears a close resemblance to pollution beliefs. Similarly, shame ethics, the ethical mode in which shame is the primary affect encouraged and provoked in response to wrongdoing, tend to be highly concerned with keeping matter in its proper place, reinforcing social and physical boundaries, and what Kristeva calls the “self’s clean and proper body” (*Powers* 72). Likewise, moral transgression or calamity is imagined and experienced in shame ethics as the breakdown of differentiation—in Girardian terms, as a mimetic crisis—in the sense that the shame of the individual can result, if it is not expiated properly, in the fatal contamination of the entire order; moral disorder imagined as natural and physical

---

<sup>53</sup> Or, ironically, perhaps we feel free to champion the ethical value of shame only when we can take for granted a liberal society in which we are largely protected from political structures of shame by a legal system built around the concept of guilt and personal responsibility. On the dangers of shame and the law, see Martha Nussbaum (*Hiding from Humanity*).

disorder. The role that shame plays in keeping categories clear and distinct is reflected, on an individual and psychological level, in the fact that shame can be provoked by an almost infinite diversity of responses and experiences. These attributes of shame—mimetic, materialist, contagious—mean that shame often leads to sacrifice, whether in cultural terms as literal violence (the Girardian single victim mechanism), or in figurative terms as humiliation and ostracism. Shame cannot be forgiven, but often it can be expiated, balanced out, or mastered by violent substitution. Just as the loss of honour requires balancing through vengeance, so does shame require redress through sacrifice.

Despite this inherent connection between shame and violence, shame appeals to our current existential moment because it constitutes a foundation for ethical reasoning that does not rely on metaphysical absolutes (such as God or the moral law) which no longer seem philosophically tenable. As an ethical concept, shame does not rely upon (or call upon) a transcendent self; neither does it distinguish between acts and identity, and it marks identity not in relation to morality or teleology but in relation to embodiment and desire—or, in Tomkins' terms, interest-excitement. Shame designates moral wrongdoing not as *intrinsically* wrong but as wrong in the context of a particular relationship or social order, as an offense to other embodied, desiring selves. Finally, shame appeals to our increasing awareness that even as we have been liberated from metaphysics and morality, we are also constrained by the unavoidable realities of embodiment and desire: that we are so completely of this earth that we cannot gain an objective moral perspective over it; that we are, in some important ways,

determined by biology and culture, and thus fated to subjectivized ethics and power struggles.



### Chapter Three: Shame in Medieval Romance and Hagiography

In the previous chapter, we saw how recent theorists and critics in the humanities tend to favour shame as a theoretical foundation for understanding identity and ethics because they see it as more socially and psychologically realistic and productive than guilt. In this chapter, however, I look at representations of shame in medieval romance and hagiography and find a very different picture of the ethical implications of shame than the one offered by Bernard Williams and Eve Sedgwick. What this discrepancy suggests is that we can understand shame as a positive ethical force only if we emphasize its self-revelatory power to the neglect of its affective role in motivating the economy of sacrifice. If we attend to the *history* of shame, that is, we find grounds for a view of shame that is both mindful of its psychological potency and wary of its cultural effects. In romance, and especially the Arthurian world of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, shame is a dominant force in shaping chivalric identity and in punishing offences against chivalry, but it is also a key factor in the way in which the text inscribes a universe governed by fate and the tragic downfall of the Round Table. In the lives of the virgin martyrs, on the other hand, shame functions in a way that is very similar to the pollution beliefs studied by Mary Douglas: it acts as a means of policing the physical boundaries of the self, and is dramatized in the motif of threatened rape defied by the saints in their imitation of the humiliation and violent sacrifice of Christ. In both, therefore, we see the ways in which shame demands propitiating violence: either that of the knight seeking vengeance or against the virgin seeking eternal purity. In Malory, the fatalism that attends

shame is written into the legend's tragic structure; in the saints' lives, the fatalism of shame is not so much structural as it is thematic, in the sense that the pattern of purity and sacrifice suggests a dilemma that cannot be escaped except in death.

### Historizing Shame

In his discussion of the ways in which experiences and understandings of shame vary in different epochs, Ewan Fernie (*Shame in Shakespeare*) more or less conflates shame and guilt, and contends that less “shame is found in cultures with a debased view of the self; it is in societies where individual integrity and dignity is prized most highly that corruption and disgrace are most lamented” (24).<sup>1</sup> Distinguishing classical, medieval, and Renaissance notions of shame, Fernie argues that there is “a marked increase of shame between the medieval and Renaissance periods” (24). In Fernie's view, the dark religiosity of medieval guilt culture produced a sense of shame and guilt so pervasive that it ceased to be remarkable: both affects reflected the acknowledged condition of sinful humanity, “the atmosphere of the fallen world, rather than a personal disaster or tragedy” (Fernie 42). Again, comparing classical and Christian attitudes to shame, Fernie opposes the “man-centered” world of Homer, Sophocles, and Aeschylus to “the God-centered Middle Ages,” arguing that, for the classical hero, to suffer shame is to suffer devastating self-loss, but for the medieval, shame “is a mystic road to God,” the only honest and proper response to unmitigated sinfulness (35). A similar view of the medieval period is presented by historian Jean Delumeau in

---

<sup>1</sup> Fernie develops his definition of shame on the basis of Lynd and Lewis, et al., but nowhere does he explicitly distinguish between shame and guilt. When he does mention guilt at all, it is as an emphatic synonym: “shame and guilt” (see, for example, page 243).

his monumental study *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries* (1990). Delumeau also does not distinguish between shame and guilt, and he depicts the fourteenth century as witness to the birth of Catholic “scruple sickness,” and ruled by the *contemptus mundi* vision of life, suggesting an ethos of overwhelming gloom and anxiety. This picture of the Middle Ages (especially the High Middle Ages)—as modernity’s gothic and grotesque Other—makes it seem difficult indeed to study shame and guilt in terms of the psychoanalytic and anthropological approaches outlined above. In this sense, the “rediscovery of alterity” renders medieval subjectivities inaccessible and irrelevant to the project of theorizing shame and guilt.

And, to be sure, there are few, if any, medieval parallels to the dramatic spectacles of shame found in classical and Renaissance tragedy—Oedipus gouging out his own eyes, Shakespeare’s Richard II shattering his mirror-image in disgust and self-hatred—but the differences between these and medieval shame argue for rather than against the importance of further study. Girard and Lacan take as a prime example of the impossibility of desire the (French) medieval idea of courtly love; in the realm of English Arthurian romance, what we find is not so much a detailed anatomizing of desire, but a highly externalized world in which social relations are governed largely by the desire to win honour and the fear of incurring shame, and by the performative speech acts that confer honour and shame. The story told in romance is, among other things, the story of the individual or hero establishing, discovering, or somehow coming into his identity; the quest on which he embarks is often a quest to “find himself,” to test or prove

his moral and physical worth. Sometimes, this process of selfhood is bound up with great historical events, some decisive moment in the birth or fate of a nation, for instance; in other cases, the individual stands alone, chafing against the demands and expectations of the social order and challenging political authority. In either case, whether the fundamental impulse is conservative or counter-cultural, the quest constitutes a search for or a movement towards the realization of an ideal.<sup>2</sup> In the interplay between these essential features—the individual’s quest for identity and self-knowledge, his relationship with the social order and negotiation of social roles, and the idealism which acts as the driving force of the narrative—dynamics of honour and shame are central. Indeed, the hero’s identity, whether it is measured primarily as nationalistic destiny, chivalric knighthood, or as something else altogether, is largely synonymous with his honour. Conversely, as the hero encounters adversity on his quest, the possibility that he might fail to reach the ideal end is the possibility that he might be shamed. We might say that honour and shame are the primary impulses that motivate the hero to embark on his quest in the first place and to act in certain ways as the narrative progresses; they also designate the primary standards by which the hero’s conduct is measured by others—both the social world of the narrative and the reader or audience. Thus, the potency of the threat of being shamed is implicit in the

---

<sup>2</sup> These central features of medieval romance, especially in the Matters of France and Britain, are well-established. For a good general overview, see William Barron, *English Medieval Romance*. I am here simplifying a genre—or, as it is better termed (again, see Barron), a “mode”—that is, in fact, a multi-faceted composite of a wide range of literary traditions. Despite the differences between the various “Matters,” however, Barron also notes that, in terms of the romance mode, “the history of narrative literature from 1100 onwards appears coherent and progressive, changing in interests and values, rapidly evolving the expressive means of a new genre, but consistent in its ambivalent balance of ideal and reality, individual and social concerns, and its inherent challenge to the reader to measure them against his own values and experience” (209).

chivalric code itself: insofar as the code enshrines the ideals (courage, loyalty, largesse, *gentillesse*) that knightly identity is supposed to embody, it effectively establishes something akin to the ideal-I against which self-worth is measured.

### Chrétien de Troyes: Chivalric Shame and Identity

The dynamics of chivalric shame, and its relation to guilt, are represented with remarkable probity but also lightly ironic humour in Chrétien's romances, and later Middle English texts are the fortunate heirs of Chrétien's deft psychological insights.<sup>3</sup> *Érec et Énide* explores the dilemma of honour in the knight's conflicting military and marital duties. When the joys of wedded bliss distract Érec from the task of maintaining his knightly reputation, Énide overhears gossipers mocking her husband for his apparent uxoriousness. The story contains a fascinating scene in which Énide reminds her husband of his obligation to perform on the field by pretending to talk in her sleep so that she may avoid shaming him in a direct confrontation: in order to protect his honour, she must tell him, but in order to prevent his shame, she tries to prevent a situation in which she becomes a spectator of his failure. Érec, however, sees through the ruse and feels keenly the shame of his wife's awareness and the community's mockery. The rest of the narrative recounts the quest undertaken by the two together, during which the husband punishes the wife for her role in his shame and regains his honour both in her eyes and in the eyes of the community by performing feats of prowess. Despite Érec's outrageous mistreatment of a wife who is clearly and deeply

---

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of Chrétien's deployment of shame as a narrative and ideological device, see Sandra Pierson Prior, "The Love that Dare not Speak its Name: Displacing and Silencing the Shame of Adultery in *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*."

concerned for the honour he holds so dear, the story concludes with Érec's gracious forgiveness of Énide's "guilt": acknowledging that he has "tested" his wife "in every way," he reassures her that he loves her more than ever, and that, if her words offended him, he says, "I fully pardon and forgive you for both the deed and the word" (97). Guilt and forgiveness often function in this way in chivalric romance—in a complete reversal from the way that they ought according to Christian morality: rarely do we see a weaker knight, for instance, forgive a stronger one, and the *right* to forgive typically depends upon one's intact honour and status in the social hierarchy vis-à-vis the one who is guilty.<sup>4</sup>

*The Knight with the Lion* similarly represents the agony of shame that seems inextricable from the glory of knightly honour. Here, Chrétien revisits the conflict between "armes" and "amors" taken up in *Érec et Énide*, but from the opposing perspective: while Erec neglects to maintain his honour for the sake of his marriage, Yvain neglects his wife for the sake of prowess and glory in battle. But the delightfulness of the story and the aptness of its themes warrant closer analysis here; a brief summary of the plot also shows the extent to which considerations of honour and shame are central at nearly every juncture in the narrative. The story is composed of two main parts. In the first, Yvain sets out to find the knight who defends the mysterious spring and stone, and who defeated his cousin Calogrenant. Yvain boasts before the court that he will avenge his

---

<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, the relativizing force of the extratextual conditions in which the romance was meant to be heard or read: that is, the possibility that the problem of Érec's treatment of Énide was to be considered a problem by its courtly audience too, as a *demande d'amour* for example, mitigates the sense in which we can see this as affirming a reversal of Christian morality. In other words, it is possible that the story was meant to provoke a debate about whether or not Erec was justified in testing his wife, and hence whether she was right to tell him about the gossip in the first place.

cousin's shame. He does so, and is rewarded for his effort by winning the hand of the lady whose husband he killed. Happily married and charged with the responsibility of defending the stone himself, Yvain then decides to leave his wife and castle to seek adventure; he does this at the behest of Gawain, who reminds him of the dangers of a life of ease, and that his wife would no longer love him if he lost his reputation: "A man must be concerned about his reputation before all else! Break the leash and yoke and let us, you and me, go to the tourneys, . . . engage in combat, and joust vigorously, whatever it might cost you" (326). The lady allows him to go but makes him vow to return in a year's time; if he fails to return at the set date, she tells him, "the love I have for you will become hatred" (327). Yvain proceeds to win great honour at many tournaments, but forgets to return to his wife at the appointed time. When he initially realizes his mistake, it is a moment of silent agony, because the awareness of his guilt—his wrongdoing towards his wife—is trumped by his fear of shame, and so he does nothing:

King Arthur was seated in their midst when Yvain suddenly began to reflect; since the moment he had taken leave of his lady he had not been so distraught as now, for he knew for a fact that he had broken his word to her and stayed beyond the period set. With great difficulty he held back his tears, but shame forced him to repress them. (329)

But this self-realization is followed by a public accusation which makes his failure known to all; in this moment, his interior sense of guilt becomes an experience of shame. A messenger from the Lady enters the tent and proclaims Yvain "a cheat, a seducer, and a thief," and tells him that the lady no longer loves him. Only at this moment does Yvain react visibly to the knowledge of his misdeed:

He hated nothing so much as himself and did not know whom to turn to for comfort now that he was the cause of his own death. But he would rather lose his mind than fail to take revenge upon himself, who had ruined his own happiness. . . . Then such a great tempest arose in his head that he went mad; he ripped and tore at his clothing and fled across fields and plains, leaving his people puzzled and with no idea of where he could be. (330)

Thus begins the second part of the story, as Yvain performs his penitence in the forest “like a madman and a savage,” hunting wild animals and eating their raw flesh (330).<sup>5</sup> But at no point does Yvain consider his wife or her suffering directly: he hates himself for ruining his *own* happiness; he wants only to take revenge upon himself rather than try to make reparations to her. The initial moment of realizing his guilt, with its potential for reparative action, is thus lost in the torrent of shame that follows his public exposure. The image of the shamed man as madman or savage is also worth noting: shame divides consciousness against itself, and the sense of losing one’s self which produces the desire to become literally lost—to hide or even commit suicide—is here represented by the loss of Yvain’s reason and the regression to animal-like savagery.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Marc Pelen suggests an interesting take on the “madman” episode (“Madness in Yvain Reconsidered”). Pelen argues that the language of madness pervades the entire narrative, is used to describe nearly all of the characters, and that Yvain’s recovery or return to sanity is in fact the object of Chrétien’s irony. On the theme of madness in Chrétien’s romances, see also Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, “Yvain’s Madness.”

<sup>6</sup> Romance and medieval literature generally abounds with instructive examples of men running wild in response to shame. See, for example, the story of Nebuchadnezzar in *Cleanness*, in which the story of the biblical figure is retold with special attention paid to madness as a penitential response to pride: the shame of becoming like an animal in exile teaches Nebuchadnezzar the limits of his own earthly power in relation to God (*Cleanness*, 1651-1707). In the romance tradition, men fall into madness typically because they have been scolded by a lady: in Malory, Lancelot runs mad twice because of his shame vis-à-vis Guinevere, as does Tristan after his shame is pronounced by Isolde (“Tristram’s Exile and Madness,” 294-320 in Vinaver’s *Works*). In this way, madness can be seen either as shameful (Nebuchadnezzar) or as a way of purging shame (Lancelot and Tristan), but in both it is part of a penitential process. For more examples of madness in medieval literature, see Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*.



But, of course, Yvain eventually recovers his wits and goes on to perform a series of challenges before reuniting with his wife: he is reborn as a new self after his old self dies in shame, thereby demonstrating shame's transformative power. Along the way, he saves the life of a lion who becomes his constant and devoted companion, liberates a colony of slaves, and slays a giant. Each episode is worthy of closer analysis in its own right, but of special import here is the scene in which Yvain and Gawain fight a duel in order to settle a dispute between two sisters arguing over their inheritance, but neither knows the identity of the one he is fighting. This scene considers an impressive network of interrelated chivalric ideas, including the metaphysics of the trial-by-combat, the intense love and camaraderie between knights, and the problem of knightly identity. Even as the sole *raison d'être* of the Arthurian knight is to distinguish himself above all others through feats of prowess, the chivalric code enforces strict conformity to a way of being that is almost purely formulaic: the knight is thus faced with the contradictory imperative of perpetual differentiation by means of competition that makes all men the same.<sup>7</sup> The armour which covers the knight from head to foot means that there are in fact a great many mysterious knights roaming the land because no one can tell one from the other.<sup>8</sup> Chrétien and romance writers after him often use this as a device to heighten the sense of drama, but it also conveys

---

<sup>7</sup> I discuss chivalry's contradictory imperative in greater detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> The motif of the failure to distinguish friend from foe (and accidentally falling into combat with a friend or brother) is evident in this scene, and is also common in Malory (for example, in the Balin and Balan episode). And this motif is closely related to that of the deliberate use of disguise: in Malory, Lancelot in particular is fond of going into tournament in another knight's armour because if he is recognized as Lancelot, no one will agree to fight him. Clearly, the use of armour motifs bears directly on questions of identity, suggesting perhaps both an interest in and an anxiety about the stability of inner, private identity apart from the public performance of identity.

the very real sense in which chivalry problematizes the romantic impulse toward the inner world of the individual—an inner world glimpsed, for example, when “Yvain suddenly began to reflect.” Gawain and Yvain’s case of mistaken identity dramatizes this tension, by posing the *demande*, how can two men who love each other fight as if they hate each other? This is, of course, a stylized way of asking how the inner self of romance can be reconciled with the public role of knighthood. It is significant, therefore, that, in this scene, the trial-by-combat does not “work”: Gawain and Yvain are so equally matched (in skill as in love for each other) that they fight to a draw, and Arthur is able, in Solomon-like fashion, to discern the truth of the matter without violence, when the malicious sister inadvertently admits her wrong-doing. In this scene, therefore, the real conflict is not between the dueling knights but between the idea of truth as something external that can be made known on the bodies of the knights in combat, and the discernment of inner truth—Yvain and Gawain’s true feelings for each other, the true merit of the one sister and the false merit of the other.

Yvain is finally reconciled with his lady as a new yet older man who has endured a period of penance and regeneration, and now enjoys the sweetness of his present life. And, like *Erec and Enide*, this story ends with a confession of guilt and an absolution, but this time it is the husband who requires forgiveness:

“My lady,” he said, “one should have mercy on a sinner. I have paid dearly for my foolishness, and I am glad to have paid. Folly caused me to stay away, and I acknowledge my guilt and wrong. I’ve been very bold to dare to come before you now, but if you will take me back, I’ll never do you wrong again.” (380)

Unlike Enide, Yvain actually stands in need of absolution. And yet, the focus remains, as it does in all of Chrétien's stories, on the psychology, plight, and triumph of the knight alone. While they bear little resemblance to the inhuman, indifferent, quasi-divine figures Lacan identifies in some courtly love poetry, the female figures in Chrétien are still comparatively underdeveloped: they are almost more like props for the unfolding drama of male identity than characters with fully formed emotions and opinions. As such, the project of defining honour and the representation of shame, its agony and its transformation of the self in the world, take precedence over the language of interiorized penitence, guilt, and forgiveness.

#### Malory: Honour and Shame as Expressions of Fatalism

The question of knightly identity and the trial-by-combat feature even more prominently in the Arthurian stories of Sir Thomas Malory. Although Malory is writing almost four centuries after Chrétien, who is in many ways the originator of the Arthurian legends as we know them, Malory's Arthurian world is much more *Arthurian* than Chrétien's ever was: while we can never be entirely sure how seriously Chrétien is taking his own stories, Malory replaces this light, ironic touch with nostalgic idealism for the Golden Age of chivalry. In particular, the external orientation of chivalric shame that is subtly tempered by Chrétien's interest in psychological landscapes is here exaggerated and largely devoid of internal reflection: indeed, of all medieval romance, none fits the general outline

of honour culture as Pitt-Rivers describes it as clearly and straightforwardly as do Malory's *Works*.<sup>9</sup>

The episodes that make up Malory's *Works* illustrate quite clearly some of the ways in which shame as a corollary of honour depends less upon freeing individual identity from traditional morality and more upon defining identity in terms of fixed social roles, in a way that evinces Visser's discussion of the fatalism and social hierarchy that are built into both the experience and the idea of shame. Nearly all of the salient points of Malorian honour culture are exemplified in the chapter entitled "Arthur and Accolon," from Book One of the *Works*. In this episode we learn of Morgan le Fay's treachery and how she orchestrates an elaborate scheme to have Arthur killed in a trial-by-combat at the hand of her paramour Accolon. While Arthur himself fades into the background in later books as Lancelot becomes the undisputed hero of Malory's account, in this story Arthur's own strength and prowess take centre-stage. Through Morgan's machinations, Accolon uses Arthur's own sword against him, thereby putting Arthur at a distinct disadvantage, but Arthur's prowess is demonstrated not only in the brute physical strength that allows him to withstand the blows, but more importantly in the fact that he values his honour over his life. Arthur's moment of greatest vulnerability—when he has lost his sword and has been clearly bested by his opponent—is also his moment of chivalric glory. Accolon holds him at sword-point and demands submission; Arthur responds with stirring defiance:

---

<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the *Morte Darthur* has been the subject of several projects aiming to apply Pitt-Rivers' insights to the study of medieval literature. Brewer was the first to do so, in his introduction to *The Morte Darthur, Parts Seven and Eight*. Mark Lambert offers an excellent analysis of the connection between honour, shame and "noise" in Malory's concluding books in his *Malory: Style and Vision in the Le Morte Darthur*, 176-94.

I had levir to dye with honour than to lyve with shame. And if hit were possible for me to dye an hondred tymes, I had levir to dye so oufte than yelde me to the. For though I lak wepon, yett shall I lak no worshippe, and if thou sle me wepynles that shall be thy shame. (86)

And, just as Accolon initially gained the upper hand through Morgan's supernatural deviancy, so too is Arthur saved in the nick of time by "inchaumentente" (87). This scene, in which Morgan's treachery is contrasted with Arthur's nobility and prowess, moves Nyneve, the damsel of the Lake and Malory's favourite *deus ex machina*, to such "grete peté" that she intervenes by magically returning Excalibur to its rightful owner.

The incident is resolved when Arthur, after having defeated Accolon and learning from him the details of Morgan's plot, resumes his role as king and legislator by punishing Sir Damas (Morgan's chief and willing pawn) and rewarding Damas's persecuted brother, Sir Oughtlake. Arthur's judgment on the conflict between brothers over inheritance and rights is intriguing in the context of the story. He declares,

Because ye, Sir Damas, ar called an orgulus knight and full of vylony, and nat worth of prouesse of youre dedis, therefore woll I that ye geff unto youre brother all the hole maner with the apportenaunce undir this fourme, that Sir Oughtlake holde the maner of you and yerely to gyff you a palfrey to ryde uppon, for that woll becom you bettir to ryde on than uppon a courser. . . . Also, Sir Oughtlake, as to you, because ye ar named a good knight and full of prouesse and trew and jantyll in all youre dedis, this shall be youre charge I woll gyff you: that in all goodly hast ye com unto me and my courte, and ye shall be a knight of myne. (89)

Arthur's judgment here is in contrast to that of Chrétien's Arthur in that, here, the question of actual guilt is beside the point. The wicked woman who disinherits her sister in Chrétien is proven guilty not by combat but by her own admission; but Arthur appeals here specifically and pointedly to the evidence of hearsay. Of

course, the reader has already been convinced of Sir Damas's villainy through the testimony of the imprisoned knights. But Arthur does not legitimate his judgment by citing indisputable facts of injustice (that Sir Damas has withheld lands that belong to Sir Oughtlake and wrongfully imprisoned innocent men), or even that Sir Damas *is* an orgulus knight and full of villainy, but simply that he is *called* so. Similarly, he welcomes Sir Oughtlake into his court on the basis of his reputation alone, because he is *named* "a good knight and full of prouesse."

The story of Arthur and Accolon contains on a small scale the general structure of the Malorian chivalric ethos. The ways in which honour and shame are constituted here and throughout the work depend upon a series of related paradoxical conditions. The first condition has to do with the fact that Arthur and Accolon's encounter is arbitrary, in the sense that they are fighting because of Morgan's plot and not because they have any quarrel between them; but their combat is also invested with ultimate moral and ontological significance, in the sense that they are acting as champions for Damas and Oughtlake, and the outcome of the battle will decide which brother wins. The rules of a trial-by-combat imply that the just cause will prevail when put to the test of the sword, because, as Mellyagaunce explains later in the book, "God woll have a stroke in every batayle" (659). On the other hand, however, as the enchanted ship, the supernatural properties of Excalibur, and Nyneve's intervention make clear, the circumstances of the trial are defined by magical forces both malevolent and benevolent, in which each combatant must respond to events over which he has no control and which he does not fully understand. In other words, regardless of

how or why Morgan has stacked the deck, Arthur and Accolon must fight even to the death. The causal chain is as follows: Oughtlake is vindicated because Arthur wins, and Arthur wins not through his own strength but because Nyneve decides to give him the upper hand; the duel, which here constitutes the means of justice, is thus rigged, and yet it is rigged because Arthur (and Oughtlake), as everyone knows, *deserves* to win, both because his is the just cause and because he is the inherently superior knight.<sup>10</sup>

Closely related to this condition is the fact that Arthur, Accolon, Oughtlake, and Damas each occupy a clearly defined place in a hierarchy of knighthood, and their behaviour in the story corresponds to their relative degrees of status. And yet, the worth of each knight is also construed as dependent upon individual merit. Hence, the miraculous circumstances of Arthur's conception and claim to the throne imply that he has been ordained or fated to wield Excalibur, with all that it signifies, but his prowess in turn prompts Nyneve to decide that he, rather than Accolon, merits the advantage in the fight; put simply, the power that

---

<sup>10</sup> By the end of the *Morte Darthur*, however, this implicit trust in trial-by-combat has been undermined. The belief behind the trial-by-combat, of course, is that it is actually God who decides who deserves to win and thus gives the victory to the worthier knight. But, ultimately, Arthur rejects Lancelot's offer to "prove" his and Guinevere's innocence with his sword, precisely because Lancelot wins every time even when he is guilty: Arthur says, "I woll nat that way worke [that is, trial-by-combat] with Launcelot, for he trustyth so much uppon hys hondis and hys might that he doutyth no man. And therefore for my queen he shall nevermore fight, for she shall have the law" (682-83). Thus, when it becomes apparent that physical strength cannot uphold justice, Arthur turns to "the law."

We must also weigh the more extreme or even slightly caricatured examples of honour culture as Pitt-Rivers defines it against other complicating factors, such as the oath taken by every knight of the Round Table, in which the idea of the knight's prerogative to defend, promote, and increase his own stock of honour is directly opposed to the call to altruistic, communally-minded acts. That is, Arthur's knights are not out simply to see how many other knights they can knock off a horse; rather, they pledge never to do "outrage" (excessive violence) or murder; to flee treason; to give mercy to anyone who asks for mercy (although in doing so the supplicant forfeits his own honour and the favour of the king); always to give aid to ladies, damsels, gentlewomen, and widows, upholding their rights and doing no force against them, on pain of execution; and, significantly, never to take the wrongful side in a trial by combat (75-76).

Nyneve grants him over Accolon is merely a reflection of the power he holds innately. This is why, at the moment when it would appear that Arthur has been shamed by his defeat, he is in fact able to assert his honour and even has the audacity to remind Accolon of *his* potential shame. Similarly, because Sir Damas is a shameful knight, he must be shamed by riding on a palfrey, and because Oughtlake is an honourable knight, he is honoured by membership in the Round Table fellowship. Or, to emphasize the tautology even more starkly, because Sir Damas has been shamed, he must be shamed, and because Sir Oughtlake has been honoured, he must be honoured. As Pitt-Rivers observes, “just as capital assures credit, so the possession of honour guarantees against dishonour, for the simple reason that it places a man (*if he has enough of it*) in a position in which he cannot be challenged or judged” (37; italics mine)

This episode also illustrates how the distribution of shame and honour in Malory is closely linked to performative speech: shame and honour are verbally invoked upon a knight’s name or reputation; to pronounce a knight’s shame *is* to shame him. Furthermore, as Stephanie Trigg observes, Malory must continually negotiate between the goal of “stabylyté” realized in the verbal assignment of honour and the containment of shame, and the artistic demands of the narrative. Trigg comments that the “rhetorical performances” of shaming “play an important role in Malory’s perpetual struggle to distribute honor correctly while also maintaining the narrative tension necessary to the courtly contest within the Arthurian court and its engagements with those outside its circle” (9). The uneasy relation between these two narrative aims is registered in the contradictory ways



in which shame is ascribed to different knights in different circumstances, depending on their place in the greater hierarchy. Some knights who operate outside the Round Table fellowship, such as Sir Damas or Sir Meleagant, bear out the claim that “knyghtes ons shamed recoverys hit never” (1.218). Such knights “ar called” shameful, and they behave accordingly from beginning to end. Others, such as Sir Oughtlake or Sir Palomides, are marginal figures: they have the potential to be brought into the fellowship and thus become knights of honour. Undisputed heroes, such as Arthur and Lancelot, seem inherently honourable and almost immune to shame of any kind. Gawain is an intriguing figure in this regard: morally ambiguous at best, he commits many shameful acts throughout the course of the narrative and yet remains “officially” honourable to the end. Even after his vengeful fury precipitates the downfall of the Round Table, Gawain is rehabilitated, reconciled with Lancelot, and remembered as one of Arthur’s “noble knyghtes.” Such inconsistency prompts Trigg to comment that, indeed, there seems “to be an implicit hierarchy whereby the ‘good’ knights are empowered to invoke shame on others in this kind of powerful proclamation” (10). The narrative roles assigned, for example, to Arthur, Lancelot, and Gawain (Arthur *is* the greatest Christian king, Lancelot and Gawain *are* his best knights) invest them with that power—to transform potential shame into honour, to claim honour, and to assign shame to others. A knight’s identity, whether shameful or honourable, is thus forged from outside in: you are, quite literally, who people say you are. In “Arthur and Accolon,” we see this dynamic operating on a narrative level with fascinating clarity, in that the actual martial skill of the fighters is

almost beside the point of their relative degrees of inherent worth, and the supernatural intervention exposes the arbitrariness at the heart of the combat, which serves only to reinforce a hierarchy that is represented as natural and unchanging.

Malory's insistence on the inherency of knightly worth has the potential to produce a tedious and predictable plot that is rigged in the same way that Arthur and Accolon's battle is rigged, in which the winners always win and the losers always lose. Such predictability is mitigated by the mysterious fatalism attending the rise and fall of Arthur's court. Just as the narrative tension in classical tragedy emerges in the conflict between the hero's relatively static role and the irrevocable fate assigned to him, so too is suspense generated in the *Morte Darthur* in the clash between the idealism realized in the "flower of chivalry" and the inevitable fact of its demise—inevitable in a historical sense, in that, from the first, we always already know that the Golden Age has past, but also inevitable in a tragic sense, in that the universe with which we are here presented is much closer to the amoral cosmos of classical fate than it is to the moral framework of providence, in which the consequences of sin rather than one's *moira* shape one's destiny. This larger tragic structure is encapsulated in the moment when Nyneve beholds Arthur bleeding and defeated at Accolon's feet: her "grete peté" signals the pathos of the destruction of great men through the happenstances of an amoral universe, which is here embodied in the perverse malevolence of Morgan le Fay.

One of the great preoccupations in the *Morte Darthur*, of course, is the question of why the Round Table failed. Given Malory's unwavering

commitment to the viability and nobility of the chivalric military ideal, he must look beyond this ideal to forces over which the knights have no control, to causes which excuse the knights themselves, so that the essential honour of the fellowship may be preserved. Morgan and her fellow enchantresses sometimes play the role of sporting gods dispensing *moira*, as they do in the Arthur and Accolon story, but more often the fall of the Round Table is figured as simply and vaguely necessary. Malory is careful to purge his version of the Grail quest of its traditional Christian moralizing, in which the secular knights are judged for their spiritual failings and in which their ultimate demise is represented as a result of their sins. Mark Lambert has pointed out that Malory takes great pains to “present the destruction as an occurrence of unknown or at least impersonal causation rather than human action. . . . Malory is pointing to luck, fate, fortune, chance, rather than moral responsibility” (162). And the phrases “hit befelle,” “hit happed,” “hit mysfortuned” are indeed ubiquitous throughout the work. “Arthur and Accolon” begins in just this way: “Than hit befelle that Arthur and many of his knyghtes rode on huntynge into a grete foreste . . .” (81). We almost always know *how* a given knight will respond to a situation, depending on his position in the hierarchy, for his behaviour will usually conform to his reputation. We may even know that a knight such as Lancelot will always win in combat (unless he is defeated through treachery or enchantment). But we do *not* know what adventure might befall the knights when they set off to seek their honour. The point, for Malory, is not to leave us wondering about the nature of true knighthood, but to

arouse in us the experience of “grete peté” at the sight of nobility and honour in the face of adversity.

Even though the knights do not therefore deserve their fates in the sense of being morally responsible, the necessity of the outcome is signaled by Merlin’s prophecies in the opening tales, which effectively pre-empt any other conceivable conclusion. And although Merlin exits the scene before the end of the first book, the entire narrative rests on this mysterious figure: in addition to his prophecies, which effectively determine the outcome of the narrative, it is Merlin who brings about Arthur’s conception and upbringing, as well as the consolidation of Arthur’s kingdom. Critics often talk about the lack of motivation and explanation that characterizes the romance mode (McCarthy 6-8). One of the main effects of this lack of motivation is that events do not appear to be caused by individual choice: the mysterious impulses or compulsions that often precipitate action augment the sense of necessity dictated by the narrative structure of prophecy and fulfillment. Thus Merlin tells Arthur that Lancelot and Guinevere are destined to fall in love, yet Arthur feels somehow compelled to marry her anyway. Similarly, Gawain counsels the king “nat to be over hasty” in his judgment of Lancelot and Guinevere in one episode, and a mere five pages later he is vowing to “seke Sir Lancelot thorowoute seven kynges realmys, but I shall sle hym, other ellis he shall sle me” (682, 687). And despite the fact that the ghost of Gawain visits Arthur in a dream to warn him of his impending defeat at the hand of Mordred, Arthur cannot help himself, at the crucial moment, from pursuing the traitor and receiving his death blow in the same instant that he is revenged. There is no

ultimate answer to the question “why,” in the same way that there is no answer to why Apollo hands Oedipus the particular fate that he does. But it is precisely the amorality of the downfall that renders it necessary: if the knights had been responsible for their ruin there is a chance that they could have chosen to act otherwise.<sup>11</sup>

“Arthur and Accolon,” therefore, shows how honour and shame depend, first of all, upon a naturalized social hierarchy (a hierarchy based on innate differences in individual worth); and, secondly, upon a fatalistic universe that subordinates individual will and choice to the amoral forces of necessity. The specific components of honour and shame that operate within this hierarchical and fatalistic framework relate to a complex and often contradictory value nexus that defines knightly identity, and produces the very terms by which the narrative progresses and makes meaning.

#### Paradox and Purity in the *Lives* of the Virgin Martyrs

Arguably, the medieval genre that most clearly illustrates the idea of the inherent impossibility of desire embodied in the “eternal feminine” is not romance but hagiography, specifically the lives of the virgin martyrs, a genre whose popularity was absolutely unparalleled in fourteenth-century England, both in collections of saints’ lives or legendaries and as exempla included in handbooks

---

<sup>11</sup> I am touching on a much-discussed and debated issue here: arguably, the nature of Malorian tragedy is more complicated than I suggest. For a discussion of the *Morte Darthur* as tragedy, see J. D. Pickering, “Choice and Circumstance in Chaucer and Malory”; Beverly Kennedy, “Northrop Frye’s Theory of Genres and Sir Thomas Malory’s ‘Hoole Book’”; Elizabeth Sklar, “The Undoing of Romance in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.” Sklar argues that while the *Morte Darthur* has often been identified generically as a romance, if we consider the book in its entirety, “romance finally gives way to tragedy” (309).

and manuals. In many of the saints' lives, the revelatory power of shame is expressed in bodily terms: in the traditional Christian paradox, loss of one's earthly self in the mortification of the flesh results in the birth of a new self united with Christ. This paradox, however, entails that, far from *suffering* shame, the saints effectively deny shame, or engage in flagrantly shameful acts as a way of transcending their human sinfulness. Indeed, hagiographic narratives revel in the uncomfortable juxtaposition of saintly shamelessness with images of shamed bodies, or the dynamics of shame *between* bodies. In Raymond of Capua's fourteenth-century *Life of St Catherine of Siena*, for example, Catherine nurses an older nun, whose "cancer" has produced festering sores which give off a stench so unbearable that no one else is willing to care for her. When Catherine feels herself beginning to succumb to physical revulsion at the smell, she forces herself to drink a bowl of the pus she has collected from the wound. Immediately, the "temptation to feel repugnance" passes away and Catherine is able to resume her work (*Life* 147). The following night, Catherine is granted a vision of Christ, who appears with his five holy wounds and extols Catherine's spiritual strength and good deeds.

Catherine's extreme penitential act traverses boundaries, both physical and figurative, between self and other to such a radical extent that it threatens to dissolve those boundaries altogether. The "danger" of the polluting substance is actively sought out rather than ritually avoided: for Catherine, physical purity is an obstacle to truly selfless neighbour-love. But an important feature of Catherine's life according to Raymond is the persecution she must bear: in her

perfect virginity and charity, Catherine is often the target of jealous attacks and irrational hatred prompted by the devil—even by the recipients of her care, such as the cancer-ridden nun Andrea. At times, the inherent danger of blurring the boundaries between self and other is manifest in a literal contagion: caring for an outcast leper, Catherine’s hands become infected with leprosy. And Catherine’s radical openness, her utter disregard for her own bodily integrity, leads to accusations of another kind of openness: when the signs of her affliction are made known, people begin to doubt her claims to virginity. But earthly shame—the appearance of foolishness and even corruption in the eyes of the world—is here transformed into spiritual ecstasy; the loathsome pus of shame becomes the spiritual water of grace. Catherine’s radical and unrestrained giving of herself to the Other does indeed enact that frightening dissolution of self experienced in shame, but from the assured perspective of transcendence, as a means of also breaking down the boundary that separates her from her Eternal Bridegroom, it is a dissolution for which the saint strives.<sup>12</sup>

For Catherine, spiritual purity means deliberately contaminating herself with polluting bodily fluids—deliberately courting abjection rather than avoiding it. But that this purposeful contamination is itself, paradoxically, shame-driven is evident in the extent to which the saint occupies the position of the “inhuman”

---

<sup>12</sup> This kind of self-evacuation in shame differs, however, from the selflessness that is only possible in guilt ethics. Selfless acts made possible by guilt depend on the self securely intact—as a kind of solid footing, as it were, from which to extend one’s hand—and on a clear distinction between self and other. The person who acts out of a sense of guilt may care for an afflicted person to the point of neglecting her own needs and desires, but she will not traverse the boundary of affliction—attempt to become one with the affliction—the way that Catherine does. In the selflessness of guilt, one focuses on another person *qua* Other; in the self-evacuation of shame even altruistic acts are ultimately geared, perhaps paradoxically, back towards the self, in the sense that one no longer considers the Other to be totally distinct from the self.

feminine, impervious to desire and even to the needs of those around her; she devotes her life to charity but *in order to escape* the vulnerability and exposure required in imperfect earthly relationships. And, more importantly, if spiritual rebirth entails dying to the flesh in shame, this radical transgressiveness does not extend as far as *sexual* purity and danger. Indeed, for the virgin martyrs, fears of sexual pollution reach heights unimagined in the primitive purity systems studied by Douglas, and they are dramatized in the motif of threatened rape. This combination of factors—the enactment of triumphant shamelessness in the *passio* and the heightened sense of sexual danger—creates the typical plot in which the virgin, like Dante’s Beatrice, is completely fulfilled by her bridegroom Christ, and thus constitutes an impossible obstacle to the desires of those (men) around her.

In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas reflects on the “exaggerated” importance of virginity in the early Christian community’s attempt to define itself against its Jewish heritage and Roman context:

In [the effort of the early Christians] to create a new society which would be free, unbounded and without coercion or contradiction, it was no doubt necessary to establish a new set of positive values. The idea that virginity had a special positive value was bound to fall on good soil in a small persecuted minority group. For we have seen that these social conditions lend themselves to beliefs which symbolize the body as an imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable. (*Purity and Danger* 195)

Subsequently, in much medieval theology and in hagiography, this exaggerated importance did not wane but was strengthened and institutionalized.<sup>13</sup> In the *Lives*

---

<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, there were also medieval discourses in which virginity did not figure as an ideal at all: doctors and secular love poets, for example, often took a very different view of sexuality than did theologians. See, for example, Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 83-138.



of the virgin martyrs, such as Lucy, Agnes and Agatha, virginity promises freedom because it allows the virgin to transcend the fundamental connection between femininity (and especially female sexuality), sin and corruption. As Douglas points out, virginity became the key, defining characteristic of the New Eve, in direct contrast to the Old Eve and the old law, a paradoxical elevation of the spiritual over the literal by means of physical intactness.<sup>14</sup>

The remarkable power of virginity as both a symbol and a prerequisite for holiness is illustrated in the legends that circulated widely in late medieval England, such as the *The Golden Legend*, the *South English Legendary*, and, in the fifteenth century, Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. In these popular collections, virginity is also an important virtue for male saints, but it is not a necessity and it is not emphasized to nearly the same degree. In the story of St Margaret, on the other hand, the fifteen-year-old girl of "radiant beauty" catches the eye of the Roman prefect Olybrius, who intends either to marry her or to keep her as his concubine, provided he can persuade her to renounce her Christian faith. Here, as in nearly every virgin martyr legend, the virgin's "naked, besieged body is the site of battle against the devil, whose will is embodied in male desire" (Saunders 126). When St Margaret refuses Olybrius she is tortured, and we are given vivid description of every detail:

---

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum has also pointed out the "peculiarly bodily" nature of medieval women's spirituality. Bynum argues that the inherent "viciousness" of female flesh was thought to be relieved and sublimated through regimes of fasting and self-flagellation, by enduring illness and by "psychosomatic manipulation" such as levitation ("The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages" 162). Bynum has written extensively on this topic: see also *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*.

She was bound upon the rack, and beaten cruelly, first with rods, and then with sharp instruments, so that all her bones were laid bare, and the blood poured forth from her body as from a pure spring. And all those who stood by exclaimed, "Ah, Margaret, how we pity thee! Oh, what beauty thou hast lost by thine unbelief! But now, to save thy life, at least, profess the true faith!" And she said, "Begone from me, evil counselors! This torture of my flesh is the salvation of my soul!" Meanwhile, the prefect, unable to bear the sight of such an outpouring of blood, hid his face with his mantle. He then had her taken from the rack and sent back to her prison, which instantly was filled with a great brightness. (*Golden Legend* 352-53)

Here, we are indeed presented with the spectacle of torture, and one that is relatively tame compared to the most lurid of the *Lives*. Foucault has argued that the spectacle of torture serves to reinforce the legitimacy of authority. In Foucault's account of the "genealogy" of the modern legal-judicial system, he contends that the violent retribution exacted upon the criminal in pre-modern societies "inscribes" the truth of the crime on the body:

It was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime that he had committed. His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all. . . . Its aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play at its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength; . . . in this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and its intrinsic superiority. . . . The public execution did not re-establish justice, it re-activated power. (*Discipline and Punish* 43, 49)

In this passage, Foucault provides an apt description of the use of shame as an instrument of political power and subjugation. The means of punishment—making the sentence "legible" on the body—indicates that the ultimate purpose of public torture is to shame rather than to recompense a wrong; as Foucault points out, at stake in the spectacle of torture is power rather than justice. It is therefore striking to compare these two passages, for the story of St Margaret and the

conventions of Christian hagiography effect a complete reversal of the re-activation of power described by Foucault.<sup>15</sup> What is inscribed on the saint's body is *not* the "truth of the crime" and the "intrinsic superiority" of political authority, but the truth of the victim and the futility of political authority. And it does so not only on some vague, compensatory level—i.e., the victim will triumph but only in heaven—but by appealing to the emotions and sympathies of the audience, to mobilize Christ-like praxis. Foucault is describing the historical phenomenon of public torture and execution, as experienced by witnesses physically present, while hagiography is a literary genre in which the spectacle of suffering is meant to be imagined by the reader or listener. But, in both, the visual dimension is central; in both, the dissymmetry between subject and powerful sovereign is represented in an extreme, almost theatrical way; and, in both, our eyes are drawn to the sight of torn flesh, broken bones and the "outpouring of blood." Indeed, the story of St Margaret, as in hagiography generally, the text itself serves as a kind of literary iconography: precisely by virtue of the repetition in story after story of the same drama, we are invited to meditate upon and respond to the suffering, not as an argument but as a symbol of transcendence.

The importance of sight and spectacle in medieval hagiography has led several scholars to perceive an erotic or pornographic element in the way that the text invites the visualization of a tortured female body. In her study of the *South*

---

<sup>15</sup> That Foucault's analyses of modern institutions, power, and the subject typically miss the mark when applied to medieval contexts has been observed by several scholars. Karma Lochrie (*Covert Operations*) and Carolyn Dinshaw (*Getting Medieval*) have criticized Foucault for his nostalgia regarding the supposed unity of medieval discourses. More recently, Katherine Little (*Confession and Resistance*) has reiterated this critique in relation to medieval confessional practices (see especially Little's introduction, 1-15).

*English Legendary*, Beth Crachiolo argues that, although all of the *Lives* involve the spectacle of the suffering body, those of male saints emphasize how they withstand the torture while those of female saints emphasize how they look while being tortured. Crachiolo contends, “torture in the life of a male martyr is thus an event in which he is involved, while torture in the Life of a female martyr is a spectacle that she must endure” (147). Kathryn Gravdal has argued that the basic formula of hagiographic narratives, involving the spectacle of the naked virgin body, the constant threat of rape, and sadistic physical abuse, serve to eroticize rape. Hagiography, she writes, “affords a sanctioned space in which eroticism can flourish and in which male voyeurism becomes licit if not advocated” (*Ravishing Maidens* 24). Similarly, Thomas Heffernan considers the imagery of “a holy woman’s sexuality under attack . . . undeniably erotic” (*Sacred Biography* 281), and Marina Warner reads “the particular focus on women’s torn and broken flesh” as representing the “sexual fantasy” of violent penetration (*Alone* 71, 73). These and other feminist readings of hagiography, therefore, emphasize the victimization of the virgin martyr in a discourse that grounds female sanctity in bodily pain, silence, and passivity. Gail Ashton, for example, as recently as 2000, considered the virgin martyrs of late medieval hagiography to be “powerless mirror images of patriarchal assumptions” and “patriarchal dolls” (41, 104). On the other hand, many have read the female saints’ lives as discourses of empowerment. As Robert Mills observes, “[the virgins] are consistently public; . . . they engage in openly political discourse with the people who are portrayed as their oppressors; they actively resist objectification and rape” (187). Similarly,

Corinne Saunders counters the view of virgin martyr as victim by pointing out the importance of inevitable associations with the tortured body of Christ as well as the images of motherhood and nurturing associated with Mary's virginity (126).

If we re-cast this debate about the representation of femininity in the virgin martyr stories through the lens of shame theory, we are able to consider saintly representations in a way that goes beyond the problem of female (dis)empowerment. Significantly, as Corinne Saunders has pointed out, in none of the accounts of the virgin martyrs is a woman actually raped (*Rape and Ravishment* 134). Despite the insistence of the church fathers that purity is a spiritual rather than a physical state—or in Margeret's words, "thou hast power over my flesh, but my soul belongs to Christ" (353)—the trope of threatened (but never actual) rape suggests that to imagine the loss of virginity presented an insurmountable challenge to the idea of female holiness. The importance of physical virginity in the stories of female saints, therefore, signals a persistent, even obsessive, focus on the impenetrability of the saint's physical body. It also indicates the complex role of shame in hagiography. On the one hand, images of humiliation and suffering, in which the persecuting authorities clearly intend to shame their victims (in the Foucauldian sense of "branding" the body), are central: the virgins are almost always stripped naked before they are killed, and the Holy Spirit's miraculous interventions mean that they are able to withstand incredible tortures and are subject to increasing degrees of violence before they actually die. On the other hand, by virtue of their perfect sexual and spiritual purity, the martyrs are impermeable to shame in the same way that they are

impermeable to physical penetration: in reenacting the Passion, they have symbolically shed embodied womanhood by renouncing the traditional family structure and sexuality itself. The torture suffered by the body serves to point out the complete spiritual transcendence that the virgin martyrs have achieved: they have been so thoroughly liberated from the flesh that often they do not even feel the physical pain being inflicted upon them. Sometimes this immunity to shame is literalized, as when St Agnes's hair grows miraculously to cover her entire body when she is being paraded naked through the streets, or when the Holy Spirit causes St Lucy to become so heavy she is literally immovable when her persecutors attempt to carry her off to a brothel. But absent such material interventions, from the narrative perspective of the medieval Christian, the spiritual triumph of the virgins, in the sense that they maintain a kind of stoical reserve and unwavering faith under torture, transforms the potential shame of violent abuse and nakedness into stirring heroism.<sup>16</sup>

By renouncing her sexuality, the virgin martyr is also granted a kind of spiritual authority that claims precedence over any earthly, political authority. In most of the stories, in fact, the virgins publicly preach and convert others; and, in

---

<sup>16</sup> To modern readers, any appeal to such heroism will risk idealizing or mythologizing a particularly sadistic misogyny. Nonetheless, the social subversiveness of these texts cannot be easily dismissed. As Thomas Heffernan has observed, "this ultimate stage [of female transcendence in martyrdom] is the inevitable obverse to the orthodox ideas of family, male sexuality, and authority sanctioned by the *civitas hominis*" (192). See also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Brown's study attests that the emphasis on sexual renunciation in the early Christian communities out of which the martyr stories emerged should not be confused with modern forms of Christian puritanism. Indeed, the social and political threat represented by sexual renunciation at a time and place where each woman would have had to produce an average of five children for the population of the Roman Empire to remain even stationary (Brown 6), is properly understood alongside the similarly subversive rejection of purity laws, and the emphasis on giving to the poor and communitarian renunciations of private property.

the face of persecuting authorities, their Christian meekness is replaced with a righteous and sometimes forceful contempt. The virgins' physical strength is typically demonstrated by their ability to endure pain, but they are also capable of other, more aggressive kinds of action. When, for example, St Juliana is visited by the devil in prison, she binds him, beats him, drags him out of her cell, and throws him into a toilet. The image of a beautiful, pubescent girl disposing of her attacker in such a physical way is remarkable indeed. Such transgressive authority and assertiveness, however, is always short-lived, as the threat of sexual violation gives way to torture and inevitable death. As R. Howard Bloch has wryly noted, "the only true virgin is a dead virgin" (*Medieval Misogyny* 108). The virgin martyr is liberated momentarily from the bonds of male ownership in an honour culture in that her physical suffering is construed not as an affront to honour—either her own or that of her kinsmen—but as a trial and a means of purification; from a medieval Christian perspective, she achieves permanent liberation only in death; indeed, death is a glorious deliverance embraced rather than feared.<sup>17</sup>

Shame in the virgin martyr stories therefore presents us with a paradox, but it has little to do with pornography. On the one hand, in transcending the familial and social bonds that provide the shape and content of honour and shame, the virgin martyrs transcend shame, in the same way that Christ's humiliation and suffering on the cross is a sign of his ultimate triumph. The seemingly morbid (or, to some, erotically sadistic) preoccupation with the imagery of suffering is highly

---

<sup>17</sup> This medieval Christian perspective is, of course, prefigured in many classical sources as well, especially in the writings of the Stoics, whose emphasis on the fleetingness of life implied a similar idea of the stability found only in death. Chaucer and his contemporaries were heavily influenced not only by hagiography but also by Boethius's Christian stoicism and his discussion of the fundamental unreliability of all earthly, material things in the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

significant when we consider the role of sight and exposure in shame: these texts function to *subvert* rather than reinforce the shameful of exposed humiliation, and do so in a way that is radical and visceral enough to disturb contemporary critics. Jonathan Dollimore sees in the radical idealism that lies behind sexual renunciation

promised resurrection, the abundance of peace which only the freedom from desire can afford, and the prospect that even the rigid boundaries between the sexes might trickle away in the liquid gold of a “spiritual body.” In short, [sexual renunciation] constituted a heroic and sustained attempt . . . to map out the horizons of human freedom. The light of a great hope of future transformation glowed behind even the most austere statements of the ascetic position. (*Death, Desire, and Loss* 47)

On the other hand, by restricting spiritual purity to literal virginity, hagiography maintains the conflation of spiritual and material, thereby reinscribing the potent threat of shame-producing, involuntary pollution. In this way, the idea of an inherent female shamefulness persists, even in narratives which celebrate the heroism and transgressive authority of women. The imperative of virginity offers both an escape from shame and a reminder of its ever-present threat. Arguably, the emphasis on virginity, for all of its subversive potential, simply recasts traditional associations between sexual purity (defined now as complete renunciation rather than in terms of licit marital unions and social productivity) and categories of shame and pollution. Indeed, in some ways, the potency of the shame involved here is only intensified, for there is no purification or expiation ritual that can restore physical virginity: the choice is not between licit sexual relations and shameful, illicit ones, but between the *inherent* shame of sexuality (closely



associated, as always, with the female body itself) and sacrificial death.<sup>18</sup> If, in the economy of sacrifice, shame requires propitiation, the shame that is atoned for here is, quite simply, the shame of the earthly, reproductive body itself, apart from any failure in sin.

Thus, we can see in the virgin martyrs' lives a fascinating confluence of ideas: we see the representation of desire not as object-directed but as the desire for shameless self-sufficiency, both directly (in the desire of the saints) and as mediated through the saints (in the men who desire them); we also see the highly physical concept of self implied in shame, insofar as embodiment and sexuality are experienced as inherently shameful, and insofar as the humiliating obstacle to desire is represented as the female object that is both sought and rejected. In other words, we see the Lacanian mystic complete in her *jouissance* and the mimetic effect of this *jouissance* on the desires of others. Finally, we see the paradox of

---

<sup>18</sup> Saunders, however, notes a shift in focus from earlier to later medieval saints' lives:

The emphasis of the early saints' lives on the battle against the enemies of Christianity, on torture and death, finds a marked contrast in the legends of later holy women. These narratives tell not of heroic virgins dying for their faith in an ominous pagan world, but of more familiar trials of family life, politics, or asceticism. The opposition is of secular and sacred rather than Christian and pagan, although the tales treat the same themes of good and evil, lust and chastity, and convey the same notions of virginity. (Saunders 142-43)

In the later texts, therefore, the dilemma between sexual shame and death is less prevalent. The case of Margery Kempe is interesting on this point. As Saunders points out,

sexual relations with her husband become repulsive to her with her first vision of the merriment of heaven and wishes to exchange her earthly lover for a spiritual one. Margery imagines herself as Christ's spouse, daughter, and mother, but there is no doubt that the sexual image of Christ as lover provides her with the most powerful and immediate metaphor for her intimacy with him. . . . Her desire for spiritual marriage is often threatened by her lust for a particular man who later cruelly rejects her. Christ's promise to Margery: a radical statement opposing the virgin's pre-eminence with the assertion of the equal value of physical and spiritual chastity, an assertion made by theologians but rarely translated into literature. In these conversations, Margery's text presents a remarkably liberal view of chastity. . . . At the same time, this symbolic empowerment is essential to Margery's existence. She needs to align herself with the virgins, to construct her earthly marriage as a spiritual one, and to deny sexual temptation. (Saunders 146-47)

shame, which emerges when we consider the saint not as a symbol of illusory sufficiency nor as the (irrelevant) object of mimetic desire, but as a desiring subject herself, in which the rejection of a shame-bound identity liberates her from the demands of purity even as it constrains her to an ever-intensifying vigilance against contamination.

### Conclusion

The representation of shame in medieval romance and in the lives of the virgin saints illustrates in vivid detail the theories of shame surveyed in the preceding chapter. Through the lenses of romance and hagiography, we see the material conception of self that underlies the experience of shame. In the world of chivalry, this material self is maintained by adherence to the code of honour, and by making good one's name (one's identity) on and through one's body. In the world of the saints' lives, spiritual and sexual purity are conflated to the extent that, in tension with medieval Christian theology, female spiritual purity *depends* upon physical intactness. And since lifelong virginity in turn contravenes the honour-bound mores of family and social structure, female spiritual purity depends ultimately upon the violent sacrifice of the saint's physical body. In both genres, therefore, we see different but related facets of the causal links between shame ethics and the economy of sacrifice.

#### Chapter Four: Penitential Shame and Guilt

Are we in debt to anyone or anything for the bare fact of our existence? If so, what do we owe, and to whom or to what? And how should we pay?  
(Atwood, *Payback* 1)

In medieval chivalric romance, shame is a primary means of legitimating political authority and the social hierarchy of knighthood; in hagiography, shame is the primary affective force that drives the virgin to embrace her martyrdom in order to avoid the pollution of sexual impurity. In both cases, we can see the role of shame in maintaining social and physical boundaries through various forms of violence. But shame can also turn on the very political authority that typically wields the power of bestowing honour or punishment. Indeed, even in the absence of any moral consensus, the totalizing force of shame can transform and undermine the powerful in a way that guilt cannot. That is, while we cannot create the feeling of guilt in those who ought to feel it but do not, we can often provoke their shame simply by declaring or in some way enacting “shame on you.”

Medieval penitential discourses reflect the remarkable historical process by which pre-Reformational Christianity developed the language and practices through which to induce shame for moral wrong-doing, and, in so doing, “cultivated a version of interiority” shaped by the confessional, by self-examination of one’s sins (Little 3). And yet, in penitential shame, ideally and theoretically, shame is a response to one’s guilt or sin: it is not intended to be felt as a kind of contamination or as a tool to enforce social and political structures. Ideally, therefore, penitential shame is a secondary response, an affect to be

encouraged in the recognition of wrong-doing, in the guilt ethics of medieval Christian thought. In reality, however, much of medieval penitential discourse is characterized by a tension between the centrality of penitential shame and an ideal of true contrition, which is also an ideal that promises the very forgiveness that is precluded or problematized in shame. In this chapter, I will explore the idea of guilt as an escape from or a remedy for shame, through the lens of late medieval penitence. In particular, I want to argue that the development of the ideas of shame and guilt in late medieval English literature is best understood in terms of this persistent tension, in the sense that contrition and an awareness of guilt frequently constitute a form of relief from the psychological and ethical pressures of a materialist, all-encompassing experience of shame.

J.A. Burrow's influential study of Langland, Gower, the anonymous Gawain-poet, and Chaucer identifies several distinctive characteristics of the literature produced in the second half of the fourteenth century in England, the period that Burrow has christened "Ricardian." Burrow perceptively connects the "unheroic image of man" (*Ricardian Poetry* 94) that we find in Ricardian poetry to the penitential ethos of the fourteenth century, an ethos shaped by several centuries of theological and ethical reflection on the nature of sin, the purpose and practice of confession and penance, and the nature of divine grace. The period's defining works of literature, including *Piers Plowman*, *Confessio Amantis*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, are typically centered on the image of a flawed but sympathetic human figure confronted by a powerful "confessor" figure, whose

nature neither he nor the reader can fully comprehend, but who is a means of revealing to the protagonist the true state of his soul—of puncturing his ideal self-image through shame. Such representations in literature of penitential practice, or simply a penitential attitude, demonstrate the centrality of the sacrament of penance in medieval religious life. These representations further suggest the way in which the centrality of penance inscribed shame as one of the defining features of literary representations of medieval selfhood; they also place the question of the relation *between* shame and guilt implicitly at the forefront of medieval ethical reasoning.

Gregory Roper has pointed out that, although there is much historical scholarship chronicling the development of institutionalized penance, we know little about the “theological and psychological event of penance” and how late medieval penance constructed “a particular kind of self” (154).<sup>1</sup> In many ways, contemporary theories about shame and guilt provide insight into what Roper calls the “event” of penance, and how the self is constructed through penitential practices. Penitential handbooks and manuals give us an idea of the language used

---

<sup>1</sup> On the psychology of penitential despair as context for the *Pardoner's Prologue* and *Tale*, see Patterson, “Chaucerian Confession: Penitential Literature and the Pardoner.” More general studies include Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages*; Biller and Minnis, eds., *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*; Root, *Space to Speke: The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature*; and Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England*. Root undertakes an explicitly Foucauldian “archaeology of the medieval self” by investigating penitential discourse as a primary site of the construction of selfhood (2). In contrast, Little rejects a Foucauldian methodology and what she sees as its privileging of the “confessing self,” and models her investigation of the shifts underway in late medieval penance on Benveniste’s theory of subjectivity. Little, therefore, focuses less on the aspects of medieval confession that are overtly coercive or analogous to criminal confession and more on the emergence (with the Wycliffites and other reform movements) of a new emphasis on biblical models of self. See especially Little’s chapter on *The Parson's Tale*, in which she traces “on one side, the demands for a reformed language with which to define the self and, on the other, the limits of clerical language to enact that reform” (82).

(or at least prescribed for use) in the confessional, the language sanctioned for the expression of the penitent's innermost experience; contemporary ideas about shame can help us to decipher what that language meant for the penitent's self-understanding. To a considerable extent, the penitential shame of the late medieval period exemplifies the complex relation between shame and identity that constitutes a core feature of contemporary theories. Lee Patterson writes,

At the centre of the Christian dispensation stands the idea of a radical transformation of the self, literally of its "reformation" according the pattern (*imago Dei*) in which it was originally created and from which it has defected through sin. The process begins with the inward turn of self-confrontation. . . . The sinner must set himself before himself, face to face with the defilement he has become. . . . A true knowledge of himself humiliates the sinner, and he cries out to the Lord, "In Thy truth Thou hast humbled me." ("Chaucerian Confession" 159)

Setting oneself before oneself, seeing oneself face to face as if in a mirror: this is the capacity for self-objectification that makes human consciousness possible, but almost inevitably humiliates. Penitential shame may be rooted theologically in a belief in the omnipresence of sin, but it is no less painful and it is certainly no less dramatic than what we might call the tragic shame of a "Man-centered" universe.

Historians generally identify three main penitential movements in the Middle Ages. The first began with Constantine's conversion, whereby the once elite group that comprised early Christianity swelled into the millions and became a "moral mixed bag" of saints and sinners, clergy and laity (Murray 55).

Poschmann reports that the formal procedure for reconciling lapsed Christians prior to the sixth century (canonical penance) was allowed only once in a lifetime, and imposed permanent strictures on the penitent (usually celibacy) as well as

some kind of stigma or public shaming (87-98, 104-6).<sup>2</sup> This quite public, often involuntary penitence was punitive rather than contritionist.<sup>3</sup> In the fourth and fifth centuries, some monastic communities developed a role for a spiritual father or informal confessor in whom the anchorites or cenobites could confide. But it is not until the late sixth century that we find what is called tariffed penance, involving confession both private and repeatable and penance assigned according to the gravity of the sin. As Murray points out, while canonical penance did require confession made in private to the bishop, it was frequently coercive and placed little to no emphasis on contrition. By contrast, tariffed penance placed confession front and centre: “Instead of acknowledging one grave sin which might, indeed, already be notorious, the penitent was invited to range over his memory, remembering each offence and its circumstances” (Murray 57). Each sin was thus weighed and measured, so to speak, so that the penance assigned could be proportional to the offense.

The third and final movement emerged in the twelfth century in what Delumeau calls the “psychological and religious evolution” strongly influenced by monastic milieus (*Sin* 197). This contritionist movement was inspired by theologians such as Abelard, Anselm and Hugh of St-Victor, and involved the

---

<sup>2</sup> The measures taken to ensure that penitents were set apart from regular parishioners varied across time and place, but they included special seating in the church (usually at the back or sometimes outside the sanctuary, where they would ask the congregants entering to intercede on their behalf), exclusion from the Eucharist, penitential dress made from goatskin, and cropping or shaving of the hair (*Penance* 88-89).

<sup>3</sup> This is the view of Murray and my own surmise; Poschmann, however, writes that “the primary purpose of public penance, even when done for secret sins, was not to humiliate the penitent, but to enlist the support of the faithful on his behalf. . . . In addition to their intercession, the faithful had a practical part to play in the emendation of the penitent; they kept watch on the progress of his conversion, reported on it to the bishop, and themselves admonished him” (86-87). It is perhaps a question of interpretation, but it is difficult to see how this kind of “support” from the community would *not* result in humiliation.

rejection even of tariffs in order to assign external penalty, and a rejection of the view, implicit in the notion of tariffs, that sin is quantifiable, and placed sole emphasis on intention, conscience, and the interior experience of contrition: tariffed penance became redemptive penance (*Sin* 197). Murray explains the shift to contritionism in terms of expediency. As parish clergy turned their attention increasingly to the education and the consciences of their parishioners, penance became a much more frequent and central part of religious life. Tariffed penance required two interviews with the priest, one to confess and receive penance and another to be absolved after the penance had been performed. This arrangement, Murray observes, “was less suited to ‘mass production’ than one in which absolution immediately followed the award of penance” (62). As the elision between the two interviews took root, and absolution was granted as soon as confession had been made, so too did the centre of penance shift from external performance to inner contrition: “contrition now *became* the penance” (Murray 62). The shift from public to private penance, from the shaming of the penitent to the penitent’s own feelings of contrition, might seem to suggest quite clearly a move from shame ethics to guilt ethics. But in reality the shift from public to private was less about shifting from shame to guilt and more about moving the scene of the penitent’s shame inward, from the communal stage to the penitent’s own psychological drama. Public humiliation may be allayed in this process but the spectacle in which the sinner confronts his own depravity is only brought into sharper focus. Moreover, the “inner” contrition felt by the penitent still had to be apparent somehow to the confessor, who required some proof in order to grant



absolution; indeed, priests were counseled on how to recognize the outward signs of true penance: bowed head, tears, and hand-wringing.<sup>4</sup> Although the audience had shrunk, therefore, from the parish at large to himself, his priest and God, the penitent was not only to feel contrition but to *perform* it. The question of sincerity and, thus, of efficacy arose: how can the penitent be sure that the examination of his conscience is complete, that he has not forgotten anything? How can the confessor be sure that the penitent is truly contrite? And, further, what does it mean if the priest invested with the power to grant absolution is himself in a state of deadly sin?

In response to these and other related anxieties, a vast body of literature developed: scores of handbooks and manuals for clerical use, sermons and homilies, as well as penitential lyrics and, interestingly, a body of illustrative tales that recur in nearly every penitential subgenre, including miracle stories and saints' lives. The tales and exempla were also collected into encyclopedic works, and these exist in literally hundreds of manuscripts; most of the encyclopedic

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, in a thirteenth-century penitential, Thomas of Clobham writes,

And just as a doctor of the body inquires of the patient's disease through many signs and indications whether it can be cured or not, thus the doctor of the spirit should consider by means of many signs concerning the penitent if he might be truly penitent or not, for example is he should sigh, if he should cry, if he should blush, and should do other such things. Either if he should laugh or deny that he had sinned or should defend his sins and similar things. (quoted and translated by Katherine Little, *Confession and Resistance*, 54)

Clobham suggests that shame is thus a kind of requirement for absolution, because it is an affect visible on the face and body. Similarly, John Mirk, in *Instructions for Parish Priests*, describes the event of late medieval confession in remarkably detailed terms:

the penitent is to kneel before the priest, who pulls his hood over his eyes so as not to see the penitent. The priest, Mirk instructs, should sit 'style as ston' (line 777) while the penitent first confesses; he should be sure not to spit, cough, or wriggle his limbs, lest he give the impression he is impatient or loathes being there. When the penitent says 'I con no more' (line 709), the priest is to respond immediately by aggressively questioning the penitent, . . . [thus walking] the penitent through the *forma confitendi*" (Roper 162).

volumes appear to have been prepared for or by clerics for preaching purposes. Sullens reports that these volumes were “arranged by subject captions or alphabetically [and] bear the marks of everyday use; many of them are thick quartos that could have been carried about by an itinerant friar trudging from one poor parish to another” (xvii). Manuscripts of penitential poems, on the other hand, are typically “carefully penned and beautifully illuminated, suggesting that they were popular among laity as well as the clergy” (xvii). Middle English manuals include, for example, Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne* and *The Boke of Vices and Virtues* (both English adaptations of French sources: *Manuel de Pechiez* and *Les Sommes de Vices et de Virtues*, respectively). These English texts are relatively concise, practical guides to making a good and effective confession, and were meant as aids for clerical instruction of laity (and, in some cases, to instruct the clergy as well). On the other hand, Raymond of Pennaforte’s *Summa de paenitentia* (one of Chaucer’s two main sources for the *Parson’s Tale*) is a larger, formal moral treatise, intended to be theoretically comprehensive.<sup>5</sup>

The veritable explosion of penitential literature consequent upon the Fourth Lateran Council and continuing unabated into the fourteenth century does suggest the emergence of a kind of collective penitential consciousness in England and across the Continent. This intense literary and educational activity thus appears initially to warrant Delumeau’s diagnosis of “scruple sickness,” and Fernie’s charge of the medieval “debased view of the self”; indeed much has been

---

<sup>5</sup> On the idea of a penitential consciousness, especially in the English context, see also John Mirk’s *Instructions for Parish Priests*, which similarly includes a list of topics to be covered in parish sermons at least once a year, such as the Seven Deadly Sins, confession, and penance.

written on the “psychology of sin” that characterized late medieval religious life, a psychology that also gave rise to images that are often considered the quintessence of late medieval culture, such as the *Danse Macabre* or the processions of flagellants.<sup>6</sup> But arguably, understanding this penitential ethos as reflective of a morbid obsession with guilt and mortality is a vast oversimplification. What we find, in fact, to some extent in the penitential manuals and to a large extent in the literature of the period, is a purposeful and psychologically sophisticated attempt to reinforce an awareness of guilt *instead of* shame as the primary moral affect: a feeling that promotes rather than discourages confession, and one that leads the sinner to an experience of grace and absolution. That we do see the marks of such an attempt suggests that shame figures as an important but potentially dangerous aspect of the penitential experience: the transformation and rebirth of the self in penance involves shame, but it also depends on placing limits on shame, specifically on the experience of totalized failure and lack. In this, penitential guilt separates the essence of one’s self from

---

<sup>6</sup> For general discussions of this morbid psychology, see Delumeau, *Sin and Fear* (1990), and Kurtz, *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature* (1975). Cf. Pearsall, “Signs of Life in Lydgate’s *Danse Macabre*.” The last part of Pearsall’s article (65-71) is on medieval attitudes towards death and their reputed “morbidity.” Pearsall complains that there has been a tendency to misread medieval works on death and medieval attitudes towards death; thus, Huizinga and Boase both write of the “macabre vision” found in late medieval art. While critics repeat such judgements in various forms, this is, in fact, not what we find when we read a work like the “*Danse Macabre*”: “Lydgate is not in the least interested in decay and putrefaction . . .” (66). For medieval artists and writers, like Lydgate, the meditation on the fact and moment of death” is “a salutary warning”—to the proud, for instance—to amend their lives.” The transitory nature of life means that “it is our business to use it to win heaven by fleeing sin.” Indeed, “it may be debated whether morbidity, properly speaking, is possible within an eschatological system based on life-after-death” (67). The *Dance in Paris* is not, as Clark (*Dance of Death*) described it, a reflection of “the misery and despair of a dying age,” for “the historical fact is that 1424, when it was installed in Paris, was a time of notable peace and prosperity for the city . . .” (70). It is the seventeenth, not the fifteenth, century which was distressed by a morbid preoccupation with images of decomposition (71).

the sinful acts committed, so that there remains a self worth redeeming in the first place. In the absence of guilt, shame impedes this transformation by paralyzing the sinner in a state of self-loathing and despair, or by discouraging the penitent to admit his sins and vices at all. Thus, according to Raymond's *Summa*, shame is listed as one of the six causes of contrition, but it is also listed, alongside fear, hope, and despair, as one of the chief *obstacles* to penitence. In the first case, shame is the initial, painful and jarring moment of self-objectification in which the sinner sees himself in truth. It is therefore the first step of the entire penitential process: the experience of coming to self-knowledge, and the realization that one's self is in need of transformation and redemption. But, on the other hand, as Raymond writes, "shame holds many people back from penitence, but chiefly hypocrites and the proud, who like to appear to people as healthy and beautiful, although they are actually sick and most foul . . ." (SA 560). The important point in both cases centres on shame as a certain kind of self-awareness, or the capacity to imagine how others (or God) see one's self—a looking through another's eyes. One of the central questions addressed by penitential manuals and handbooks, therefore, is how to *manage* shame; how to bring the sinner face to face with his own defiled soul and encourage abject contrition before God without, at the same time, destroying the penitent's will to change and seek reconciliation. In this sense, although it does not occupy as prominent a place in the manuals, shame and especially excessive shame is a phenomenon distinct from the idea of despair as the "unforgiveable" sin. Despair is a sin because it leads the individual to believe that he is depraved beyond the reach of grace and therefore prevents

confession and contrition. Shame, on the other hand, results (in this context) in the fear of *being discovered* as guilty of particular sins, and relates to the desire to deceive oneself and others.

Two examples will suffice to show both the ideal and the pitfalls in the late medieval management of penitential shame. Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* is aimed at "lewed men" (43), to teach them "On englysshe tonge" how to avoid the snares of sin, and how to make shrift of "mouthe and herte" (44, 111). *Handlyng Sinne* and similar handbooks are expressly therapeutic and function in a way that persistently counters the wordless, polluting force of shame. Indeed, the detailed anatomizing of vice, weakness, and perversion is, perhaps paradoxically, restrained as far as judgment and censure go; any sense of moral outrage is made untenable by the methodical cataloguing and didactic tone of the penitential handbook.<sup>7</sup> As Raymond's comments on shame suggest, the aim of encouraging confession and openness on the part of the penitent mitigates the impulse towards harsh rebuke or contempt. Similarly, there is an effect of distancing in the ritualized aspects of confession as it is prescribed in these handbooks: the intensely painful because intensely personal experience of shame is replaced with a kind of script that is meant to be rehearsed by all sinners in all places and times. In the establishment of a *language* through which to experience one's failures and misdeeds, and by which to express one's own knowledge and thus mastery of

---

<sup>7</sup> The same is true of the *Boke of Vices and Virtues*, another well-known example of this type of literature, probably written to assist priests in educating their parishioners. As Gower does in *Confessio Amantis*, the author of the *Boke*, a French Dominican friar named Laurent, describes the seven deadly sins as a tree, with each sin representing a branch that in turn gives rise to many smaller branches of related sins. Cf. *The Parson's Tale*, in which Chaucer calls penitence a tree whose root is contrition (111).

them, shame loses its sting. Moreover, Mannyng expresses the view, common in this type of literature, of a kind of solidarity with the “lewed” folk for whom he writes, and a concomitant denunciation of clerical corruption. Thus a large part of the section outlining penance is directed not to the penitent and what he ought to do, but describes the punishment reserved for the sinful *priest*, the “shepherd” who fails in his duty to care for the sheep who have been “boghte” by the Lord “ful dere” (10897). This is not to say that shame is not important in the handbooks; indeed, it is front and centre, as the opening lines of *Handlyng Synne* make clear:

Fadyr and sone and holygost  
 Pat art o god of myghtys most.  
 At þy wrshepe shul we begynne  
 To shame þe fend amd shewe oure synne.  
 Synne to shewe, vs to frame,  
 God to wrshepe, þe fende to shame.  
 Shameful synne ys gode to lete:  
 Al þat men do boþe smale and grete.  
 Þe grete wyth outyn pryuyte  
 Pat beyn commune to me and þe,  
 Of hem wyle y telle yow nede  
 As y haue herd and red yn dede. (1-12)

In these lines, Mannyng encourages the penitent to confession and contrition by stressing the therapeutic benefit of purging shameful secrets, of transferring the shame of sin from the penitent to the “fende.” Confessing one’s sin and “letting” one’s shame also perform a socially cohesive function by showing what all men hold in “commune.” What they do hold in common is, of course, the subject of Mannyng’s text, as he proceeds to explain the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins, sacrilege, the seven sacraments and the various elements of shrift. As Gregory Roper points out, texts such as this one, designed to instruct laity on

what, precisely, they were supposed to find when they examined their consciences, were more than mere “checklists” to aid in the recollection of sins (Roper 157). These lists, in fact, provided “a sort of map of the interior landscape of the sinful self and a guide to discovering the more or less unknown territory by offering signposts for the exploration of the penitent’s past” (Roper 157). But of course, this map was the same (at least in theory) for everyone from prince to pauper: a schema for articulating an interior reality that is, at the same, shared by all. What is at issue, therefore, is the precise nature of the relationship between private and public, inner and outer realities. As Roper points out,

penitents realize that their subjective acts are instances of objective structures; their selves are defined, given significance, through matching their subjectivity with this objective structure. Seeing oneself as a “sinner” gives one’s fluid, unfocused life a meaning and a form. . . . By becoming more of an individual—by particularizing sins, identifying the particular ways in which he has acted—the penitent becomes less an individual self and more a self defined as a role, a texture of relations, because sin itself is so ordinary, typical, and universal. (159)

This paradox of penitential interiority recalls Caroline Bynum’s insights into the emergence of the self in the twelfth century:

The twelfth-century person did not “find himself” by casting off inhibiting patterns but by adopting appropriate ones. Moreover, because to convert was to find a stricter pattern and because Christians learned what it was to be Christian from models, and the individual who put off the “old man” for “the new” became a model available to others. (*Jesus as Mother* 90)

As Bynum points out, in this view it makes sense to talk about the emergence of the self as an interior space but not as an individual in terms of the modern idea of uniqueness. Moreover, the process of looking inward in order to find a fallen self the contours and content of which have already been prescribed, while at the same time looking outward to a model of selfhood for which one can only strive but

never fully attain, raises the question of just how interior the new interior penance really was. In the development from external, punitive penance to inner contrition, we can see the purposeful attempt to circumscribe the role of shame in penitence, in the increasing privacy or even secrecy of the confessional (and in the harsh consequences for priests who breached that secrecy), and in the terms set out in the manuals and handbooks, whereby the confessor is taught both how to overcome shame in order to elicit a full confession and how not to embarrass the penitent into silence. And yet, in that dual and intensely specular movement—looking inward and outward simultaneously in order to measure and compare—shame remains an intractable force. And, still, the question of the authenticity of the contrition—the purity and completeness of it—haunts both penitent and confessor. Thus, the pitfalls of shame, which, by its very nature, tends to resist management and containment, are apparent in a passage from the *Scale of Perfection*, in which Walter Hilton describes in vivid terms the spectacle of the sinner’s internal landscape:

What then? Soothly right nought but a murk image and a painful of thine own soul, which hath neither light of knowing nor feeling of love nor liking. This image if thou behold it wittily, is all belapped with black stinking clothes of sin, as pride, envy, ire, accidie, covetise, gluttony and lechery. . . . This image and this black shadow thou bearest about with thee where thou goest. (126-27)<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> This passage is from Hilton’s chapter on the *image* of sin in particular, and therefore picks up on the specular nature of shame. But it would be a mistake to suggest that Hilton concludes with this horrifying, paralyzing image, for the *Scale of Perfection*, no less than the penitential manuals, is concerned above all with illuminating the path to salvation—with teaching a kind of practice. Moreover, in his discussion of the remedies of vice, Hilton emphasizes not only the virtues but especially *love*: “Ask thou then of God nothing but this gift of love, that is, the Holy GhoSt . . . For there is no gift of God that is both the giver and the gift, but this gift of love” (392).



The image of self described by Hilton is one that is literally covered with sin so foul that it takes on physically repulsive characteristics (“stinking clothes”); if one attempts to turn one’s face away, the image of the sinful self follows behind like an inescapable shadow. This is penitential shame that crosses the line between contrition and impenitence because it leaves no possible avenue for reparative action. And it does so in a way that differs from excessive guilt—the sin of despair—in which one believes oneself sinful to a point beyond redemption. The language of shame evokes an idea of the self as repulsive, causing physical disgust, and thereby to be avoided or purged, rather than guilty of sin and in need of forgiveness. In the case of excessive guilt, the sinner believes himself already lost, and therefore refuses to ask for mercy. Excessive shame, however, carries with it the sense of a physical inadequacy that breeds contempt rather than censure. The shamed sinner refuses to ask for mercy because the cure he seeks is not forgiveness but some means of expiating the shame.

The tension between shame as a productive, transformative means of purification and shame as soul-destroying is one that informs, even pervades, fourteenth-century English poetry. The problem of shame in penitence is taken up with great rigour and creativity not only by Chaucer but also his fellow Ricardian poets, Langland, Gower, and the anonymous Gawain-poet. As Burrow points out, it is precisely the anti-heroism of Ricardian poetry that emphasizes self- and world-shattering scenes of shame, in which “confrontations between human and a more-than-human power . . . articulate [the poet’s] sense of man’s thwarted heroism” (101). Fernie’s comments about the drama of shame in a “man-centered

universe” presuppose that it is only when the human subject begins from a great height that it is possible for him to fall to the depths of shame. The shame of the Ricardian penitent is indeed more quietly haunting and all-too-human, but it also attests to the fact that intense shame is not the special burden of kings and heroes, while the rest of us are simply too abject in the first place to experience the pain of self-knowledge; shame consists not in the fall from high to low, but in the discrepancy between image and truth, ideal and reality—and does so for all people in all places.

Langland’s *Piers Plowman* and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* are dream vision poems in which the drama of penitence—the sinful soul in the process of recognizing itself—is closely connected with the project of social and political reform. For Langland, as for Chaucer, the virtue of “pacience” is crucial for this process, reflected in the merciful God who forgives rather than exacting vengeance, and in Will, who must learn to conform *his* will and desire to Christ by relinquishing the temptations of worldly power, wealth, and knowledge. The “sovereignty” of patience or “suffraunce” is thus set in opposition to the honour-based cycle of affront and revenge. As Reason reminds Will,

“Recche thee nevere  
Why I suffre or noght suffre—thiself hast noght to done.  
Amende thow if it thow might, for my tyme is to abide.  
Suffraunce is a soverayn vertue, and a swift vengeaunce.  
Who suffreth moore than God?” quod he; “no gome, as I leeve.”  
(B.XI.375-79)

In shame ethics, “the act of resentment is the touchstone of honour” (Pitt-Rivers 26), but here, both insult and injury are to be accepted and *suffered*; the measure of a man does not lie in his ability to avenge his honour but in his ability to endure

the loss of honour without anger, without taking action. In this way, the affective experience of shame is harnessed to religious and ethical ends, as a recognition of guilt, and the political dynamics of honour and shame are undercut by the powerful image of a suffering God. Thus, to put oneself in the position of him who has the right to exact vengeance is to put oneself above God.

At the end of *Piers Plowman* (B-text), we are left with an image of the dreamer afflicted with the indignities of old age: bald, impotent, and infirm, seeking Unity but finding only corruption. The sacrament of penance, which, in former times, ensured “clennesse of the comune and clerkes clene lyvyngē” (B.XIX.381), has been corrupted by the hypocrisy of friars, who preach against private property for their own gain (B.XX.273-79). Here, in Passus XX, Langland explicitly distinguishes between proper shame which is annexed to guilt, and the shame that accompanies excessive pride and thereby inhibits penance: instead of feeling shame “in hir shrift,” the parishioners of the corrupt clergy “maketh hem wende / And fleen to the freres,” who offer an easier penance (B.XX.284-85). This misguided shame is countered by Piers’s refrain, “redde quod debes,” or pay what you owe. The self-defensive mechanism of shame prompts flight and denial, and is directly opposed to guilt as *schuld* or debt. Conscience thus rejects all institutional forms of penance—“person or parish preest, penitauncer or bisshop”—in favour of true, inner contrition (B.XX.320). Hope remains, embodied in the figure of Piers, but Will is then jolted awake, and his long and arduous spiritual journey is thus concluded, with Conscience’s loud and unanswered cry for grace. Missing from the picture is the violence and angst of

confronting one's epic fate; Will's shame is "private and quotidian"; it is a kind of shame rooted in a bodily, and therefore universal, human experience.<sup>9</sup>

In Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the penitential process of remembering and confessing is, similarly, a means of self-discovery for the protagonist Amans, and shame and guilt are held in careful balance. For Amans, and for the social order he represents, the disillusionment involved in shame is profoundly generative; the recognition of guilt, in Amans' repeated admissions, "I have done that; I too am guilty of that sin," involves a cognitive process of placing limits on desire and re-directing the will to its proper aims: shame tears down the old self but guilt leads to the birth of a new self. But while Will is led on his pilgrimage by an assortment of spiritual guides (Reason, Conscience, Piers himself), Amans relies solely on his "Genius." Gower's Genius borrows from Alain de Lille's *Complaint of Nature* and Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose*, and thus he is a rather paternal and clearly allegorical figure, embodying natural reason and productivity (in a social, political, and sexual sense) with the sole aim of healing Amans's sick soul. Genius's primary criterion for judging behaviour is to decide whether an act is natural or "unkynde": Amans's love for his lady, in its frustrated, lustful self-centeredness, has been "unkynde" and therefore fruitless; he retreats to the forest where he languishes in unrequited love. Venus appears and asks him "What art thou?" Amans answers that he is "A Caitif that lith hier" (161). Venus and Nature direct Amans to Genius for his penance, since it is

---

<sup>9</sup> J. A. Burrow uses this phrase to describe the process of self-understanding represented in Ricardian poetry. Comparing the grand histories of epic to the "unheroic image of man" found in Chaucer, Langland, Gower, and the Gawain-poet, Burrow writes that the achievement of self-understanding is "private and quotidian, rather than public and for all time" (101).

“genius”—natural reason and productive love for the sake of common profit—that he has lost. In this way Amans’s journey follows a trajectory directly opposite that of shame: beginning at a point of abjection and “divisioun,” he remembers and confesses in order to gather together the fragments of his history and self into a coherent whole.

Where Gower departs from his sources, however, is in representing Amans’s self-discovery in terms of an education in history: Amans realizes his follies and vices by applying the examples of myth and antiquity to his own past, to discern where there is overlap, where he has failed, or where he has managed to avoid the snares of sin. In this way, the historical catalogue of wisdom and error presented by Genius resembles the listing of vices and virtues in the penitential handbooks and manuals, but suggests a slightly different picture of the sinner’s interior landscape: a map based on theological ideas about the virtues and vices gives one particular shape to this landscape; a map constructed from social and political history as it was conceived in fourteenth-century England, and interpreted with the aid of “reason,” gives a slightly different shape. And, indeed, as Amans’s confession unfolds, we are directed less to injunctions against breaking general or abstract precepts, and more to the sphere of social action and social relationships, and the political problems confronting Gower’s own time and place. The prologue in particular suggests overtly the political dimensions of sin—the sins of the age rather than of the individual. After his confession, Amans once again encounters Venus. When she asks him again “What art thou?” he is able to answer with his true name, John Gower. This is a dramatic moment in the

poem, when the lengthy cataloguing of historical episodes and Genius's moralizing on general and abstract virtues suddenly becomes infused with the particularity and concreteness of autobiography. But, paradoxically, it is this narrowing from the general to the particular—from "A Mans" soul to John Gower's soul—that allows the poem as a whole to conclude with a broader, communal perspective, with a prayer for the general welfare of England. This prayer contrasts with Amans' lovesick and self-centered pleas at the beginning of the poem, and reflects the full integration of self and society, good governance both individual and social for the sake of common profit.

Amans' confession, therefore, mirrors the paradox of interiority set up by the institutionalization of interiorized penance: he achieves knowledge of his true self by comparing his personal experience with historical exemplars, by recognizing public history *as* private history. What "counts" as constitutive of selfhood is that which can be understood in moral terms (as natural or unnatural, productive or selfish) and that which illustrates, positively or negatively, the moral lessons of human history. But in the very act of proclaiming "I did this, I felt that," a distinction is made between the "I"—the agent—and the acts themselves, between the private self and the public significance of the self as agent in the world. What can see here, therefore, is not that shame is simply irrelevant in the medieval, God-centered universe; rather, we can understand the penitential poetry of the fourteenth century as reflective of a sustained attempt to understand, to manage, and, above all, to *redeem* shame through the recognition of a guilt before God that can be forgiven through interior contrition rather than

expiated through external humiliation, and through the narrative of confession rather than through ritual alone.

### Guilt and Grace

In medieval penitential discourse, guilt figures as a remedy for the sinner's shame because it can be forgiven and redeemed. If shame constitutes, in some ways, the very pre-condition of human consciousness, if it is the "keystone affect" in the development of self, but it is also the moral affect that most intensely provokes the need for violent, self-defensive substitution in sacrifice, how can we conceive of ethical possibilities that avoid making violent sacrifice an unavoidable fate? How do we escape the imperative of vengeance, and how do we redress wrongs without compensatory violence? These are questions that figure prominently, albeit in slightly different terms, in late medieval thinking and poetry. Gabrielle Taylor has remarked that shame is the "emotion of self-protection" (*Emotions* 81), but that remorse, which emerges from the recognition of one's guilt, is the "emotion of salvation" (101) because it rests on a fundamental differentiation between the agent and the act: the act may be reprehensible but the agent is able to make amends and to be redeemed. In contrast, what is crucially missing from shame ethics—in any of its historical manifestations—is a conception of grace: a capacity for a certain kind of non-material, non-calculating reflection that recognizes wrongdoing and the pain caused by it, but, at the same time, makes forgiveness possible. Grace and forgiveness are, of course, concepts with deep theological roots—roots that

extend to the fourteenth century and far beyond. But here I want to consider them primarily as ethical concepts that oppose the contagious, materialist nature of shame. If shame posits the self as a physical portion that is unbearably diminished by injuries and affronts of various kinds, then in order to avoid the necessity of periodic violent compensation to restore one's portion, what is needed is a conception of the self as, at least in part, *disembodied*—a self that remains untainted or undiminished by harm (but not indifferent to it)—in the sense that we ought not to hold victims of violence responsible for the violence or as polluted by it—and thus a self as a moral agent who can choose to “override” the instinct towards reciprocal violence. What is needed, in other words, is a way of considering transgression, not as a piercing of physical boundaries, but as a breaking of moral laws that transcend particular relationships and social contexts.

Guilt, as Lynd points out, is etymologically related to debt (*Schuld*), and is often understood in those terms: guilt is, literally speaking, what I owe to another person (or to God). Like shame, guilt can be experienced internally but it can also be assigned, by a judge in a court of law for instance, even if the person does not accept responsibility or feel guilty. This is the difference between subjective and objective guilt, and it corresponds in some ways to the difference between feeling shame and being shamed (as the object of others' contempt or humiliation). Both shame and guilt in this sense represent a nexus or interface between the subjective, emotional-ethical realm and the objective social-ethical realm; each is a parallel but qualitatively different kind of bridge between self and other. While shame is experienced as a physical affect and as totalizing, covering the entire



self, guilt is primarily a cognitive emotion. With guilt, a person may feel horrified at what she has done, but the horror is primarily a cognitive phenomenon; absent is the agonizing physicality of shame, the burning face and the urge to flee or to “crawl under a rock and die.”<sup>10</sup>

In the Freudian tradition, guilt originates as a fear of punishment or retribution from parental authority, and this fear is increasingly internalized in the development of the superego.<sup>11</sup> And, indeed, fear of punishment is an important aspect of guilt, in the sense that this fear is often what tells us that what we have done is wrong. But, more importantly, guilt is closely connected with our ability to empathize.<sup>12</sup> Whereas shame results from our capacity to see ourselves as we imagine others see us, guilt results from our capacity to imagine how others *feel* as a result of our actions. As James Gilligan has observed,

. . . the capacity to love others appears to be a prerequisite for the capacity

---

<sup>10</sup> This important difference in the affective experience of shame and guilt—how each *feels*—has been observed and expressed many times, both on the basis of personal or anecdotal evidence, but also in clinical studies. See, for example, Lynd, *Shame and the Search for Identity* (especially 21-50); Tangney, *Shame and Guilt* (10-25); Gilligan, “Shame, Guilt and Violence” (see below).

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Piers was one of the earliest shame theorists in the Freudian school to articulate in a systematic way the difference between guilt and shame in terms of punishment. Piers writes that guilt “is the painful internal tension generated whenever the emotionally highly charged barrier erected by the superego is being touched or transgressed. The transgressor against which this barrier has been erected are id impulses that range from aggressiveness to destructiveness. . . . The psychologically most important anxiety contingent to the feeling of guilt is, therefore, the widely studied castration anxiety after which the entire punishment complex is usually named” (16).

<sup>12</sup> June Tangney makes this point explicitly, and argues in favour of guilt’s positive ethical potential on the basis of an impressive amount and range of clinical data. Reflecting on decades of clinical studies, Tangney observes that “shame-prone individuals appear relatively more likely to blame others (as well as themselves) for negative events, more prone to a seething, bitter, resentful kind of anger and hostility, and less able to empathize with others in general. Guilt, on the other hand, may not be that bad after all. Guilt-prone individuals appear better able to empathize with others and to accept responsibility for negative interpersonal events. They are relatively less prone to anger than their shame-prone peers—but when angry, these individuals appear more likely to express their anger in a fairly direct . . . manner” (*Shame and Guilt* 3).

to feel guilty about hurting them, [and thus] the person who is overwhelmed by feelings of shame is incapable both of the feelings of guilt and remorse and of love and empathy that would inhibit most of us from injuring others no matter how egregiously they had insulted us. (“Shame, Guilt and Violence” 1154)<sup>13</sup>

What differs, then, is the directionality of the causal agency and the metaphors through which it is expressed: in shame, the reactions of others (real or imagined) act on the self; in guilt, the self acts on others. Similarly, in shame, the self is a spectacle, but, in guilt, the self is an agent.<sup>14</sup> As Martha Nussbaum writes, “[in] and of itself, guilt recognizes the rights of other” and thus aims “at a restoration of the wholeness of the separate object or person” (*Hiding* 207). Guilt, therefore, is not simply a conditioned response to an internalized legal code, but (like shame) occurs simply by virtue of our day-to-day encounters with other people. Perhaps it is even accurate to say that our capacity to empathize, and thus to feel guilty about harming others, emerges primarily from our awareness that we share with others a basic vulnerability to shame; certainly a large part of guilt ethics involves the attempt to avoid shaming or diminishing others in various ways (whereas shame ethics focus more on the attempt to safeguard one’s own honour). And while shame is typically accompanied by the fight or flight response, guilt evokes the desire to confess—to reveal rather than conceal; in Lewis’s assessment, guilt can

---

<sup>13</sup> Gilligan’s work with prison inmates has led him to produce some powerful arguments on the differences between shame and guilt, and about the connection between shame and violence. In short, Gilligan argues “that the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behaviour is the wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame and humiliation—a feeling that is painful and can even be intolerable and overwhelming—and replace it with its opposite, the feeling of pride” (“Shame” 1154). As one violent criminal put it to Gilligan in an interview, “I never got so much *respect* before in my life as I did when I pointed a gun at some dude’s face” (“Shame” 1149).

<sup>14</sup> This points to an important difference from Williams’s understanding of guilt, as a relation between the moral self (the Kantian “I”) and an objective law; I argue that guilt emerges in the self-other relation to the same extent as shame, but that it shapes this relation in a different, and better, way.

be understood as a “press toward confession, reparation, and apology” (19). While shame can be evoked by a wide variety of experiences, responses, acts, and relationships, guilt is almost always a result of one’s own hurtful actions or thoughts against someone else: guilt is not contagious in the way that shame is.<sup>15</sup> Guilt may be no less intense than shame, but its intensity comes in the form of self-directed anger, nagging or even obsessive thoughts about one’s transgression, wishing the action done or undone—but it is typically not gut-wrenching in the way that shame is. Precisely because the anger is directed so clearly and definitively at what I myself have done, or even simply at my self, the experience of guilt precludes the frightening, disorienting sensation of the dissolution of self or identity that often accompanies shame. In fact, in this sense, guilt can expressly counteract shame: because guilt is so closely connected with the awareness of the efficacy of one’s agency, for good or for ill, a deep sense of one’s own culpability can actually mitigate the feelings of vulnerability and inefficacy caused by shame. Gabrielle Taylor expresses this distinction well when she writes,

If I have done wrong then there is some way in which I can “make up” for it, if only by suffering punishment. But how can I possibly make up for what I now see I am? There are no steps that suggest themselves here. There is nothing to be done, and it is best to withdraw and not to be seen. This is typical reaction when feeling shame. Neither punishment nor forgiveness can here perform a function. (*Emotions* 90)

Because of these key differences—in the kinds of experiences that cause shame versus guilt, in the affective experience that each term denotes, and in the cognitive content of each experience—while shame produces an economy of

---

<sup>15</sup> As Taylor observes, guilt (unlike shame) “cannot be vicarious, and feelings of guilt similarly cannot arise from the deeds or omissions of others” (91).

sacrifice and demands propitiation, the empathic dimension of guilt results in the desire to make amends and to seek forgiveness. Thus, shame is to sacrifice what guilt is to grace: sacrifice and expurgation alleviate the one while forgiveness and absolution alleviate the other. What this means, more precisely, I will elaborate further in a comparative reading of sorts, between Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and the anonymous fourteenth-century romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

### Suspicious Guilt

At this point, I want to consider the most likely objection to my understanding of guilt: the view popularized by Freud and given immense intellectual traction in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, that the effect of the penitential turning inward of shame and the promise of forgiveness attendant upon confessing one's guilt has been, historically, the development of increasingly intrusive and psychological forms of control and repression. Freud's paradigmatic deconstruction of guilt as the means of controlling aggression in civilized man—"like a garrison in a conquered city" (*Civilization and its Discontents* 79)—cannot be fully understood without at least a cursory glance at Freud's most important predecessor, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Nietzsche's enquiry into the origins of the ideas of good and evil in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Here, Nietzsche too begins from the idea that our conception of guilt originates in debt, but he goes on to trace the history of that conceptual development in a way that directly opposes the definition I present above. For Nietzsche, as for Freud and

Foucault after him, the possibility of grace that follows from guilt does not represent true liberation from sacrifice, but is itself an interiorized, and therefore much more lethal, form of sacrificial punishment. In order to affirm the central dichotomy that I propose between shame and guilt, then, I must first address this central objection.

Nietzsche's understanding of guilt is closely tied to his understanding of what he calls the "slave revolt" in morality, which he attributes to the Judaeo-Christian subversion of pagan, heroic values—the master morality. We have seen how Bernard Williams explicates the master morality of Ancient Greece, the system of values in which strength and the acceptance of fate in an amoral universe constitutes one's honour, as instructive for our current existential situation. And, indeed, Williams does justice to Nietzsche's vision. But, for Nietzsche, what drives the Judaeo-Christian slave revolt, in which the moral judgment "good" (right) versus "evil" (wrong) replaces the amoral judgment "good" (high or noble) versus "bad" (low or weak), is a specific psychological trait that characterizes the slave, whoever is weak or oppressed, *ressentiment*:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different," what is "not itself"; and *this* No is its creative deed. (36)

The slave's No is a rejection of strength, power, worldly deeds and nobility, not because these are inherently evil but because the slave is unable to attain them. In Nietzsche's genealogy, what has become evil in the Judaeo-Christian value

system was all that once belonged to the master in pagan antiquity, all that once was considered good. The slave's "imaginary revenge" is thus expressed in the Christian axiom, "the first shall be last" (Mark 10:31).

The slave's psychology of *ressentiment*, in its essence, consists of this covert practice of the strategic, self-interested subversion of values. Because the man of *ressentiment* is unable to triumph by dint of real power over those who oppose him and humiliate him by their relative superiority, he must go underground; he must be devious:

While the noble man lives in trust and openness with himself, . . . the man of *ressentiment* is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul *squints*; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as his world, his security, his refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble. A race of such men of *ressentiment* is bound to become eventually cleverer than any noble race; it will also honor cleverness to a far greater degree.  
(*Genealogy* 39)

Of course, on one level, Nietzsche means that this race is his own: modern, decadent, Christian or post-Christian Europe, a civilization that cultivates the epistemological and philosophical adroitness that has made possible the very critique that Nietzsche inscribes in the *Genealogy*, but whose cleverness has reached its pinnacle and is now in decline towards total cultural collapse. Nietzsche thus addresses this crisis of modern man by exposing the true source of Christian and democratic values in *ressentiment*, in order to make way for a new and nobler order. In this project of undoing the Christian subversion of honour, Nietzsche deconstructs the central tenets of slave morality:

Weakness is being lied into something meritorious . . . and impotence which does not requite into "goodness of heart"; anxious lowliness into

“humility”; subjection to those one hates into “obedience” (that is, to one of whom they say he commands this subjection—they call him God). The inoffensiveness of the weak man, even the cowardice of which he has so much, his lingering at the door, his being ineluctably compelled to wait, here acquire flattering names, such as “patience,” and are even called virtue itself; his inability for revenge is called unwillingness to revenge, perhaps even forgiveness (“for they know not what they do—we alone know what they do!”) They also speak of “loving one’s enemies”—and sweat as they do so. (47)

With Girard, therefore, Nietzsche recognizes that concern for the victim lies at the heart of the Christian story, but instead of understanding this concern as Christianity’s greatest virtue, Nietzsche despises it as the source of all psychological ill-health and cultural malaise.<sup>16</sup> And the reason he does so is because he does not believe that true compassion or grace is possible. Humility and Christian neighbour-love can *only* be understood as covert power plays, rooted in the desire to overcome one’s weakness by subterranean means.

Nietzsche begins his second essay in the *Genealogy*, entitled “Guilt, Bad Conscience, and the Like,” by considering the apparent autonomy (to the nineteenth-century mind) of the modern, rational individual: “To breed an animal with the right to make promises—is this not the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man?” (57). The genealogy he proposes to trace here, therefore, is that of the idea of responsibility and its attendant ideas of free will and conscience. An animal with the right to make promises is one which

---

<sup>16</sup> This is a point that Girard himself makes in his own reading of Nietzsche (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*), see Chapter Fourteen, “The Twofold Nietzschean Heritage.” Girard points out that what is instructive about Nietzsche’s comparison of pagan mythology and Christianity is Nietzsche’s appalling consistency: that Nietzsche follows through to its bitter conclusion the rejection of the Judeo-Christian concern for victims (or slaves) in favour of pagan honour culture: “. . . to defend mythological violence, Nietzsche is obliged to justify human sacrifice, and he doesn’t hesitate to do so, resorting to horrifying arguments. He raises the stakes even on the worst social Darwinism. He suggests that to avoid degenerating, societies must get rid of humans who are waste, who hinder and weigh them down . . .” (174).

possesses a certain kind of memory, and one which has attained the moral capital, as it were, to vouch for himself. An animal with the right to make promises is also an animal with the capacity for guilt; for guilt, in Nietzsche's understanding, is incurred when one defaults on one's promises—when one is unable to pay what one owes. Nietzsche argues that this capacity was developed in man through the brutality of primeval justice and punishment, which rested on the notion that “if something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory. . . . Man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself” (61). The overcoming of pure animal instinct in primitive man for the purpose of establishing a “social existence” is thus an overcoming of forgetfulness through violence (61).

It is also the establishment of a social contract, specifically a contractual relationship between creditor and debtor. With a rhetorical bravado that Foucault was to later imitate and elaborate in *Discipline and Punish*, Nietzsche surveys the various gruesome means of “medieval” law enforcement, such as drawing and quartering, boiling in oil, flaying alive, etc., and asserts these “*mnemotechnics*” as the driving force of the social contract: “With the aid of such images and procedures one finally remembers five or six ‘I will not’s’ in regard to which one had given one’s *promise* so as to participate in the advantages of society—and it was indeed with the aid of this kind of memory that one at last came to ‘reason’!” (62). Guilt in terms of the German *Schuld* is thus conceived as a material debt to be paid by the transgressor of the primitive law, the one who forgets his promise



to conform—specifically, a debt to be paid with his body. Nietzsche opposes this notion with the “enlightened” view of guilt as demanding punishment in order to ensure that the wrongdoer is accountable, that he takes *responsibility*, for his *freely* chosen act. This view, Nietzsche contends, misunderstands individual responsibility as the foundation and *source* of morality rather than perceiving what it really is, a human construct forged through millennia of brutality.

Developing memory, creating the right to make promises, to be responsible, involved the transaction whereby the debtor could use his body or any other of his possessions (his wife, his freedom, his life) as surety; if he failed to repay, the creditor was entitled to extract, literally, a pound of flesh: in this way, payment is assured, and the debtor never forgets what he owes. What is central to this understanding of guilt and compensation, the rudimentary form of our own justice system, is the way in which it enshrines cruelty as the legal prerogative of political authority and, over time, clothes this sanctioned cruelty with the aura of righteousness. But make no mistake, Nietzsche insists: the lofty ideals by which we justify the law and the punishment of those who break it have their roots in nothing other than the desire, fundamental to human nature, to discharge one’s aggression and to inflict torment on those beneath us:

Let us be clear as to the logic of this form of compensation: it is strange enough. An equivalence is provided by the creditor’s receiving, in place of a literal compensation for an injury (thus in place of money, land, possessions of any kind), a recompense in the form of a kind of pleasure—the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely upon one who is powerless, the voluptuous pleasure “*de faire le mal pour le plaisir de le faire*,” the enjoyment of violation. . . . To ask it again: to what extent can suffering balance debts or guilt? To the extent that to make suffer was in the highest degree pleasurable, to the extent that the injured party exchanged for the loss of he had sustained, including the displeasure

caused by the loss, an extraordinary counterbalancing pleasure: that of *making* suffer. . . . (64-65)

Far from the naïvete of a belief in the natural moral law or an innate human conscience that dictates duty and right action, Nietzsche thus asserts that the origins of guilt and conscience were “soaked in blood thoroughly and for a long time” (65).

It is a logical progression from these bloody origins to the beginnings of the bad conscience in particular: the Christian sense of total depravity before God, and the shift from the master’s pleasure in making others suffer to the slave’s perverse pleasure in self-torture. Just as the slave revolt in morality involves the inversion of the good by means of clever impotence, a deviousness that substitutes for noble power, so here the Christian bad conscience involves the turning inward of the creditor’s prerogative to exact payment. And here we find the linchpin of what was to become Freud’s understanding of guilt: “all instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn inward—this is what I call the *internalization* of man: thus it was that man first developed what was later called his ‘soul’” (*Genealogy* 85). As the bonds and constraints of civilization multiplied and grew stronger, all the instincts that ensured primitive man’s survival (“hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction” [85]) were no longer allowed to be vented, and so were internalized: Nietzsche presents us with the image of man as a wild beast pacing in a cage, chafing against the bars and lacerating himself. In the absence of a real, external field of combat, man “had to turn himself into an adventure, a torture chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness” (85). And this process of domestication did

not happen spontaneously. The first “state” was one administered by the “conqueror and master race,” the creditors of the social debt, who pounded and tortured the wandering, semi-animal primitive into the form we call “man” (86).

The birth of the Christian God occurred on the ground of the slave’s fear of the ancestral master-creditor. The tribal social order was one founded on the “good” and “bad” or “high” and “low” distinction, but also the burden of unpaid debts to the ancestor-gods. The Judaeo-Christian order, imagining “the maximum god attained so far” also creates “the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness on earth”—a guilt so great that it cannot be repaid, a guilt that transcends material repayment (90). And in the same movement, we discover the inversion of values, the invention of good and evil, through which man is able torture himself because he can no longer torture someone else. But the idea of an irredeemable debt that demands *eternal* punishment also turns against the creditor, out of necessity, in a desperate bid to escape from an impossible burden:

—suddenly we stand before the paradoxical and horrifying expedient that afforded temporary relief for tormented humanity, that stroke of genius on the part of Christianity: God himself sacrifices himself for the guilt of mankind, God himself makes payment to himself, God as the only being who can redeem man from what has become unredeemable for man himself—the creditor sacrifices himself for his debtor, out of love (can one credit that?), out of love for his debtor! . . . Here is sickness, beyond any doubt, the most terrible sickness that has ever raged in man; and whoever can still bear to hear . . . how in this night of torment and absurdity there has resounded the cry of love, the cry of the most nostalgic rapture, of redemption through love, will turn away, seized by invincible horror.—There is so much in man that is hideous!—Too long, the earth has been a madhouse!— (92-93)

The image of God crucified—“who suffreth moore than God?”—reflects nothing other than a projection of man’s own sense of infinite, irredeemable guilt.

But the fact that this projection, what Lacan would call the *jouissance* of cruelty, finds expression in Christianity as love, Christ's unending love for humanity and the neighbour-love that we are supposed to extend even to our enemies (Nietzsche would say, especially to our enemies) fills him with such horror because it represents such a spectacular feat of culture-destroying dishonesty. To re-interpret the humiliation and shame of Christ as an act of love, through the clever but abased means of slavish thinking is, for Nietzsche, a particularly insidious form of self-deception. And, as Williams argues, it was not always this way; we can smell the rot of Christian decadence, as it were, precisely because we once breathed the clean, fresh air of Homer and Sophocles, whose aristocratic gods reflected the unflinching self-image of aristocratic men. Nietzsche thus contrasts the diseased notion of human guilt before God with the psychologically healthy notion of human honour in Ancient Greece, the last bastion of the master morality, "these splendid and lion-hearted children" (94). For the Greeks, Nietzsche contends, anything that went wrong was attributed not to sin but to man's folly, and even folly was attributed not to any particular human weakness but to the mischief of the gods themselves. Faced with any kind of atrocity or calamity and assured of their nobility and virtue, the Greeks looked not inward but outward for the source of their suffering: "He must have been deluded by a *god*," they concluded finally, shaking their heads. . . . In this way the gods served in those days to justify man to a certain extent even in his wickedness; . . . in those days they took upon themselves, not the punishment but, what is *nobler*, the guilt" (94).

We can see in Nietzsche's virtuosic but historically impressionistic

account several crucial components of the psychoanalytic treatment of guilt, and, clearly, it is an account that does not privilege guilt as a higher form of ethical reasoning, but rather as an invention designed to thwart man's natural instincts for health and life and as an expression of the will to power. From Nietzsche's primitive man's pleasure in cruelty and freely vented aggression, we have Freud's primitive man and the theory of drives. From Nietzsche's notion of socialized man's debt to the tribal founder, we have Freud's Oedipal drama, in which fear of and aggression towards the primal father produce the sense of guilt for his murder: Freud thus provides a more accessible story and a language to convey Nietzsche's insights, but the insights themselves are essentially unchanged. Like Nietzsche, Freud begins by noting the absence of guilt in the animal world; he then rejects the notion of an innate moral sense, in which certain actions or behaviours are naturally good or bad. As Freud observes, "what is [deemed] bad is often not at all what is injurious or dangerous to the ego; on the contrary, it may be something which is desirable and enjoyable to the ego" (*Civilization* 79). It must be, Freud concludes, an external influence rather than an innate capacity which is responsible for the initial distinction between good and bad: namely, a fear of a loss of love and punishment (i.e., castration) at the hands of an authority figure. When this fear is internalized, through the establishment of the super-ego, the individual's sense of guilt is formed. What is typically called conscience, therefore, is simply natural aggression thwarted and directed back towards the self.

In this way, Freud distinguishes between an immature fear of "being

caught” and true guilt, which is a tension that characterizes individual consciousness regardless of whether a wrongful act is committed. In the first instance, as in early childhood development, control is achieved through fear of an actual authority or parental figure; in the second, a more pervasive anxiety arises out of a “fear” of the superego. A true sense of guilt is thus rooted ultimately in the perpetual conflict between *eros* and *thanatos*, between the “internal erotic compulsion” that knits human beings together in community and the aggression which must be suppressed if civilization is to be preserved. Freud writes, if

civilization is a necessary course of development from the family to humanity as a whole, then—as a result of the inborn conflict arising from ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between the trends of love and death—there is inextricably bound up with it an increase of the sense of guilt which will perhaps reach heights that the individual finds hard to tolerate. (*Civilization* 89)

Here Freud hints at what is to be a central point, “that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt” (91). And it is this implicit contrast, between the freedom enjoyed by natural, instinctual man and the anxieties and neuroses—the *unhappiness*—suffered by civilized man, that Freud has imparted to academic and popular discourses alike.

Although both Nietzsche and Freud look back to a partly anthropological, partly mythological prehistory in order to imagine the earthly origins of guilt and morality, Nietzsche especially and Foucault after him also rely on an inherent distinction between premodern and modern, between the barbarism of past ages and the supposed enlightenment of the current age that they are trying to expose

as barbarism-in-denial. Foucault's analysis of the evolution of what he calls the scientifico-legal complex rests on the distinction between externalized and explicitly "medieval" modes of punishment and modern, internalized inducements towards guilt and remorse. The development in Nietzsche's genealogy from the pleasure of "making suffer" to that of self-torture is similarly expressed by Foucault: "The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (*Discipline* 16). And likewise, this development of apparently lenient or compassionate punishments, of private confession and contrition in place of public humiliation, and the concomitant development of a collective sensibility that is revolted rather than excited by the sight of a body in pain, reflects not an *evolution* to a higher form of consciousness but the growth of ever-more constraining psychological torments, the *jouissance* of cruelty internally oriented, thus intensified and made *supremely* clever.

#### *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Guilt and the Ethics of Non-Perfection*

In short, this suspicious approach posits guilt in terms that do not oppose shame and do not offer an ethical or psychological remedy for shame. And, although Nietzsche has little sense of a clear chronology, in many ways this understanding of suspicious guilt is constructed on the basis of a particular understanding of the medieval or premodern.<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault, in

---

<sup>17</sup> To challenge the suspicious account of guilt is thus also to challenge the alterity of a gothic Middle Ages: for, if we can make the case that medieval man is *not*, relative to modern man, a semi-primitive lacking an interiorized, reflective capacity, then we can also argue that guilt does not represent a process of domesticating this semi-primitive by means of a theology of self-

particular, precisely identify guilt rather than shame as the basis of an ethical paradigm that demands “a pound of flesh” for wrongs committed: guilt, not shame, is the currency in the economy of sacrifice. In this view, guilt itself rests on the conflation of material and spiritual, and consequently leaves no possibility for true grace.

In response to the Nietzschean account of guilt, I propose that we turn to particular representations of medieval guilt, to inquire whether we indeed find traces of a theology of self-torture. The Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* brings questions about penitential shame and guilt to bear on the idea of chivalric honour in a highly sophisticated and complex way.<sup>18</sup> This poem is striking in the context of our current discussion for the way in which it charts the affective incompatibility of shame and guilt, in the sense that Gawain’s shame impedes him from an understanding of Christian guilt. It is also striking for the way in which it registers the poet’s sense that penitential guilt offers a remedy for shame. But, most impressively, we can see in the Gawain-poet a psychological acumen to match Nietzsche’s own: the Gawain-poet too understands the primal aggression at work in cultural forms that purport to transcend the will to power, and he represents clearly and realistically the sublimation and inversion involved

---

torture. Fortunately, the first is not a difficult case to make. There is much historical and literary evidence to support this challenge, and much critical work that recognizes the late Middle Ages as a period of incredible and complex cultural production, and a period of extreme contrasts; indeed, it seems redundant to pursue extensively this line of argument here. The wonder is, since we do have available such an extensive body of scholarship that presents a full and rich historical picture of the medieval period, why our understanding of guilt has not progressed much *beyond* suspicion.

<sup>18</sup> In what follows, I am indebted to several discussions of honour and shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, including: Burrow, “Honour and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”; Wasserman, “Honor and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”; Pearsall, “Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment”; Benson, “The Lost Honor of Sir Gawain”; Miller, *Humiliation, and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*, 183-96.



in courtliness. But, unlike Nietzsche, the Gawain-poet also suggests the possibility of true transcendence, which is dependent upon the conscious rejection of the false humility and false forgiveness that Nietzsche deconstructs. What the Gawain-poet proposes, in other words, is a rejection of the economy of sacrifice, not out of a *ressentiment* that deceives itself, but out of an awareness that the externalized ethics of shame and honour are essentially self-defeating.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is commonly considered both the epitome of and an ironic reflection on medieval romance. Here, the ideal self against which the protagonist is measured is not only the ideal of chivalric identity, but also the various literary incarnations of one of Arthur's best knights. And this ideal self is construed in the narrative as "surquidre," or pride, not in the penitential sense as the chief of sins, but in terms of honour and reputation—the all-important "name" of the chivalric knight. Gawain's reputation and the renown of the Round Table are continually invoked, questioned, tested, and rendered uncertain in a playful, intertextual dialogue with romance conventions of the hero. "Sir, if ye be Wawen," says the Lady when she teases him for a kiss (1481); similarly, when Gawain flinches at a feinted blow from an axe, betraying his fear of death, the axe-wielding Green Knight asserts outright, "Thou art not Gawayn" (2270). And, of course, Morgan le Fay's stated purpose in testing Gawain is to test the Round Table's "surquidre"—their renown as knights of great strength and courage. As Pitt-Rivers points out, honour is based on external performance and appearance, and must be won and subsequently guarded and maintained with unceasing vigilance. Honour demands display, and when Gawain does not

perform according to expectations, his identity becomes uncertain, his very selfhood threatens to dissolve: despite his repeated assertions, “I am who I am,” the poem’s fundamental message insists, “you are not who you think you are.” The painfulness of this experience, however, is balanced by the irony which is generated by means of a complex plot structure involving two interlocking games, the “beheading game” and the “exchange of winnings” game. Unbeknownst to Gawain, a move in one game is a move in the other, and how he performs in the exchange of winnings game—honourably or not—determines whether he gets to keep his head—or not.

The core of Gawain’s ideal self is emblemized (literally) in his chivalric insignia, the pentangle. In each of the five “fives” symbolized by the pentangle, the demands of worldly valour confront the demands of Christian spirituality. The tension between these two sets of demands is signaled by the image of Mary painted on the inner side of Gawain’s shield, itself a symbol of chivalric militarism. Gawain places all of his trust (or so we are told) in the five wounds of Christ, and all of his prowess comes from the five joys of Mary, and yet these two sides interlock with the five virtues of chivalry that firmly root Gawain in his obligations to his king and the brotherhood of knights:

And alle his afyauunce vpon folde watz in the fyue woundez  
That Crist kaght on the croys, as the Crede tellez

...

... alle his forsnes he fong at the fyue joyez  
That the hende Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde.

...

The fyft fyue that I finde that the frek vsed  
Watz fraunchyse and felagship forbe al thing,  
His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,  
And pité, that passez alle poyntez —thyse pure fyue

Were harder happed on that hathel then on any other. (641-55)

At the beginning of Gawain's journey, the narrator seems to affirm a blithe confidence in Gawain's ability to fulfill these conflicting obligations, and we have no reason to believe that Gawain himself doubts his ability either. He is "fautlez in fyue wittez" and "fayled neuer" in his "fyue fynGRES" (640-42). And when he arrives at Hautdesert, the excited whispers of the courtiers—"Now schal we semlych se sleghtez of thewez / And the teccheles termes of talkyng noble" (916-17)—seem to confirm it: a lion on the battlefield, a lamb in the court, Gawain is the quintessential hero. But the action of the poem proceeds to test every facet of Gawain's perfections, and, in nearly every aspect, he is found wanting. The process of revealing the truth of Gawain's nature, which turns out to be more human than heroic, is gradual and not always immediately apparent to the reader. It is only when we read back from the conclusion, in which the two games are revealed to be related, that we realize how the perfectionist ideals of romance have been the object of a subtle but effective parody.

Burrow has commented that the poem "is not *about* honour and shame," but that "it seems to take them largely for granted in its Arthurian world" (130). And, indeed, the basic principles of competition and reciprocity shape nearly every encounter and dialogue in the poem: even non-aggressive exchanges such as courteous conversation, hospitality, exchange of gifts, expressions or practices of piety, constitute arenas in which honour may be gained or lost. Similarly, Britton J. Harwood has argued that the world of the poem is governed by what anthropologists since Mauss have called the "economy of the gift," in which gift-

giving and exchanging constitute displays of honour and a means of asserting prestige in times of peace; the economy of the gift is thus the non-violent incarnation of the economy of sacrifice. In this competitive ethos, the poet sets up a series of contrasts between different images of maleness—contrasts that imply the perpetual sizing up of relative amounts of honour in an honour culture. Arthur and his knights, lounging in opulence at their New Year's feast, are first contrasted with the British kings who love fighting. Brutus and his kind are bold and win their conquests with joy: combining martial prowess with the jollity it affords, they resemble the simplicity of Nietzsche's masters. But the narrator indicates that, even in these heroic times, Britain was a place of "both blysse and blunder," and the lineage of British kings is tainted with "tricherie" and "gret bobbaunce" (18; 4; 9). And when we reach the supposed pinnacle of this golden age, Camelot in its prime, we are given the sense that, even at this point, decline is in the air. Arthur is singled out, not for his strength and courage in battle (perhaps these are assumed), but for being the "hendest" or most courteous of these ancient kings. The picture we are given of Arthur's court is a far cry from the image of rugged masculinity required to lay the foundations of British civilization. Courtiers dally with ladies. Knights play games and joust for sport. Tables are spread with the finest delicacies. Life is a decadent affair. The triviality of this existence is reflected in the restless immaturity of Arthur, who "watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered" (86). His young blood and "brayn wylde" suggest, as Anderson notes, "a potentially damaging carelessness, a lack of stability and responsibility" (341).

This potential is realized when the Green Knight charges into the hall on his green horse, interrupting the festivities and stunning the court into silence. In this scene, the poem presents the second contrast, between the burly green man and the youthful Arthurian knights, who appear as beardless children by comparison. Accordingly, in the exchange of insults that ensues, the Green Knight questions their masculinity (“‘What, is this Arthures hous,’ quoth the hathel thenne, / ‘That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?’” [309-10]), and Arthur “for scham” jumps to take the bait (317). The fundamental ambiguity of the Green Knight—he insults and goads the knights but insists, and his clothing attests, that he does not seek a fight; he carries a holly bough in one hand and an axe in the other—allows Arthur and his court to reveal much about their own folly in how they choose to interpret him. The narrator takes pains to emphasize the Green Knight’s lack of armour and, save the ominous battle-axe, lack of conventional weaponry (203-09). And despite his mockery of Arthur and his “gyng,” the Green Knight is quite unambiguous in his purpose:

Bot I wolde no were, my wedez ar softer.  
 Bot if þou be so bold as alle burnez tellen,  
 Pou wyl grant me godly þe gomen þat I ask  
 Bi ry t. (271-74)

The Green Knight states that he comes not for a fight but for a game, as is fitting for the season. Arthur’s reply to this invitation is telling, for he replies belligerently to a challenge that was not even offered:

Arthour con onsware  
 And sayd, “Sir cortays knyght,  
 If þou craue batayl bare,  
 Here faylez þou not to fyght.” (275-78)

The subsequent grumblings of the courtiers about Arthur's "angardez pryde" placing Gawain in danger, although made with the benefit of hindsight, emphasize this folly. And significantly, while the Green Knight sets the rules of his Christmas game in terms of an exchange of blows, he does not actually specify beheading. Presumably, Gawain could have used the holly bough as his instrument of choice, or could have merely nicked the Green Knight with the axe, as he himself is dealt later on.<sup>19</sup> But Arthur and all the court choose to interpret the enigmatic figure as a threat to be destroyed rather than as the playful Christmas game for which Arthur claimed he was looking. Arthur thus encourages Gawain to "redez hym ryght" (373) as the surest way to preserve his own life, suggesting that if Gawain strikes with enough force and accuracy, he will not have to worry about reuniting with the Green Knight next Christmas. Gawain acts accordingly, and his long ordeal is thereby set in motion. The subsequent narrative tension, in which we, along with the courtiers, fear for Gawain's life and wonder at what the Green Knight could possibly be about, is born in this one decisive moment: interpreting the intruder as hostile, the knights become hostile, and from thenceforward Gawain must be ever on guard against reciprocal hostilities. This is the mimesis of shame, and the cycle of honour-bound vengeance (or "gift" giving) that it creates, in action. And, crucially, it originates in the encounter with ambiguity, in the psychological and social imperative to interpret ambiguity into something certain and identifiable (an

---

<sup>19</sup> The suggestion that Gawain ought to have used the holly bough instead of the axe was first made by Victoria Weiss ("Gawain's First Failure: The Beheading Scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*"). The issue has been taken up several times since Weiss: see, for example, Sharma, "Hiding the Harm: Revisionism and Marvel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*."

intruder, an opponent), and particularly in the *choice* to respond to ambiguity with aggressive self-defensiveness.

That we are meant to disapprove of Arthur's rashness and Gawain's attempt to "redez hym right" is not unambiguous. And yet Gawain's motivation in actually beheading the Green Knight—to prevent his opponent's return blow—is re-enacted when he accepts and conceals the girdle out of love for his life. What Gawain thus betrays is a fear of death; he demonstrates a kind of cowardice that is only obscured by his readiness to take Arthur's place in the game; it is thus a strategic cowardice—a calculating humility—that is strikingly at odds with the pentangle ideal of perfect courage and perfect trust in Mary and ChriSt Burrow observes that the apparent humility with which Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge on Arthur's behalf "is no more a Christian virtue here than pride [in the sense of surquidre] is a deadly sin" ("Honour and Shame" 121). His speech before the court and the Green Knight, in which he declares that he is "the wakkest" and "of wyt feblest," is a strategy by which "the Round Table stands to gain the greatest possible honour if he succeeds, and the least dishonour if he fails" ("Honour and Shame" 121). But, compared with the Green Knight, the Arthurian knights are like boys playing at chivalry—hot-headed and defensive but foolish. When given the opportunity to prove themselves in a test of reciprocity, their aggression is in reality a scheme to avoid a just return. This is, at least, the picture presented by the Green Knight's laughing insults; at this point, the Green Knight seems to suggest that there is nothing real at stake in their silly games, and

their renowned courtesy is nothing more than effeminate dissembling. In other words, they are not *real men*.<sup>20</sup>

These comparisons foreshadow the central contrast between Bertilak and Gawain at Hautdesert. The faultless hospitality that Gawain experiences from the moment he enters the “comlokest” castle places him in a subordinate position from the start. The compliments and concessions he makes to his host—what Burrow calls “the sophistry of honour” (124)—in order to retain his dignity as the object of charity, only implicate him further in the complex scheme in which he is an unknowing pawn. In good form, the host thanks him for honouring his house with his presence, and Gawain replies, “Al the honour is your awen” (1038). As the exchange of compliments progresses, the host is able to elicit promises from Gawain—first to stay at Hautdesert until his meeting with the Green Knight, then to rest and regain his strength by staying indoors, and finally to enter the exchange of winnings contest. This last is phrased explicitly in terms of honour (“sware with trawthe”) and competition (“Quether leude so lympe here other better”) (1108-09). While the game appears to be in fun, it is no less about gaining the upper hand than are the exchanges of courtesy. The rules of the game are that, for the three consecutive days that Gawain is to rest at the castle in preparation for his encounter at the Green Chapel, his host will go hunting. Each evening, the two men are to hand over to the other what each has “won” over the course of the day.

---

<sup>20</sup> On gender in the poem, and specifically on representations of maleness, see Dinshaw, “A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”; Geraldine Heng, “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”; Sheila Fisher, “Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” and her “Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” See also Catherine Cox, “Genesis and Gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.”



Ostensibly, the purpose is a competition to see whose offering is the most impressive, whose “winning” is the most productive. This ostensible competition, although it initially appears in sport, is mirrored in their exchange of compliments, which is a kind of verbal combat, as each tries to best the other in gentility, generosity, and hospitality. Nonetheless, the host’s casual demeanour and apparent concern for Gawain’s welfare lulls him into a false sense of security. Thus Gawain, the consummate love-talker outwitted by courtesy, is hoisted with his own petard.

In the bedroom scenes that follow, the gendered dimension of Gawain’s subordination is made clear, and the groundwork for his final humiliation is laid: the deeper he is drawn into the trap, the more assured he becomes that he is besting the Lady’s attempts to ensnare him. The terms of the game (terms which Gawain was obligated by the rules of courtesy to accept) are such that, while Bertilak spends his days outside hunting—active, physical, in combat with nature—Gawain stays inside, in a private chamber, supine, passive, in verbal combat with the Lady. Indeed, Gawain’s remarkable inaction throughout the poem leads John Plummer to comment that its subject matter “is not deeds but words” (“Signifying the Self” 195). Noting the poem’s departure from the traditional romance in this regard, Plummer writes further, “Love and battle, sex and violence, . . . hover over the story as potentials but are realized only in symbolic, displaced forms. . . . [M]artial prowess is reduced to two blows, both harmless, falling twelve months apart” (195).

But of course the “words” that constitute the poem’s subject are not only, or even primarily, those exchanged between Gawain and Bertilak, but those between Gawain and the Lady. When Gawain is surprised by the lady on the first morning, we already know that he has noticed her great beauty, which we are told surpasses even Guinevere’s. At the Christmas Day feast, they sit together and engage in a little innocent flirting, and he finds much “comfort of her compaynye caghten togeder” (1011). Harvey de Roo points out that “There can be no doubt that a good part of Gawain’s response to the lady . . . is based on sexual attraction” (314). Consequently, when she sneaks into his room the next morning and makes the playful offer of her “cors,” Gawain is quick to overcome his surprise and engage her in a courteous love game (1237). The tone here is light, and the lady’s real intentions are unclear. But as the conversation progresses, and the Lady feigns true feeling, Gawain begins to reveal the egotism that fuels his courtesy. When the Lady, upon leaving, accuses him of acting out of character, he fears that “he hade fayled in fourme of his castes” (1295). That is, totally unconcerned with the substance of their interactions—whether or not his behaviour is consistent with his own ideals of chastity and trawthe, and regardless of the lady’s true feelings—Gawain fears only that he may have lost the game of their “verbal sex-play” (de Roo, “Undressing Lady Bertilak” 316).

In other words, from Gawain’s perspective, the Lady may well be sincere in her hints of love and affection, but *his* primary concern is to display his verbal prowess at her expense. The sense that Gawain takes the Lady’s advances at face value is emphasized when they sit together on the second day of the Christmas

feast and she continues to flirt with him as she did the first night. We are told that this time Gawain becomes inwardly “wroth” with himself but does not dare snub her “for his nurture”; he responds in kind, but has become self-conscious about how their behaviour may appear (1657-63). Assuming the Lady to be in earnest during their bedroom encounters, he is shocked to see her carrying on their private flirtation in public when she ought to be discreet. His confusion here foreshadows the shame he feels when their encounters are made fully public; it also points to a crucial discrepancy between Gawain’s interpretation of the relationship and the Lady’s.

Gawain’s confidence in his ability to navigate the murky waters of feminine designs and desires is rendered ironic by virtue of the reversal and general slipperiness of gender roles here. The Lady pursues him, enters his bedchamber as brazenly as a would-be ravisher, and offers herself as *his* servant while he lies naked under the bedcovers. His emasculation is dramatized when he must bestow the kisses he has “won” on Bertilak. Carolyn Dinshaw states the matter clearly: in these homoerotic moments, “Gawain acts like a woman” (“Heterosexuality” 211). He follows the rules of the game to the letter, kissing his host first “comlyly,” then “hendely,” and on the last day “as sauerly and sadly as he hem sette couthe” (1389, 1639, 1937). He thus recreates the erotic charge that characterized his encounter with the lady and raises the spectre of sodomy—the “chek” he would be obligated to deliver if he could not resist the Lady’s advances (1107). In this way, the possibility of a more literal emasculation looms behind the text and emphasizes the fragility of Gawain’s chivalric identity, ignorant as he

is of the real stakes of the contest. The structure of the plot thus catches Gawain in an irresolvable dilemma: his honour depends upon his performance both in the bedroom and at the Green Chapel, and yet he has already been placed in a subordinate position from which no honourable escape is possible.

When Gawain accepts the girdle, he has been made vulnerable by his sense that he has been playing the lady—deflecting her advances, letting her down gently as it were—and his complete ignorance of the fact that she has been playing him. His ostensible reason for taking the girdle is not self-interest, but to oblige the Lady who has essentially made an open declaration of love, been rebuffed, and requested an exchange of gifts in order to ease her pain at his leaving. In reality, of course, he accepts the girdle even though he has nothing to give in return, because “Hit were a juel for the joparde that hym jugged were” (1856). Thus, just as he beheaded the Green Knight in an attempt to prevent a return blow, here he breaks the cycle of reciprocity because he fears for his life. Just before the Lady enters his room, he has been tossing and turning in bed, suffering nightmares about the “wyrde” that awaits him at the Green Chapel. The Lady appeals to this fear while seeming to act out of her own unrequited desire for him, convincing him of the sincerity of her feelings by making him promise to keep the gift a secret from her husband—validating Gawain’s perception of their relationship in the way that her earlier indiscretion did not. Gawain can thus break his agreement with his host and justify his action by appealing to the courtesy which demands that a knight obey the Lady to whom he has pledged service.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> To assume the insincerity of the Lady’s words we must, of course, account for the narrator’s remark prior to the third morning: “Bot þe lady, for luf, let not to slepe, / Ne þe purpose

Gawain leaves the Lady and goes to the priest to confess and be absolved, apparently with a clear conscience. The observance of this sacrament is often understood as perfunctory: that while Gawain shows all the signs of a dutiful piety, he does so in the same way that he is careful not to fail “in fourme of his castes.” Derek Pearsall argues that Gawain “has no inward sense of religion. . . . At its most spectacularly demonstrative, in his adoption of the pentangle, Christian faith is little more for him than a sentimental or even superstitious attachment to *objets de foi*” (352). According to Pearsall, this is how religion functioned historically in chivalric life, as a “strictly codified version of the inner life to be hauled to the surface for inspection and dismissal” (353). And yet it is precisely his adoption of the pentangle, and the significant claims it makes both for Gawain’s religious devotion and his chivalric prowess, that lead to Gawain’s shame when the Green Knight exposes how far he is from embodying the ideal. Ultimately, however, the problem is not with Gawain but with the ideal itself: the “endeles knot” of perfection is not attainable for finite human beings. As Gawain points out, rather laconically, if his head is cut off, he will not be able to pick it up and ride away unscathed: “Bot thagh my hede falle on the stonez / I con not hit restore” (2282-83). Understanding the pentangle as a sign of contradiction makes sense of the tension between Gawain’s courtesy and his *trawthe* when he is cornered by the Lady. His duty as a knight of courtesy, as she reminds him, is the “*lel layk of luf*,” or the faithful practice of love (1513). But he is equally obligated

---

to payre þat pyght in hir hert” (1733-34). Andrew and Waldron interpret “for luf” as “for wooing,” and thus the Lady’s “purpose” as the plan to ensnare him. I apply this interpretation here provisionally, although I do not rule out entirely the possibility that the Lady might also, on some level, have her own feelings and desires, apart from the “gomen” in which she has agreed to participate.

to keep his trawthe: as a representative of the Round Table, the honour of his king and the dictates of Christian virtue demand his honesty and chastity. He fails in “trawthe” and “felaghschyp” when he conceals the girdle from Bertilak, he fails in “forsnes” or courage when he values his life over his honour, and his courtesy to the Lady is indeed shown to be “croked” (653). But the poet suggests that, when courtesy constitutes an arena for the winning or losing of honour, it is *essentially* croked. Troth, courage, and fellowship, on the other hand, constitute the outward signs that define honourable male conduct in the world of chivalry. When Gawain first accepts and then conceals the girdle, his inability to make a reciprocal gift to the lady and his failure to exchange his winnings with his host make manifest the gender role reversal in the bedroom scenes: failing to make a “worthy return” in more ways than one, Gawain exposes his fundamental inadequacy. In the terms established by Pitt-Rivers, Gawain leaves his honour “in a state of desecration,” and his failure is therefore “equivalent to cowardice” (Pitt-Rivers 26).

In this sense, the intricate web of Gawain’s obligations is complicated by the presence of nominal Christianity but is not fundamentally altered by it. Gawain does not sin by withholding the girdle, and so he does not need to confess his action to the priest. His failure is rather a source of shame, but only once it is brought to light at the Green Chapel: if honour consists of display, then shame consists of exposure. Indeed, Gawain’s shame is imposed by a complex series of exposures, as each layer of the bizarre scheme of entrapment is revealed. First, the Green Knight explains the meaning of the two feinted blows and the final tap on

the neck: on the first and second days of the exchange of winnings game, Gawain gave to his host all that he had gained but on the third day he failed. By telling Gawain that the girdle he wears actually belongs to him, the Green Knight also reveals that he is Bertilak in a magic disguise. Moreover, he knows about the secret bedroom encounters because he instructed his wife to seduce their unwitting guest. The Green Knight's tone here and throughout this final scene is light and, according to some, "good-natured" (Harwood 491). He assures Gawain that he only "lakked a lyttel," and that he remains true to the sign on his shield, the "fautlest freke that euer on fote yede" (2366, 2363). Because Gawain accepted the girdle not for "wowing" but because he loved his life, the Green Knight hardly blames him. But if the Green Knight intends this revelation to be good-natured, then Gawain's response is strangely inappropriate. He stops short, speechless and mortified, "Alle the blode of his brest blende in his face, / That al he schrank for schome that the schalk talked" (2371-72). The Green Knight's recognition of Gawain's true motivation for keeping the girdle underscores the self-interested ignobility of his behaviour from the outset. At two critical junctures Gawain could have extricated himself from the plot: when he struck the first blow at Camelot—the truly brave, by risking the chance of a return blow, would have chosen the holly bough—and when he withheld the girdle. At each of these junctures he acted out of love for his life rather than true chivalric bravery. Thus, the Green Knight's trivializing of Gawain's fear of death ("the lasse I yow blame" [2369]) can only rub salt into the gaping wound of his exposed inadequacy.

Consequently, when Gawain does speak, his words come in a torrent of spite and self-loathing, cursing himself for his cowardice and covetousness, villainy and vice, for failing in “larges and lewte,” for treachery and “unrawthe” (2374-83). The incoherence of his speech has long baffled critics in that it is not clear how he has committed the faults he identifies. It is precisely at this point, however, that the poet makes manifest the conflict of ideas about who Gawain is or ought to be as signified by the pentangle: the delicate balance of the interlocking lines means that failure in any respect causes the entire structure to collapse. Or, as Pearsall puts it, “one break in the circuit [causes] the circuit to fail, for chivalry, like the pentangle, is an ‘endeles knot’” (Pearsall 351). His angry incoherence, then, expresses the contradiction of his Christian chivalry and effectively dramatizes the disintegration of his identity. Similarly, after the Green Knight bestows his absolution, he invites Gawain back to his castle to enjoy the rest of the New Year’s feast and be reconciled with the Lady, whom he jokingly refers to as Gawain’s “enmy kene” (2406). But Gawain is still operating on an entirely different level, and for him the Lady is indeed a serious adversary. Unable to avenge himself on the Green Knight, he turns his anger on her in an attempt to redirect his shame, and aligns her with a biblical genealogy of temptresses from Eve to Bathsheba, and himself with the male victims of their “wyles” from Adam to Solomon (2414-28). The formulaic expression of misogyny seems remarkably at odds with Gawain’s identity as a knight of courtesy, so much so that Andrew and Waldron read it as “a rueful witticism; . . . a tactful, half-jocular, use of the ecclesiastical commonplace of the ‘eternal Eve’”



(n. to ll. 2425-28). Harwood similarly downplays Gawain's vitriol, seeing the outburst as a sign of conversion, a momentary lapse as Gawain comes to grips with a sense of his own sinfulness. The timing of the speech is also strange—de Roo calls it anticlimactic: “[Gawain] is well-launched on a courteous farewell to lord and, through him, ladies, when suddenly, out of nowhere, comes to old antifeminist raving. And this from the mouth of the ‘gentylest knight of lote’” (de Roo 305). But throughout the poem, courtesy is represented as a kind of honour competition, and if we understand Gawain's performance in the bedroom as demonstrative of egotism rather than genuine respect for the Lady, then his tirade here is perfectly consistent with his latently aggressive attitude throughout. It is also appropriate given Gawain's feminized status vis-à-vis the Green Knight. Until this moment, Gawain believed that the Lady genuinely desired him, perhaps was even in love with him, and that he had maintained the upper hand in their encounters. When he learns that he was her victim and, vicariously, his host's, he suffers a serious blow to his ego. His tirade, then, constitutes a rather desperate ploy to distance himself from the Lady, to regain his honour by aligning himself with authentic (and deceived) maleness—he needs to purge himself, as it were, of the taint of femininity that, as he now realizes, constitutes his shame. He is struggling to find some way of excising his own shame by increasing degrees of dissociation: he first accuses himself but uses the third person pronoun; he then accuses “woman” as a means of negating his own feminized behaviour as much as the Lady—who, after all, has played the part of “man” in the bedroom.

When Gawain has finished his litany of self-accusations, the Green Knight laughs and tells him that he has now confessed all, performed his penance, and his soul is as clean as a newborn babe's (2394). This invocation of Christian sacramental language recalls Gawain's earlier confession and absolution: while we are given no indication that his earlier confession was not valid, in the context of chivalric competition, institutionally sanctioned penance appears to carry no real ethical weight. What is being tested, supposedly, is "surquidre"—pride as honour, rather than pride as the sin of presumption. But the Green Knight's "forgiveness" of Gawain suggests implicitly another possibility—that of understanding Gawain's true failure not as the failure to live up to the pentangle, nor his humiliation as the object of Morgan le Fay's scheme, but in terms of basic human sinfulness. The kind of weakness that motivates us to deceive ourselves or to lash out at others is, from the perspective of shame, a weakness that must be kept hidden at all costs. But from the perspective of guilt, it is a weakness that can be understood, forgiven, and repaired. The Green Knight's forgiveness implies exactly that: Gawain's failure is a minor one, and he is not a threat or obstacle to be destroyed; rather, he is accepted and forgiven, even though he lacks "a little"—even though he does not really embody the pentangle. But the Green Knight's forgiveness also constitutes another interruption in the cycle of reciprocal gifts and blows. The difference between this interruption and Gawain's failure, however, is that the Green Knight's forgiveness is not self-interested or self-defensive; it is not a strategic exercise in sublimated aggression. It is, unlike the bestowing of a gift in a gift economy, a move that defuses rather than escalates

the chain of reciprocal exchanges. But Gawain does not understand that he has been forgiven, because he experiences only shame and not guilt. From this perspective, the Green Knight's forgiveness is like a blow that cannot be returned. Gawain has nothing to "give" the Green Knight that will restore his honour; once forgiven, he cannot strike back. This underlying principle of exchange is what is problematized in the poem, for as the Green Knight asserts, "Trwe mon trwe restore, / Thenne thar mon drede no wathe" (2354-55). True and honest men pay what they owe—they deliver a return blow, they stand surety for themselves and the promises they make. In the mimetic escalation of aggression, reciprocity must be maintained. But the poem itself frustrates this imperative: Gawain is shamed and must reciprocate, but he is also forgiven and therefore cannot reciprocate.

David Aers finds fault with what he sees as the poem's comfortable reconciliation of courtly and chivalric values, and the absence of a critique of institutional corruption. Aers argues that the church is here "totally assimilated to the poem's version of courtly existence" (95). But it seems that, far from a comfortable reconciliation, the juxtaposition of Gawain's two confessions and his eventual abandonment of the pentangle effectively dramatize the fundamental *incompatibility* of church and court. In this sense, the poem clarifies the difference between guilt according to Christian moral law and shame according to the courtly honour code. Or rather, it is indeed true that, for Gawain (and Camelot generally), the church is "totally assimilated" to courtly values, but it is hardly clear that we are meant to adopt Gawain's view of things. The target of the satire is not, in a direct and explicit way, institutional practices around penance, but the

lip-service paid to religious forms in the worlds of chivalry and romance. And the method of the satire is not to apply Christian morality as the standard and then to present the romance hero as guilty of breaking it, but to show the extent to which the honour culture of romance is ethically self-defeating. In other words, if honour is won and maintained by perfect piety, perfect prowess, and perfect courtesy, the poet suggests, no one can escape shame. And, indeed, at the end of his discomfiting ordeal, Gawain is welcomed back into the community with open arms. The tragedy of heroic shame is transformed into a comedy of errors. Gawain has completed the hero's exile-and-return rite of passage, but he returns as an ordinary man, full of human flaws and foibles, rather than a larger-than-life epic hero. In this sense, Gawain's shame is, like Will's, "private and quotidian." What the poet achieves, in short, is a marvelously subtle parody of the ideal of the romance hero. While Gawain's adventure is one that would not be out of place in the fantastic worlds of Chrétien or Malory, the element of parody consists in the representation of the psychological cost of striving for an ideal of perfection.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* thus evinces what philosopher Charles Griswold calls a "non-perfectionist" ethic. In his excellent study, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, Griswold distinguishes between the perfectionist and the non-perfectionist positions, and traces the former in Aristotelian, Platonic, and Stoic thought, but also in Nietzsche's work, which he considers a modern variant of the ethical view that is "inhospitable to seeing forgiveness as a virtue" (xxi). While Griswold is not explicitly concerned with shame and guilt, we can see how his idea of the perfectionist outlook corresponds to shame ethics, while the non-

perfectionist corresponds to guilt. Perfectionist ethics, like shame ethics, begin with an ideal that the individual must strive to attain—in this case, an ideal of the good human life, which requires a kind of moral perfection; in consequence, “the idea of the inherent dignity of persons seems missing from this perfectionist . . . [or] aristocratic scheme” (Griswold 9). On the other hand, the morally perfect man (the Sage, for example) is essentially invulnerable to injury from others, and would never injure another person; for such a self-sufficient being, forgiveness is irrelevant. In Nietzsche’s aristocratic or perfectionist position, as we have seen, forgiveness is

part of a moral system that must be rejected *in toto*, for it is a system in which the weak and ignoble are empowered, control is exercised through sentiments such as guilt and in which it is impossible to “say ‘yes’ to life.” On [Nietzsche’s] view, one forgives when revenge is impossible; but as this would be insincere forgiveness, one nurses resentment. (*Forgiveness* 16)

Similarly, the central tension shaping the dramatic but vexed “revelation scene” at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one between Gawain’s guilt, which presupposes non-perfection, which we can understand in a variety of ways (his pride, perhaps, or the sins he confesses to the priest) and which is forgivable—he is absolved not once but twice—and his shame, which presupposes a failure to attain perfection and from which he cannot recover, even after his own community refuses to see his failure in the game as dishonouring the Round Table. Arthur and his court, of course, go so far as to adopt the girdle as a badge of *honour*, and thereby cancel out any potential for Gawain’s own stock of honour to be diminished. Gawain’s fellow knights, therefore, do not “forgive” him for his failure, but instead perform a kind of mathematical adjustment in

which the collective honour of the group is recalibrated to be equal with Gawain's. For, as Gawain's apparent insensibility to both his formal and his informal absolution suggests, in the shame ethics of chivalry, forgiveness serves no purpose and has no real meaning. Indeed, from Gawain's perspective—the perspective of an ideal self emblemized in the perfect pentangle—the Green Knight's forgiveness for what Gawain “lakked” is experienced by Gawain himself as humiliation. This gap, between Gawain's perceptions and the ethical reality implied in the ironic treatment of those perceptions, indicates the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the ideals implied in shame and the aspiration to perfection and self-sufficiency, and, on the other, the recognition of fallibility and vulnerability in guilt.

This gap is also captured in the sharp and often humorous contrast between Gawain's vitriolic self-censure and misogyny and the Green Knight's gentle levity. In contrast to the way that Gawain perceives himself, alternating between inflated notions of the “endeles knot” and the self-loathing that results when the knot is undone, the Green Knight looks on Gawain as a father would a foolish but loveable child—patronizingly but benignly. We see this levity in the frequency with which the Green Knight laughs (laughter which, when directed at the knights' foibles, is interpreted by them as provocation), but it is perhaps most clear after he has delivered his three return “blows” on Gawain's fateful day of reckoning. After he is nicked by Green Knight's blade, Gawain sees his own blood bright red against snow, and he jumps back, sword and shield in hand, ready for proper combat. The sense conveyed in these lines is of Gawain's

incredible relief, a kind of triumphant joy that he is still alive: the narrator tells us that there was “neuer in this worlde wy e half so blithe” as he faces his opponent (2321). But in response to Gawain’s armed eagerness, the Green Knight is completely relaxed. He puts down his axe, leans against it, and looks at Gawain:

How that doughty, dredles, deruely ther stondez,  
 Armed ful aghlez; in hert hit hym lykez.  
 Penn he melez muryly wyth a much steuen  
 And, wyth a rynkande rurde, he to þe renk sayde,  
 “Bolde burne, on þis bent be not so gryndel.” (2334-38)

The Green Knight’s posture and words here sum up his attitude throughout the entire poem, and it is one of good humour, admiration for all of Gawain’s strengths, and, above all, one that encourages Gawain (and his fellow knights) to replace their ironclad ideals with a more humane acceptance of whatever they may lack: be not so “gryndel,” that is, be not so angry and quick to take offense, do not treat every occasion as one in which you must prove your honour and your manhood, do not take yourself so seriously that you are unable to face your own weaknesses. And in this moment, the entire mood of poem shifts, from the tension created by Gawain’s apparent doom and our shared unawareness of the significance of the girdle, to the experience of things being suddenly put into proper perspective. Of course Gawain is not going to lose his head. The pentangle is abandoned as an impossible ideal, and the girdle is adopted as one that reflects Gawain’s true nature: pretty good, but not quite perfect. And because the beheading “game” around which so much anticipation and mystery has been building for so many lines culminates *without* a beheading, without the completion of reciprocity, this moment also marks the shift from the sense in

which we share Gawain's interpretation of things, from the world of the gift economy and courtliness as sublimated aggression, to a perspective from which all of that striving and competition seem superfluous. We have shifted to a perspective, implied but nonetheless palpable, in which the testing of Gawain's pride understood in the non-moral sense as *surquidre* has become a moral lesson about the folly of striving for honour above all else.

And yet, in response to Gawain's sinfulness, the Green Knight's attitude but also the broader, narrative perspective of the poem as a whole is one, I would argue, characterized by grace: an attitude which views the other, not as a potential object, obstacle or competition in relation to *me*, but as a being in his or her own right. Consequently, grace is also a willingness to overlook minor offenses and, by extension, to forgive major injuries. Implied in this seemingly simple notion is quite a complex range of ideas. Griswold's definition of non-perfectionism puts it well, as he describes the elements taken for granted and accepted in a non-perfectionist scheme:

Our interdependence as social and sympathizing creatures; our embodiment and our affective character; our vulnerability to each other; our mortality, . . . our obligations to one another; the pervasiveness of suffering—most often unmerited where it is intentionally inflicted—and of pain, violence and injustice: these are part and parcel of [human] imperfection. (*Forgiveness* 14)

In this way, guilt answers the sacrificial imperative because it registers the lack of existence not as eradicable in perfection but as redeemable in forgiveness.

Griswold argues that forgiveness is an act and represents an orientation that does *not* depend upon the wiping out of transgression in the paying of a debt—in the Nietzschean and Foucauldian sense of the creditor who exacts payment on the



body of the debtor—but precisely its opposite, the *forgoing* of payment because of an awareness of a shared transgressiveness. This is the key point: in the picture of guilt we are given in *Sir Gawain*, forgiveness does *not* depend upon an exchange of some other good in place of what one is lacking or unable to give, but involves letting go of the principle of exchange altogether. Thus *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* explicitly counters Nietzsche's idea of guilt as a psychological construct forged and imposed through punishment; the poem is equally powerful in its rejection of the idea of forgiveness as a passive-aggressive form of punishment. Gawain, a mere mortal without the aid of Morgan le Fay's supernatural protection, is unable to pay what he owes, but he is let go anyway: he is freed from his obligation, not because he is perfect, but because he is good enough. Implicit in this is the notion of a pre-existing equality: if we are all guilty, then no one occupies the position of the creditor who is entitled to claim satisfaction. Guilt implies not that we once were or ought to be whole and perfect; it assumes, instead, that we are not, and, consequently, that we must find ways of living together in brokenness. In contrast, at its root, sacrifice involves the attempt, or rather the desperate need, to preserve one's integrity or the integrity of the social order from the kind of competition and conflict that leads to destruction. In guilt, the purity we must defend against intrusion can be seen to be fundamentally illusory, and thus defending it becomes unnecessary. In guilt, I am aware of my own responsibility for how others feel and what happens to them, rather than the extent to which others pose a threat to me; I am also aware of my

own vulnerability, but it is an awareness that prompts compassion or empathy for—feeling with—the vulnerability of others, rather than expiation.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that shame and guilt represent two parallel but qualitatively different ways of conceiving of the relation between self and other. My survey, beginning in Chapter Two and concluding here, of medieval hagiography and romance and the penitential discourses informing both, give a clearer picture of what, precisely, is constituted by these opposing ways. In Malory's *Works*, we have seen how chivalric honour and shame inscribe a fatalistic universe, in contrast to the emphasis on intentionality and thus free will implied in guilt. In the lives of the virgin martyrs, we have seen how the conflation of spiritual and material realities results in the necessity of violent sacrifice, at the same time as the inversion of values represented in the *imitatio Christi* of the saints is reflected in an overt rejection of shame and the idea of physical purity. And in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we have seen how the imperative of reciprocity and revenge in shame is countered by the imperative of forgiveness in guilt.

In the following chapters, I will discuss Chaucer's treatment of each of these themes. From the *House of Fame* to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is engaged in a sustained exploration of the relationship between shame and guilt, and he represents with remarkable consistency the profound need for grace—for alternatives to violent sacrifice, for a recognition of human free will, and for the

forswearing of revenge—not only in theological terms, but also in thoroughly secular and social human realms. In my reading of the *House of Fame* and Chaucer's representations of pagan antiquity in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*, I will explore the connection between honour and fate through Chaucer's explicit reflection on his own role and agency as a medieval poet. In my discussion of the prologue and tales of the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, and the *Melibee*, I will argue that Chaucer considers an alternative to the honour-bound fate of violence in his representation of the forswearing of revenge and the possibility of forgiveness instead of sacrifice. In the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Physician's Tale* and the *Prioress's Tale*, I will discuss how Chaucer interrogates the idea of purity and its relationship to shame in terms of the conventions of medieval hagiography. I will conclude by returning to the question of Chaucer's poetics: in particular, I will argue that the prologues and tales of the Pardoner, the Manciple, and the Parson point us in the direction of a non-sacrificial poetics by imagining literature as confession.

Chapter Five: Authority and Agency in the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*,  
and the *Knight's Tale*

In his engagement with the classical world of honour and shame, Chaucer explores the limitations and pitfalls of shame ethics, on one level, in terms of the concepts of fate and freedom. On another level, these concepts are represented not solely or even primarily as cosmological ideas but in terms of Chaucer's poetics: in terms of his own identity and practice as a medieval poet working out of the rich inheritance of his classical literary and philosophical sources. In this way, Chaucer dramatizes his position as a poet who must negotiate between his own experience and especially his own moral will, on the one hand, and, on the other, the "auctors" whose authority he reveres and from whom he learns to write poetry. In the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Knight's Tale*, the extent to which Chaucer's fictional characters are embedded in the shame culture of antiquity as Chaucer imagines it, and the extent to which they posit ethical possibilities in terms of honour and shame, is also the extent to which they deny themselves the freedom to act in truly ethical ways—it is the extent to which, in other words, they consign themselves to the workings of an amoral and often unjust cosmic fate. The potential for passing self-righteous judgement on pagan benightedness, however, is mitigated by the fact that the fatalism of shame affects not only his pagan characters, but Chaucer the poet himself. Thus, for the poet, the negotiation between experience and *auctorite* offers a parallel with the tension between free will and fatalism. Ultimately, it is the poet, not his pagan creations,

who, in failing to articulate freely his own moral view, is held accountable for the way in which honour and shame are inscribed in literature.

### Shamed Guiltless in the *House of Fame*

The *House of Fame* holds unique but frustrated fascination for Chaucer criticism. Piero Boitani calls it “one of the most interesting poetic enterprises of fourteenth-century Europe” (*Imaginary* 52). Alcuin Blamires considers it an “extraordinary poem” (*Chaucer* 38). But it is also “the most curiously constructed of Chaucer’s works” and “uneven” (David 333). A common complaint is that the poem is disjointed and lacking in unity: as Geoffrey travels through cave, temple, desert, castle, and labyrinth, he considers topics as diverse as medieval dream theory, the nature of speech and language, love, betrayal, truth, chance and fortune, history, and poetry itself. The many attempts to identify a core unifying principle are further complicated by the fact that the work appears unfinished, breaking off just when we are introduced to “a man of gret auctorite,” who would, presumably, provide the answers to all of our questions. The fascination lies not only in the enigmas of the work, however, but also in the sense that it promises crucial insight into Chaucer’s own identity and self-conscious purpose as a poet or “makere.” As Sheila Delany argues, the poem “reveals Chaucer’s artistic consciousness” (2).<sup>22</sup> Most striking is the way in which Chaucer, through his fictional persona Geoffrey, both aligns himself with and distances himself from the

---

<sup>22</sup> See also Boitani: in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer “gives us an idea of the kind of literature he will create in the future and of the culture by which he is surrounded and with which he is imbued. It is in this poem that he shows us the birth of his imaginary world and his mythology” (1).

great poets of antiquity and the Continent.<sup>23</sup> As in his other dream vision poems, Chaucer represents the act of writing as emerging out of the act of reading: Chaucer's books are born out of the books of Ovid, Virgil, Boethius, and Dante.<sup>24</sup> And yet Geoffrey the dreamer in the *House of Fame* insists that he does not aspire to join the venerable poets of history enshrined in Fame's bejewelled palace. Geoffrey claims that he does not seek fame but "tydynges":

Sufficeth me, as I were ded,  
That no wight have my name in honde.  
I wot myself best how y stonde;  
For what I drye, or what I thynke,  
I wil myselfen al hyt drynke,  
Certeyn, for the more part,  
As fer forth as I kan myn art. (1876-82)<sup>25</sup>

Geoffrey, he tells us, has come to hear the latest news. He will be a conduit for fame's tidings, his poetic craft more like disinterested reportage—"so myn auctour seyde"—than self-expressive artistry. The lightly self-deprecating humour in Chaucer's representation of Geoffrey makes it unclear how seriously we are to take comments such as these. Presented with the image of the pedantic eagle struggling to lift his overweight pupil to survey the "ayerissh bestes" as he assuages Geoffrey's fears that he is about to be stellified, we must discern where the parody ends and the serious self-disclosure begins. On the other hand, it is

---

<sup>23</sup> On this dual movement of appealing to and distancing from traditional authority, see Delany: "It is the purpose of the *House of Fame*, I would suggest, to explore some traditions in which Chaucer was to work as scholar and poet. Further, the poem attempts to establish for the artist a rhetorical and intellectual stance that can accommodate both traditional material and a skeptical approach to that material" (*Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* 5).

<sup>24</sup> Boitani also makes this point. See "Old Books Brought to Life in Dreams" (40-41).

<sup>25</sup> Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer* (Ed. Larry D. Benson). Quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from Jill Mann's Penguin edition (2005).

precisely the perception and awareness required to produce self-parody—to be able to laugh at oneself—that prove the claim, “I wot myself best how y stonde” (1878). Along similar lines, the disclaimer that he does not seek the sanction of Fame suggests the delicate balance between Chaucer’s serious aspirations for writing poetry in the vernacular and his awareness that English in the fourteenth century is yet a “blunt instrument” (Wallace 22).<sup>26</sup> Staking a literary claim but deeply aware of the risks of overstepping, the *House of Fame* communicates Chaucer’s idea that he is embarking on a new and different path, linguistically, poetically, even historically: he may fall asleep reading “olde bokes,” but they inspire in him dreams of “newe science” (PF 24-25).

But even as the *House of Fame* maps out Chaucer’s poetic methodology and gestures towards a particular authorial identity, it raises questions about the stability of words, spoken and written, and about the relationship between authority, language, and truth. All of these aspects of the poetic enterprise are indicated in the central theme of Fame: *fama* can be understood as renown (“loos”) and rumour, but also in the wider sense of traditional knowledge, “the body of traditional knowledge that confronted the educated fourteenth-century reader” (*Poetics* 3). As such, *fama* conveys an idea of truth that corresponds structurally to Pitt-Rivers’s discussion of the honour value nexus that connects social ideal and individual action. In an unproblematic or “orthodox” view of authority, the

---

<sup>26</sup> On Chaucer and the vernacular, see Hwang, “Vernacular Poetry, Text and Fame in the *House of Fame*”; Brownlee, “Vernacular Literary Consciousness c.1100-c.1500.” Andrew Cole, on the other hand, (“Chaucer’s English Lesson”) challenges the idea, prevalent since Muscatine, that “Chaucer valued only European models of vernacularity” (1130).

sentiment of honour inspires conduct which is honourable, the conduct receives recognition and establishes reputation, and reputation is finally sanctified by the bestowal of honours. (22)

In this view, honour as virtue and honour as precedence are united in such a way as to reinforce the legitimacy of the one who receives honour as well as the political authority that bestows it. The duality inherent in the concept of honour, as both virtue (merit) and as precedence, therefore,

does something the philosophers say they cannot do: derive an *ought* from an *is*; whatever *is* becomes *right*, the *de facto* is made *de jure*, the tyrant becomes the monarch, the bully, a chief. The reconciliation between the social order as we find it and the social order which we revere is accomplished thanks to the confusion which hinges upon the duality of honour and its associated concepts. It is a confusion which fulfils the function of social integration by ensuring the legitimation of established power. (Pitt-Rivers 38)

The concept of *fama*, especially its literary dimensions which are of greatest concern for Chaucer, is structured in a similar way. Renown and rumour constitute the *de facto*, and traditional knowledge—the truth that comes from *auctorite*, which in medieval terms is a higher, more reliable kind of truth than that which comes to us through experience—constitute the *de jure*.<sup>27</sup> But in the

---

<sup>27</sup> Authority was the highest form of truth available to the ancients, but revelation trumps it in the Christian era. And yet, revelation can take at least two distinct forms: Holy Scripture is one, and “visions” (if one can establish that they include a message from God) is another. The fact that falling asleep over an “auctorite” gives rise to “dream” reflects Chaucer’s playful approach to the issue, and he consistently leaves it to the reader to decide whether the “sweven” is a true “vision” that can be interpreted as a message from the gods, or whether it is to be dismissed as merely physiological, arising from an imbalance in his humours. Thus, the opening of the *Book of the Duchess* presents us both with “melancholy,” arising from love sickness and long sleeplessness, as well as the book containing the story of Seys and Alcione. These elements form a dual prelude to his dream (or is it a vision?) of the Black Knight, whose blackness may indicate that he is nothing more than a projection of the dreamer’s melancholy, in which case, as Pertelote would say, Geoffrey should simply take a laxative. On the other hand, the Alcione story suggests that, sometimes, the gods really do speak to us in our dreams. In short, all of Chaucer’s dream-vision poems set up this auctorite-revelation dichotomy but leave the reader to resolve it in favour of one or the other.



*House of Fame*, *fama*, in all of its senses, originates in speech, and as the eagle explains to Geoffrey, speech is inherently ephemeral:

Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken;  
 And every speche that ys spoken,  
 Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,  
 In his substaunce ys but air. (765-68)

As Laurel Amtower points out, what is established as truth—what is named and dictated by Fame—does not originate in God’s word sent down to earth, but is made of human words floating upward: “It is thus impossible that words can ever convey a transcendent value. As their material origins suggest, words can only ever convey messages about their human creators” (“Authorizing the Reader” 277-78). The human origins of Fame’s “truths” mean that her dictates are not only unstable; they may be false and downright harmful. As the wicker cage of Rumour whirls about, true *and* false tidings escape through the spaces between the twigs and fly to Fame’s palace; the raw material of fame is essentially impure, and in the cacophony of voices it is impossible to separate the truth from the lies.

As Boitani and others have pointed out, there are few images in the *House of Fame* that are original to Chaucer: the description of Fame and her palace is derived from Virgil, the House of Rumour recalls the one in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the three-book structure is inspired, perhaps, by Dante.<sup>28</sup> But Chaucer’s highly self-reflexive representation of himself as a poet-reader, gathering together so many disparate sources and images, and trying, often unsuccessfully, to make sense of it all, serves to emphasize the instability of these *written* words as well as the spoken. The eagle’s discourse on the nature of speech

---

<sup>28</sup> For the most comprehensive discussion of Chaucer’s sources and influences in the *House of Fame*, see Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*.

is bookended by Geoffrey's "reading" of the story of Dido and Aeneas painted on the walls of Venus's temple in Book I, and the representation of literary fame in Book III: both confront the politics of historiography rather than the givenness of history, and suggest that the *matière* of the medieval poet—and reader—involves a perpetual process of discernment. Chaucer's treatment of Dido and Aeneas in Book I conveys the idea that this task of discernment is not merely an epistemological problem, but is, above all, an ethical imperative. Implicit in Geoffrey's description of the tragic love story is a contrast between Virgil's *Aeneid*, which emphasizes Aeneas's destiny, and Ovid's *Heroides*, which emphasizes Dido's suffering. The differences between the two versions of history imply fundamentally different ideals: public, epic, "masculine" on the one hand; private, romantic, "feminine" on the other. They also establish different values: as Chaucer presents it, Aeneas's betrayal of Dido fits an archetypal pattern of male cruelty and inconstancy, but the way the story is often told results in the shame of the female victims rather than the just punishment of the male offenders.<sup>29</sup> Sheila Delany argues that the representation of Dido and Aeneas in Book I draws equally from Virgil and Ovid, and thus equally sympathetic to both hero and heroine. According to Delany, the Ovidian love story is "framed in the larger context of Virgilian epic" (55); the unresolved juxtaposition of sources means that "Aeneas cannot be judged to be entirely right or entirely wrong" (55). Moreover, Delany

---

<sup>29</sup> Chaucer emphasizes the injustice of such representations in order to dramatize the problem of shame that is his central concern here. But rhetorical punch aside, in fact, sympathy for Dido was more the rule than the exception in medieval literature. For a discussion of Dido in the *Roman d'Eneas*, see Baswell, "Dido's Purse"; see also Ortiz, "The Two Faces of Dido: Classical Images and Medieval Reinterpretation." Chaucer's most important medieval influence is Boccaccio, whose sympathy for Dido and criticism of Virgil is evident in *Il Filocolo* and *Amorosa visione*. For a fuller discussion, see Kallendorf, "Boccaccio's Dido and the Rhetorical Criticism of Virgil's Aeneid."

reads Geoffrey's intensely emotional response to Dido's plight as inflected with some irony on Chaucer's part, who is "aware of the overt sentimentality" of the Ovid-influenced, courtly perspective (53).

I would argue, however, that the Virgilian and Ovidian elements of the story are not equally balanced but are held in tension, not as two options but as contradictions of each other: the workmanlike rehearsal of Virgilian history is effectively *interrupted* by the outburst of Dido's grief: the private, affective reality dramatically undercuts the objectivity and legitimacy of epic destiny. It is true that there is an abrupt change in the narrator's tone and attitude towards Aeneas, but it is not a change that indicates parallel and equally valid versions of the story. A straightforward "reading" of Virgil ("I wol now synge, yif I can, / The armes and also the man" [143-144]) brings Geoffrey to the point of Aeneas's betrayal. The shift in attitude does not centre on Dido making Aeneas "hyr lyf, hir love, hir lust, hir lord" (as Delany argues), but on Dido's realization that Aeneas's seeming goodness—as suggested by the Virgilian perspective to this point—has been all along masking the typical male propensity for inconstancy, what Chaucer elsewhere calls "newfangelnesse."<sup>30</sup> To pinpoint the change in tone precisely, it comes with the word "allas":

---

<sup>30</sup> Complaints against inconstancy are practically ubiquitous in Chaucer, and while the culprits are often men, women too may be guilty; in this at least the sexes are equal. For Chaucer, "newfangelnesse" seems to be an ineradicable aspect of human psychology, which desires what is new even if what is old is better. See, for example, "Lak of Stedfastnesse." In the *Canterbury Tales*, see especially the *Squire's Tale*:

Men loven of propre kinde newfangelnesse,  
 As brides doon that men in cages fede;  
 For though thow night and day take of hem hede,  
 And strawe hir cage faire and softe as silk,  
 And yeve hem sugre, hony, breed, and milk,

Allas! What harm doth apparence,  
 Whan hit is fals in existence!  
 For he to hir a traytour was;  
 Wherefore she slow hirself, allas! (265-68)

The significance of this abrupt change in tone is conveyed in the opposition between “apparence” and “existence”: the Ovidian perspective is invoked not simply to signal the “inherent ambivalence” of the story of Aeneas (although it also has that effect), but to remind us of the private cost of public history.<sup>31</sup> The world of epic and honour and the project of nationalistic history-making are thus associated with “apparence,” and these are held in dichotomy with the inner truth of “existence.” As Dido laments,

O wel-away that I was born!  
 For thorgh yow is my name lorn,  
 And alle myn actes red and songe  
 Over al thys lond, on every tonge.  
 O wikke Fame!—for ther nys  
 Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!  
 . . .  
 Eke, though I myghte duren ever,

---

Yet, right anon as that his dore is uppe,  
 He with his feet wol sporne adoun his cuppe,  
 And to the wode he wole and wormes ete.  
 So newefangel been they of hir mete,  
 And love novelries of propre kinde;  
 No gentillesse of blood ne may hem binde. (610-20).

Cf. the Manciple, who, despite telling a tale about a husband cuckolded by his wife, uses this word to decry the inconstancy of men:

Flessh is so newefangel—with meschaunce!—  
 That we ne konne in nothing han plesaunce  
 That sowneth into vertu any while. (193-95)

<sup>31</sup> Delany argues that the narrator’s proposal, “But let us speke of Eneas,” is contradicted by the following lines that express Dido’s complaint, and that this constitutes a “lapse” that is meant ironically to undercut the narrator’s sympathy with Dido. But the narrator says specifically that he will speak of Aeneas, “How he betrayed her, allas, / And lefte hir ful unkyndely” (294-95). The following lines do precisely that, but the narrator (following Ovid) allows Dido herself to tell her version of events. In other words, it is not an accidental lapse, because to speak of Aeneas’s betrayal *means* speaking of Dido’s pain and also of Aeneas’s connection to other untrue men.

That I have don rekever I never,  
 That I ne shal be seyde, allas,  
 Yshamed be thourgh Eneas. (345-56)<sup>32</sup>

Dido's lament expresses the totalizing, embodied experience of shame. Once her "actes" have been exposed, her very identity—her "name"—is lost forever; there is no private, inner self that remains distinct and intact apart from the public face that has been covered and transformed by shame. Dido's shame "pervades everything," and as such "cannot be modified by addition, or wiped out by subtraction, or exorcised by expiation" (Lynd 50). The act of suicide, therefore, dramatizes and literalizes the loss of self in shame. If shame is manifest in the desire to withdraw or escape, and to live in a painful wordlessness, Dido's suicide represents the ultimate withdrawal and a permanent silence.

Furthermore, the "harm and routhe" caused by the treachery of men calls to Geoffrey's mind the many stories of women betrayed in love, and all of these are

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the Dido and Aeneas story in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, where it is Aeneas who laments the shame of Troy when he sees its destruction depicted on the walls of a Temple in Carthage:

Allas that I was born! . . .  
 Thourghout the world oure shame is kid so wyde,  
 Now it is peynted upon every syde.  
 We, that weren in prosperite,  
 Been now desclandred, and in swich degree,  
 No lenger for to liven I ne kepe. (F.1027-32)

Here, however, Aeneas's suicidal thoughts are interrupted and assuaged by Dido, who sees him weeping and takes pity on him:

Anon hire herte hath pite of his wo,  
 And with that pite love com in also;  
 And thus, for pite and for gentillesse,  
 Refreshed moste he been of his distresse. (F.1078-81)

When Aeneas fails to reciprocate these "pitous" feelings, Dido is left with the shame and despair from which she had rescued him. Her pity heals his shame; his betrayal creates hers—and her death. For a fuller discussion of Chaucer's *Legend*, see Chapter 7.

connected to the “sory creatures” who are served unjustly by Fame in Book III, for they too are “shamed gilteles” (1632, 1634). Three of the groups who approach Fame’s throne have performed “good werkes” and deserve good fame. Of these, one is granted no fame at all, one is cursed with a “shrewed fame” and a “wikked loos,” and one is granted a greater fame even than they deserve. The other two groups of supplicants have committed evil works; Fame bestows honours on the first group but denies the second. And, as he did for Dido, Geoffrey expresses heartfelt sympathy for the innocent who are slandered by Aeolus’s “trumpe of gold.” The verbal echoes are unmistakable: “Allas, thus was her shame yronge, / And gilteles, on every tonge!” (1655-56). The mini-catalogue of women who are also “shamed gilteles,” moreover, looks forward to the *Legend of Good Women*, where the shame of women wronged in love also creates an imperative of violence, whether self-imposed like Dido’s or inflicted directly by men.<sup>33</sup> This catalogue places Aeneas’s betrayal in a line of historical development alternative to the official history of Rome, in terms that reverse the values of heroic honour: long-suffering patience and constancy are valorized rather than the brave and glorious deeds involved in nation-building.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Delany, however, dismisses the plight of the female victims in both texts, reading Chaucer’s irony in Geoffrey’s “obvious narrative incompetence” in the passages on Dido and in the *Legend* (53). But this dismissal does not account for the parallels between Dido’s situation and Fame’s supplicants who are similarly slandered, and whose laments Delany does *not* read parodically; neither does it account for the numerous parallels of women “shamed guiltless” in both *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*, which I discuss in detail below. I would argue that it is unlikely that Chaucer spent so many lines of good narrative poetry satirizing narrative incompetence.

<sup>34</sup> That this reversal of values finds roots and analogues in the medieval courtly tradition suggests that Chaucer is here expressing broader currents in fourteenth-century culture, but we have no reason to equate automatically courtly attitudes and vernacular literature with sentimentalism, or to assume that Chaucer’s apparent anti-heroism is meant ironically. But cf. Delany: “The Ovidian attitude, closer than the epic to medieval courtly sentiment, became usual in

Indeed, that we are to read Dido's lament sympathetically is made clear when the problem of discernment and the narrator's concern for the victims of history are recapitulated in Book III. The scene in Fame's palace depicts the process of canonization—the bestowal of literary honours—as wholly random and capricious. Some authors are enshrined on the pillars in Fame's hall while the names of others melt into oblivion on Fame's rock of ice. The basically arbitrary means of selection—if Fame's whims settle in one's favour, if one's name happens to be inscribed on the shady side of the rock—connect the idea of literary fame to the vicissitudes of Fortune, the sister of Fame. As Geoffrey remarks on Fame's caprice,

What her cause was, y nyste.  
 For of this folk ful wel y wiste  
 They hadde good fame ech deserved,  
 Although they were dyversly served;  
 Ryght as her suster, dame Fortune,  
 Ys wont to serven in commune. (1499-1504)

The old books from which we receive traditional knowledge are deemed authoritative in Fame's palace and are preserved in our cultural memory not necessarily because they contain the truth, but because they have been chosen more or less at random. This does not mean that old books and famous poets are without value or are *undeserving* of fame, but it does mean that there may be countless others, imparting different truths, that have been lost to the ravages of time—despite being equally deserving of Fame's *imprimatur*. This rather cynical picture of how Fame works serves further to exonerate Dido and others who have received infamy or dishonour; it also emphasizes the idea that honour and shame

---

vernacular literature. It is a tradition which permits the Narrator to be overwhelmed with sympathy for Dido" (53).

constitute the very foundation on which history is constructed. The epistemological ambiguity signalled by the House of Rumour, which effectively undercuts the stability of transcendent meaning, as Amtower suggests, is thus contrasted with a wholly *unambiguous* ethical distinction between the guilt or innocence of the individual—what “ech deserved”—and the shame or honour that is bestowed quite apart from true merit, by the “aventure” of Fame and Fortune in the construction of historical and poetic truth.

As Pitt-Rivers points out, as soon as the question of a possible disjunction between virtue (“what ech deserved”) and honour is conceivable, space is made in which to question also the legitimacy of the social and political status quo, just as Chaucer does here: what if those who have suffered dishonour were actually innocent, what if those poets and the perspectives they represented who have been forgotten actually deserved the fame that was denied to them? And as soon as these questions are posed, it becomes possible to understand honour and fame, as well as shame and disrepute, not as hallowed truths, but as hollow constructs that distort reality.

Blamires argues that Chaucer’s primary concern in the *House of Fame* is not the fickleness of Fame and Fortune and the fallibility of human speech, but the ethical consequences of defamatory speech in particular. Defamation or “detraction,” Blamires notes, as a form of false witness and, as one branch of envy, is a deadly sin, according to the *Book of Vices and Virtues* (and medieval ethics generally). It was also a serious legal infraction punishable in church



courts—at its most serious, by excommunication. Blamires writes that defamation cases

constituted, in fact, one of the largest categories of offences dealt with by the medieval ecclesiastical courts. The antidote to it was a form of restitution, a restoration of the good name that one had impugned, and this was to be effected with conspicuous attention to the equilibrium of the relevant community, that is, among the very people and in the very place where the defamation has been uttered, acknowledging the lies and falsehood one had spoken against the victim. No reader of Richard Green's book on law and literature in the Middle Ages can be left in doubt of the community detestation (not to mention, in the early Middle Ages, the savage punishments by mutilation) reserved for those who damaged the standing of others in the community by false allegations against them. (*Chaucer, Ethics* 38)

The reason for such “community detestation” of defamation is properly understood in light of Dido's self-loss in shame. The wrongful attribution of shame is such a serious offense because shame is such a serious and potentially life-destroying phenomenon. In this context, it is not simply a matter of “losing face” in a superficial sense, being embarrassed, or even being wrongfully accused and thus held judicially accountable for an act one did not commit; it is, at the deepest level, in the context of shame ethics, a matter of losing one's sense of self and identity. Just as “making good” one's name and word through competition establishes the essence of one's person, so does losing one's name mean the loss of that essence.

In other words, the theme of defamation and the demythologizing of Fame are, in fact, closely connected, in the sense that Chaucer's treatment of both focuses critically on the idea that identities are constructed from the outside in. In the context of shame ethics, in which to impugn a person's name is to violate his or her identity, there can be no discrepancy between private, inner subjectivity

and public identity. From the perspective of those who live within the honour code, public utterances that cast shame upon a person do not express merely the contestable views of the speaker; rather, these utterances have the power to create an identity of shame, and do so, unless an equally public reclaiming of the lost honour is performed. The point of Chaucer's dramatization of the problem with language and authority in the *House of Fame*, therefore, is not simply that it registers "horror at the process of defamation" (*Chaucer, Ethics* 39), but that it asserts the legitimacy of private, inner experience over public identity. In doing so, the poem actively rejects shame ethics and the construction of identity on the basis of honour, in favour of guilt ethics, which allows scope for a private identity which is able to withstand the power of honour and shame to sanction or demean regardless of merit.

Blamires connects the concern with defamatory speech in the *House of Fame* with the motif of defamatory speech that is announced in the first fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, especially as this speech poses a threat to fellowship. And, to be sure, the harmony and viability of the precarious social order called into being by Harry Bailly is perpetually under assault "by anger and by audacious and reckless speech" (Blamires 39). But the frequency of defamatory speech in the pilgrims' interactions with each other, whether in direct dialogue in the linking sections or through their tales, does not merely threaten the stability of the community. The motif of overgoing, in which the storytelling competition becomes a means of requital or revenge, marks a more fundamental ethos that characterizes human social life as a rule, rather than as an occasional burst of

animosity that must be quelled to preserve the social order.<sup>35</sup> In this, the social status quo represented by the pilgrimage recalls the clamour of the House of Rumour, in which,

Were the tydyngge soth or fals,  
 Yit wolde he telle hyt natheles,  
 And evermo with more encres  
 Than yt was erst. Thus north and south  
 Wente every tydyngge fro mouth to mouth,  
 And that encresing ever moo,  
 As fyr is wont to quyke and goo  
 From a sparke spronge amys,  
 Til al a citee brent up ys. (2075-80)

The cacophony of truth and lies acts like wildfire, in the sense that it is as unpredictable and uncontrollable as it is violently self-destructive. And the figurative violence of vying speech gives way to physical violence when the denizens of the wicker cage trample each other in an effort to see the man “of gret auctorite”:

And whan they were alle on an hepe,  
 Tho behynde begunne up lepe  
 And clamben up on other faste,  
 And up the nose and yën kaste,  
 And troden fast on others heles,  
 And stampen, as men doon aftir eles. (2149-54)

This extraordinary image conveys the essence of Chaucer’s vision of human social life. The storytelling competition on the road to Canterbury begins with the high drama of the Knight’s romance, but the Miller “quits” the Knight’s ideals in a way that recalls the image of men treading “fast on others heles,” and the Miller

---

<sup>35</sup> In making her case for the *Decameron* as Chaucer’s primary source for the *Canterbury Tales*, Helen Cooper points out that “the *Canterbury Tales* is unique among story-collections in being organised as a competition, with a prize: ‘a soper at oure aller cost’ on the pilgrims’ return to the Tabard” (18). She also notes that Boccaccio’s storytellers differ from Chaucer’s in that they are “consistently polite and courteous” (13).

follows suit. If, moreover, as Egeus asserts in the *Knights Tale*, all of earthly life is “but a thurghfare ful of wo, / And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro” (KnT 2847-48), the competitive ethos among the pilgrims also figures metaphorically as an idea of how human beings construct identities generally: in competition for honour or “portion,” on the basis of external appearance and performance.

This idea is corroborated by Jill Mann’s discussion of the *General Prologue* as both an example and a parody of medieval estates satire. As Mann observes,

In the *Prologue*, we are in a world of means rather than ends. A large part of the narrator’s criteria for judging people then becomes their success in social relationships at a personal level; they are judged on pleasantness of appearance, charm of manner, social accomplishments. The social role is reduced to a question of sociability. (194)

Mann’s careful comparison of the *Prologue* to other estates satires establishes the fact that, as in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer was drawing from the raw material of literature rather than “real life” for his portraits of the pilgrims. Indeed, each of the portraits draws on well-established literary traditions: the Monk and the Friar, for example, embody the stock stereotypes of anti-clerical literature, while the Plowman and the Parson represent estates ideals. On the other hand, however, our

strong impression of the individuality of the figures in the *Prologue* is due to the fact that Chaucer encourages us to respond to them as individuals. Their “individuality” lies in the techniques whereby Chaucer elicits from us a reaction, whether complicated or unequivocal, similar to the reactions aroused in us by real-life individuals. (189)

The most significant of these techniques is the way in which Chaucer allows these embodiments of authoritative discourse to comment on the identities that have

been constructed for them, registering “their reactions to the traditional attitudes to their existence” (*Medieval Estates* 189). Nowhere is this paradoxical autonomy more apparent than in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, in the sense that the Wife combats the “wikked tonges” of clerks who defame and shame women with a narrative based on her own “experience,” but we find that this experience has been irrevocably shaped by the very authorities against which she is defining herself: the Wife speaks against antifeminism in a voice that has been created by antifeminist discourse.

It is difficult, therefore, to read the opposition between experience and authority—in the *House of Fame* or the *Tales*—as championing a kind of modern individualism. It is not quite accurate to assert, as Laurel Amtower does, that any claim that Chaucer makes for authority or moral advice is “a call to remain distant from the entrapment of discourse and ideology” (“Authorizing the Reader” 289). Rather, the traditional authority of old books shapes individual experience in the same way that literary conventions and historical figures provide the shape and substance of Geoffrey’s dream; as Boitani observes, by the end of the *House of Fame*, “the world has become a book” (52). The authority and moral advice communicated through old books are as unavoidable here as they are in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, where Geoffrey finally leaves his study to enjoy a fine spring day out of doors, but the “flours white and rede” he discovers owe their beauty and hue more to the conventions of French marguerite poetry

than they do to nature (F.42).<sup>36</sup> The idea that the world is a book means that remaining distant from the entrapment of discourse is simply not an option.<sup>37</sup>

This is especially so for the poet, whose very trade consists of spreading “tydynges,” telling or writing stories about others—spinning the web of discourse that entraps us all. The *literary* construction of identities, too, necessarily works from the outside in.<sup>38</sup> And so, in the *House of Fame*, the problem of *fama* becomes, not the poet’s quest for honour, but the burden of the poet’s responsibility for the honour (or shame) of the women and men he writes into being. Such a poetic identity does not purport to tell the great deeds (or the downfalls) of great men, to chronicle the epic history of a great nation, or even to provide courtly entertainment—projects which assign honour and shame without anxiety, following the dictates of Fame. Chaucer’s friend and contemporary John Gower envisioned the poet’s role as repository and purveyor of cultural memory and traditional knowledge, and thus as the unifier of “divisioun”: poetry for the sake of common profit, art that is generative according to “kynde” rather than self-interested. Chaucer positions himself similarly as a moral voice in an age of

---

<sup>36</sup> John Livingstone Lowes established Chaucer’s use of marguerite conventions: see “The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* as Related to the French Marguerite Poems and to the *Filostrato*” and “The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* Considered in its Chronological Relations.” More recently, Catherine Sanok has pointed out that this intertextual moment “challenges the very possibility of distinguishing between life and literature upon which [the narrator’s] epistemology depended” (“Reading Hagiographically” 333).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Patterson on the historical world as both “insubstantial and inescapable” and how the construction of history operates in the wicker cage of rumour, where “words do not refer to but constitute the events they purport to describe” (*Subject of History* 100-01).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Boitani: “Two of the traditional images associated with fame are those of the shadow and the name. In our context, both are extremely interesting because they refer to a man, as it were, from the outside, and not from the inside. Yet a shadow is the projection of a human being—the projection of his self; and a name identifies him” (4).

decline, but in the sense of questioning *fama* rather than asserting its legitimacy. Questioning but not rejecting out of hand, because to do that would be to foreclose on the writing of poetry altogether: the old books and the “tydynges” out of which new poetry emerges may intermix truth and lies, but the task of the poet involves “forging a future from resources inevitably impure.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, the task of the poet is not entirely unlike that of Fame herself, who also chooses from among the true and false tidings to establish Truth through performative speech acts. The difference, of course, is that Chaucer is perpetually calling attention to the fallibility of his own powers of discernment; his literary choices are not presented uncritically but as irremediably subjective and unreliable: his “soun,” too, is “but “eyr ybroken.”

In the field of social relations, however, since honour and shame *do* shape individual identity to such a large degree, the question of how the individual is to conceive of himself outside of honour and shame becomes highly problematic. The challenge of discerning the truth of the individual who is “shamed giltyless”—the challenge of conceiving of innocence in shame and guilt in honour—is thus profoundly tied up with the self-reflexive representation of “how tales are told” that runs throughout Chaucer’s work. We can imagine that the shipmen, pilgrims, and pardoners, whose tidings and “lesinges” fill the House of Rumour, reassemble at the Tabard Inn to begin their journey to Canterbury: how we read books and how we read the world through books is, accordingly, a central concern in the *Canterbury Tales*.

---

<sup>39</sup> Jill Mann adapts this phrase from Judith Butler to describe how Chaucer’s works are “embedded” in literary, social, and political contexts (*Feminizing Chaucer* xiv).

At the beginning of the pilgrimage, Chaucer registers his awareness of the burden of poetic responsibility with a disavowal:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
 Everiche a word, if it be in his charge,  
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewē,  
 Or feyne thyngē, or fynde wordes newe. (GP 731-36)

The denial of responsibility effectively begs the question: who, then, *is* responsible? The story of Dido and Aeneas reminds us that the issue is not simply “vileynye” in the sense of crude or uncouth language, but the responsibility for assigning honour to some and shame to others, depending on how the story is told. What is the ethical implication of being a mere reporter (compiler, translator) if reporting means proclaiming the shame of Dido and the other victims of history? Here, Geoffrey implies that he must faithfully re-create the voices of the pilgrims for the sake of factual representation. But, by the end of the pilgrimage, the pursuit of factuality or realism has given way to the cacophony of voices, some speaking truth, some lies, much as it does in the House of Rumour. The elusiveness of fact, however, does not lead to an epistemological crisis; rather, it points in the direction of ethical truth as the only truth worth pursuing. And so Chaucer concludes his inquiry into the question of who is truly guilty and who has been shamed though innocent with the Retraction, an act of penitence that confesses *literary* guilt. Here, Chaucer suggests that, ultimately, the only way to avoid the dynamics of honour and shame is to stop telling stories about others (“all myn actes red and songe”) and to tell his own instead: “I wot myself best how y stonde.”



### Shame and Agency in *Troilus and Criseyde*

Before Geoffrey embarks on this final pilgrimage, however, he explores further the central contrasts of the *House of Fame* in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the tensions between authority and experience, appearance and existence, the epic fate represented by Aeneas and the private desire represented by Dido are revisited and expanded upon with greater precision and poetic skill. Here, Chaucer not only connects honour and shame to the construction of history but to ideas about destiny and human freedom, providence and predestination.<sup>40</sup> And, as he does in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer places the persona and role of the poet-narrator at centre-stage. Although the narrator in *Troilus* does not name himself as Geoffrey, his voice—that of a bookish scholar, inept in love and somewhat pedantic—is familiar.<sup>41</sup> Also familiar is the way in which Chaucer represents himself in relation to his sources, and the way in which he represents the creative

---

<sup>40</sup> Discussions of these cosmic themes in *Troilus* abound, but not specifically in connection with honour and shame. See, for example, Howard R. Patch, “Troilus on Determinism”; Morton W. Bloomfield, “Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*”; Julian Wasserman, “Both Fixed and Free: Language and Destiny in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*”; and, more recently, Jill Mann, “Chance and Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight’s Tale*”; Matthew Giancarlo, “The Structure of Fate and the Devising of History in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*.”

<sup>41</sup> Spearing (*Textual Subjectivity*) presents a convincing challenge to the critical practice of trying to solve interpretative dilemmas by appealing to Chaucer’s “fallible narrator.” Surveying critical responses to the narrator of *Troilus*, Spearing observes that he is

variously characterized as “fallible,” “unreliable,” “naive,” “glib,” “obtuse,” “imperceptive,” “self-deceived,” and “wayward.” . . . [One] 39-page chapter contains over 130 references to “the narrator,” often in forms such as “our naive narrator” and the “earnest but erring narrator.” (72)

In response, Spearing argues that underlying such readings “is a wish not just to delimit meaning but to safeguard the poem’s perfection by shifting apparent faults to a narrator whose unreliability is part of the omniscient—and evidently omnipotent—poet’s fully achieved plan” (*Textual Subjectivity* 73).

process of writing itself: the poet as reader, and writing as a highly selective process of discerning and judging one's source material. Carolyn Dinshaw observes that the narrator of *Troilus* presents himself as a faithful and disinterested translator, and, as such, that he emphasizes the geographical and temporal distance between his contemporary (medieval) perspective and the "classical otherness" of his text (*Sexual Poetics* 40).<sup>42</sup> And yet the narrator establishes at the outset *both* his proposal to tell the well-known story of Troilus's "double sorwe," following his Latin "auctour" Lollius without deviation, *and* a commitment to a particular moral purpose. That is, he intends his telling of history to provide aid and edification for other lovers ("Have he my thonk") and, more importantly, to arouse pity for the "adversite / Of othere folk" (I.21, 25-6). The second part of this commitment, to inspire pity, aims at "the cas / Of Troilus," but also "for hem that falsly ben apeired / Thorough wikked tonges, be it he or she" (I.29-30, 38-9). Although he does not name Criseyde directly here, of course it is the "she" of the narrative who, he feels, has been falsely accused. The historian-narrator thus finds himself in a dilemma, for the project of answering "wikked tonges" and the project of telling the historical "truth" of Criseyde's betrayal are mutually exclusive. This dilemma makes explicit the tension implied in Book I of the *House of Fame*, when Geoffrey's reading of Virgil is interrupted by an Ovidian outburst of pity for Dido's wrongful shame. In both, the official record tells the historical "truth" (of Aeneas's destiny, of Troilus's sorrow) but the narrator finds

---

<sup>42</sup> See also Bloomfield: "*Troilus* is not a dream vision nor is it a contemporary event. It is the past made vivid by the extensive use of dialogue but still the paSt Chaucer cannot change the elements of his story. As God cannot violate his rationality, Chaucer cannot violate his data. Bound by the self-imposed task of historian he both implies and says directly that cannot do other than report his tale" (15).

himself irresistibly pulled toward the perspective of the shamed women, history's collateral damage.

In *Troilus*, the authority versus experience debate is re-enacted in the conflict between fidelity to one's sources, to "auctoritee," and fidelity to the moral purpose of writing, opposing "wikked tonges" with a "pitous" pen. This conflict is, in turn, played off the explicit theme of the narrative, in the representation of Troilus's fidelity and Criseyde's betrayal. And, on both levels, the issue of fidelity is balanced against the question of freedom: moral agency is aligned with experience and is contrasted against the will bound by the external constraints imposed by *fama* in all its forms of authority—literary, social, political, cosmic. The result is a curious subversion of the expected reader response. The authoritative reading is imagined by the text itself as the one in which Troilus is the sympathetic hero and Criseyde is the wicked woman who causes "all his wo." But this reading becomes construed as bound and constrained, static and unpersuasive. On the other hand, precisely because of her shameful act of betrayal, Criseyde emerges as the central ethical force of the poem, as the potential but ultimately failed source of new possibility and freedom. This dynamic is achieved in part by the ironic distance between the pagan, honour-bound fatalism that governs the Trojan world of the poem, on the one hand, and, on the other, the medieval Christian belief in free will. As Minnis has observed, "whereas Chaucer's pagans believe they are fated, his narrator believes in free will. The pagans regard their supposed destinies as necessary facts; the Christian historian regards them as conditional facts" (*Pagan Antiquity* 70-71). Thus, like

Geffrey's reversal of values in the *House of Fame*, which idealizes the private suffering of the shamed over the public glory of the hero, the narrator's sympathy for Criseyde brings to bear a decidedly non-heroic standard of judgment against the epic history of honour and shame.

This ironic distance is clear when Troilus learns of Parliament's decision to exchange Criseyde for Antenor, forcing the lovers' fateful separation. Troilus does what people often do in the face of misfortune: he questions the order and purpose of the cosmos. In a speech that borrows heavily from Boethius's dialogue with Lady Philosophy, Troilus declares, "For all that comth, comth by necessittee: / Thus to ben lorn, it is my destinee" (IV.958-59).<sup>43</sup> But in what is either a misunderstanding or a deliberate departure from the teaching of Philosophy on Chaucer's part, Troilus concludes that the necessity of events removes the possibility of free will:

Wherfore I sey, that from eterne if he  
Hath wist byform oure thought ek as oure dede,  
We han no fre chois, as thise clerkes rede. (IV.978-80)

Troilus's acceptance of fate and his understanding of destiny as a lack of free agency signal his general tendency towards passivity.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Pandarus chides

---

<sup>43</sup> Chaucer began working on *Troilus and Criseyde* after finishing his translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy (Boece)*, and the strong Boethian flavour of the poem has been well-established. For recent studies of Chaucer's indebtedness to Boethius, see Harold Kaylor, "Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*"; J. Allan Mitchell, "Romancing Ethics in Boethius, Chaucer, and Levinas: Fortune, Moral Luck, and Erotic Adventure"; Sonjae An, "Echoes of Boethius and Dante in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*."

<sup>44</sup> Catherine S. Cox complains that Troilus is "wholly ineffectual and passive" (*Gender and Language* 47); Maud Burnett McInerney ("Is This a Mannes Herte?") comments that, in "behaving like a heroine when he should be playing the hero," Troilus appears "ridiculous" (234). Ironically, these (feminist) critics sound remarkably like Pandarus in the suggestion that Troilus ought to "be a man"—with the implication that being a woman means being ineffectual and passive. Jill Mann, however, argues that Troilus is a "feminized hero" in a positive sense, who is "divested of the coerciveness characteristic of the 'active' male and that his unreserved surrender

him for languishing with grief rather than taking charge of his destiny: “Ris up anon, and lat this wepyng be, / And kith thow art a man” (IV.537-38). Criseyde, too, albeit more gently, opposes Troilus’s abdication of will in favour of practical action: the “art” that enables one to achieve one’s goals, whether romantic or ethical, to “redresse” all that is amiss (IV.1266-67). In contrast to Troilus, Criseyde is, as Mark Lambert points out, “resourceful” (67). God helps those who help themselves, she says in effect, but

if a wight alwey his wo compleyne  
And seketh noht how holpen for to be,  
It nys but folie and encrees of peyne. (IV.1255-57)<sup>45</sup>

Troilus’s passivity in the face of adversity may seem like folly, but, of course, it is also a feature of his constancy. Whether we praise him or, with Pandarus, question his manhood, Troilus’s character and even his situation do not change substantially from Book I, when he first sees and falls in love with Criseyde, until we last see him on earth, seeking Diomedes in battle at the end of Book V: from first to last, he suffers the “woo” and “torment” of love, waiting first for Criseyde to reciprocate, then waiting for her to return from the Greek camp, then waiting for release from his pain through death (I.402, 404). His active

---

to the force of love is for Chaucer not a sign of weakness but of a generous nobility” (*Feminizing Chaucer* 129).

<sup>45</sup> Mark Lambert contrasts Criseyde’s “resourcefulness” with Troilus’s “decency,” and argues that decent Troilus comes across as “more than a little boring” (67). Lambert’s analysis of Criseyde’s conversation with her uncle, in which she first learns of Troilus’s love for her, similarly celebrates Criseyde’s “adroitness” (66). Both descriptors express the way in which Criseyde exemplifies practical action over acceptance of fate and destiny (“Telling the Story in *Troilus and Criseyde*” [2003]). Criseyde’s resourcefulness and adaptability do not, however, give her the ability to foresee all eventualities (despite being the daughter of a seer). Thus, she comes to regret her decision not to elope with Troilus, and complains that she lacks “oon of thyne eyen thre” of “Prudence”: she can recall the past, perceive the present accurately, but she could not predict how she would feel once in exile (V.744). Criseyde evinces practicality and prudence, therefore, but not *perfect* prudence.

participation in combat is reported by the narrator but not shown, and Chaucer makes a point of downplaying the significance of his military prowess.<sup>46</sup> Troilus's almost complete passivity in the consummation scene is enabled by Pandarus's overzealous involvement, and it is epitomized in his swoon, which again prompts exasperation from Pandarus, "O thef, is this a mannes herte?" (III.1092).<sup>47</sup> Troilus himself renders nicely the existential upshot of this passivity in the image of a rudderless boat:

Thus possed to and fro,  
 Al sterelees within a boot am I  
 Amydde the see, bitwixen wyndes two,  
 That in contrarie stonden evere mo. (I.415-18)

This striking image recurs in another portrait of long-suffering constancy, in the *Man of Law's Tale*, when Custance is literally put out to sea in a rudderless boat.<sup>48</sup> But, arguably, Troilus's passivity is different than Custance's, who physically fends off a would-be rapist, nurtures and protects her son, and converts a nation of pagans to Christianity; Troilus waits, and he weeps. Perhaps it is not unfair to say that Custance's eponymous virtue is manifest in a steadfast endurance that is the ground of moral agency, but Troilus's fidelity consists in a

---

<sup>46</sup> Many have pointed out the narrator's frequent disavowals of "armes" and "batailles": instead of describing Troilus's feats of honour, the narrator directs us to "Rede Dares, he kan telle hem alle ifeere" (V.1771). On Chaucer's persistent disinterest, here and elsewhere, in all things military, see R. F. Yeager, "Pax Poetica: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower" (1987). See also Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (92-101). Burrow points out that all four of the Ricardian poets are marked by a disinterest in battle heroics. Instead of feats of conquest, we often see Ricardian "heroes" on their knees before a greater force, such as Gawain before the Green Knight—or Troilus at Criseyde's bedside (Burrow 94).

<sup>47</sup> For a thorough analysis of this scene, and the idea that the swoon allows for "mutual submission" rather than a power struggle between Troilus and Criseyde, see Jill Mann, "Troilus' Swoon."

<sup>48</sup> Cf. the narrator's comment in the prologue to Book 2, that his story has moved into such "blake wawes" that he is unable to "steere" his "tempestuous matere"—but conditions are about to improve (II.1-7).

kind of inertia that forecloses on moral agency in the same way as his metaphysical belief that “We han no fre chois.”

What, then, of Criseyde, whose resourcefulness and confident assertion that she will be back in Troilus’s arms within a week or two dissolve into “slydyngge corage” once she is ensconced in the Greek camp (V.825)? While Troilus *believes* his will to be constrained by Providence, the scope of Criseyde’s agency is in *fact* limited, but by a wide range of external, social pressures, rather than by cosmic necessity.<sup>49</sup> These pressures, exerted continually on Criseyde’s will, take the form of the conflicting demands of honour and shame. Troilus “chooses” the bondage of fate and thus passivity; Criseyde has no choice but to react to changing circumstances as they arise, and yet, even as her circumstances change, the imperatives of safeguarding honour and avoiding shame are constant. Indeed, at every juncture in the poem, Criseyde’s choices and actions are represented as those which either safeguard or threaten her honour. When she first considers Troilus’s suit, when she submits but insists that Troilus and Pandarus keep the romance a secret, when she refuses to flee with Troilus, when she decides to renege on her promise to return to Troy, and when she regrets her own unfaithfulness and contemplates her fate in the history books, questions of

---

<sup>49</sup> Cf. David Aers, who similarly argues that “Criseyde’s bad faith was almost impossible to avoid, encouraged and prepared for by the habits and practices of the very society which would, of course, condemn such a betrayal with righteous moral indignation” (135). Carolyn Dinshaw also makes a similar observation, that Criseyde’s “slydyngge”—her capacity to change to suit the desires of different men as she is “passed between groups of men at war,” while it is “found by individual men to be intolerable, proves in fact to be a capacity with a definite utility within patriarchal culture as a whole” (56). See also Jill Mann’s discussion of Criseyde’s “pité,” cited below.

reputation, honour, and shame are foremost in her mind.<sup>50</sup> It is “hire fadres shame” that haunts her at the poem’s opening, the fear of “wikked tonges” when she is considering Troilus’s suit, and her awareness that her shame will henceforth be a scourge on all women after she has betrayed him. More importantly, these fears are not represented as baseless or superficial, but as legitimate responses to real danger and, most immediately, as coercive pressures.

If Troilus represents passive fatalism and Criseyde demonstrates resourceful and practical moral agency, Pandarus also favours agency over fatalism: his schemes and manipulations are instrumental in Troilus’s “wele” and in his “woe.” But while Criseyde’s agency is creative and responsive, Pandarus’s agency is coercive; Criseyde applies her agency as a means of responding to, or coping with, the power structure of honour and shame, Pandarus applies his in service of it. The differences between the two kinds of agency are aptly illustrated by comparing two key scenes in which they interact. After Pandarus tells Criseyde that she is loved by “noble Troilus” and that Troilus is on the brink of death for her sake, he leaves and Criseyde sits down in her closet,

as stulle as any ston,  
And every word gan up and down to wynde

---

<sup>50</sup> As Derek Brewer has remarked, the poem is “in some respects a poem about her honour, or rather, her dishonour” (14). Brewer’s observation that Criseyde faces a dilemma (“a cleft stick”) is accurate enough, but, in relying on an overly simplistic opposition between internal and external values, he construes Criseyde’s honour as a superficial concern for appearances, and thus reproduces the antifeminist reading of Criseyde as self-interested and fickle: “She has put external social worldly reputation before the internal value of *trouthe* to Troilus and has ironically lost the external reputation just because she preferred it” (15). By contrast, I argue that honour and shame constitute a value nexus, a complex social dynamic that Criseyde participates in by virtue of her social relationships in the world of the poem: she does not lose her reputation because she prefers it; rather, we are shown how honour and shame act as social forces that serve to hem her in on all sides. Moreover, to interpret her downfall in such moralizing terms (i.e., Criseyde’s punishment fits her crime) is to miss completely the careful project of rehabilitation in which Chaucer is engaged here: “Ye may hire gilt in other bokes se” (V.1776).



That he had seyde, as it com hire to mynde. (II.600-03)

As we witness the effects the words have on her thoughts and feelings, we are given a clear sense of the contradictory demands of honour and shame: honour requires different behaviour depending on whether we consider Criseyde as a Trojan widow and daughter of a traitor, as the mistress of a Trojan prince, or as an exile among the Greeks.<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that Criseyde's feelings for Troilus are not genuine, or that she acts purely for the sake of expediency. For the poet, there is indeed a thin line between, on the one hand, showing *how* circumstances mitigate Criseyde's guilt and, on the other hand, robbing her of authentic, inner selfhood *apart from* her circumstances.<sup>52</sup> Chaucer's representation of Criseyde's interior thought process manages to do just this: we see the ways in which Criseyde's desire—her will—is shaped by the demands of honour and shame but does not cater to them out of superficiality or self-interest. Her first reaction to the onslaught of Pandarus' pleas and threats, it should be noted, is grief that her uncle should care so little for her welfare, and then this initial reaction is followed by fear. Indeed, she “wel neigh starf for feere” and was the “ferfullest wight / That myghte be” (II.450-52). She fears first that Troilus and even Pandarus might really do violence to themselves, and then she fears what “men wolde of hit deme” if her refusal is the cause of it (II.461). But seeing Troilus returning victoriously from battle prompts Criseyde “to caste and rollen up and down / Withinne her thought” all of Troilus's attractive qualities (II.659-60). And she is

---

<sup>51</sup> My reading here has been strongly influenced by Jill Mann's analysis of Criseyde's “mutability” in *Feminizing Chaucer* (14-25).

<sup>52</sup> See Mann's discussion of how Chaucer emphasizes the “involuntary elements involved in the exercise of the will” in Criseyde's decision to love (“Chance and Destiny” 83).

flattered that such a man is pining for her. But she is also keenly aware of the disparity in their respective social stations:

Ek wel woot I my kynges son is he,  
 And sith he hath to se me swich delit,  
 If I wolde outreliche his sighte flee,  
 Peraunter he myghte have me in dispit,  
 Thorough which I myghte stonde in worse plit.  
 Now were I wis, me hate to purchase,  
 Withouten need, ther I may stonde in grace? (II.708-14)

This is probably the clearest expression of what Criseyde has to lose by rejecting Troilus's suit, and, thus, the strongest expression of the kind of shame she fears: exile, alienation, fall from grace—precisely the situation into which she is thrown when she is sent from Troy. But, on the other hand, fearing a “worse plit” if she rejects him, she also fears a loss of liberty if she accepts: “Allas! Syn I am free / Sholde I now love, and put in jupartie / My sikernesse, and thrallen libertee?” (II.771-73). This is a note of caution that she does not hesitate to express to Troilus outright, when she lays down the condition of equal “sovereignete” in love, even though he is her social superior (III.171). Thus, she weighs true concern for Troilus's (and her uncle's) happiness, her own safety versus her own freedom, basic sexual attraction, in addition to concern for public opinion. If hers is too calculating a mind, if she applies too much “art” and shows not enough romantic spontaneity, she is again caught in a dilemma. As the narrator reminds us, the “envious jangle” of antifeminism accuses Criseyde of loving Troilus too quickly and pledging her troth too lightly (II.666). In granting access to Criseyde's private thoughts, Chaucer represents the complex combination of factors involved in love and desire, and the gradual process by which she “gan

encline / To like hym first” and then to love “in no sodeyn wyse” (II.674-75, 679).

In the second instance, it is Pandarus who inadvertently expresses the double-bind of shame with which Criseyde must contend. Advising Troilus to be discreet, in the hopes of assuaging Criseyde’s fears and therefore advancing the relationship, he rehearses the notion that women are ever being wronged and shamed in love (an idea repeated by the narrator [V.1780-85]), and exclaims, “No wonder is, so God me sende hele, / Though wommen dreden with us men to dele” (III.321-22). But it is the same Pandarus who, a few lines later, is shaking his finger at Criseyde for being “so like a woman” in her hesitation: “ye wommen” who make false promises, he threatens, “doth hireself a shame and hym a gyle” (III.777). If Criseyde yields, or yields too quickly, she is the quintessentially shameful loose woman; if she does not give in at all, she is a tease. In either case, the spectre of “shame” is invoked as a kind of amorphous and yet definitive form of social and psychological control. The fear of shame that constrains Criseyde performs a “policing function” similar to the one that Mary Douglas associates with pollution: it monitors “cognitive boundaries as well as physical ones” and “patrols the mind” (161).<sup>53</sup> Criseyde’s ability to adapt, to find “art ynogh” to survive in a world where women are taken and exchanged as spoils of war, is not, therefore, represented by Chaucer as the stereotypical fickleness of woman

---

<sup>53</sup> The frequency with which shame is invoked here, and the varied forms in which it takes, is of course the obverse of the way in which the idea of “honour” is invoked in chivalric discourse. Honour, according to Lee Patterson, was chivalry’s guiding principle, “. . . whose glittering surface would distract attention from the dark contradictions beneath. The term ‘honor’ became its own verbal symbol, a shorthand for motives that would not bear further inspection” (*Subject of History* 175).

(IV.1266). Rather, the psychological process by which Criseyde's "ceaseless movement of thought and emotion" engages with different external stimuli is drawn by Chaucer with such exquisite detail that we are made aware that changeability is "not specifically female but is simply a human condition" (*Feminizing Chaucer* 22, 24). And that we are witness to the "proces" by which Troilus wins her over "in no sodeyn wyse" makes Criseyde's eventual yielding to Diomedes similarly insistent wooing plausible.

Criseyde's yielding is all the more plausible since she has been granted protection by Hector while she is in Troy, but is isolated and vulnerable when Diomedes approaches her. But, moreover, the fears that she makes explicit when she contemplates escape from her father—that she dreads "moost of alle" falling into the "hondes of som wrecche" (V.704-05)—are implied throughout the poem, in a pervasive subtext of threatened violence. For all of Troilus's swooning, it is Criseyde who is placed on the defensive from the start, when we first see her "in gret penaunce," on her knees, begging Hector's mercy (I.94). Corinne Saunders points out parallels between the image of Criseyde trembling "Right as an aspes leef" in the consummation scene and Chaucer's description of the rapes of Lucretia and Philomela in the *Legend of Good Women* (III.1200). Pandarus's coercive tactics culminate in a kind of voyeurism, and he comes close to violating Criseyde himself when he pries and thrusts under her sheet and finally steals a not-so-paternal kiss after Troilus leaves the next morning (III.1571-75). Similarly, the "winning" of Criseyde is bracketed with references to Procne and Philomela: the day that Pandarus goes to Criseyde to tell her of Troilus's love for

her—and threatens her with the deaths of both men if she refuses—he awakens to the singing of the “swalowe Proigne” (II.64). That night, Criseyde falls asleep to the sound of the nightingale singing a “lay / Of love” (II.921-22). But as she sleeps, she dreams that an eagle rips out her heart with his “longe clawes” (II.927). And when Pandarus explains his scheme to Troilus at Deiphebus’ house, he uses a deer hunting metaphor—that he will “drive” Criseyde into Troilus’s bow—which garners nothing but eager assent from Troilus, “so glad ne was he nevere in al his lyve” (II.1538). Such imagery makes the wooing of Criseyde, by the gentle Troilus as well as Diomedes, an act of violence.<sup>54</sup>

Criseyde’s lack of “fre chois” and agency, then, is the result, not of Providence, destiny, or fate, but of the engagement between the vicissitudes of politics and the self-interested desires of the men around her, on the one hand, and, on the other, her own ability to survive, both psychologically and physically, in a hostile world. This is the reality that Shakespeare’s Cressida, who is much more world-weary than Chaucer’s, expresses in a punning response to Pandarus’ complaint that she is “such a woman a man knows not at what ward [she] lies” (1.2.260-61). Cressida picks up the fencing metaphor to suggest an image of her identity as essentially, and necessarily, protean:

Upon my back, to defend my belly; upon  
 my wit, to defend my wiles; upon my secrecy, to defend  
 mine honesty; my mask, to defend my beauty; and  
 you, to defend all these. And at all these wards I lie, at a thousand  
 watches. (1.2.262-66).

---

<sup>54</sup> Corinne Saunders also notes this: these images give “a sense of Criseyde herself as victim in a world of violence and violation” (*Rape and Ravishment* 292).

Shakespeare's *Cressida*'s ever-shifting mode of defence is brash and cynical where Chaucer's *Criseyde* is sensitive and responsive, but the pressures each faces are the same. The point is related to but different than Mann's, who argues that *Criseyde*'s "slydyng corage" is the negative consequence, or corollary, of the "pit " that leads her to yield to Troilus in the first place:

This is how men would have their women be, instinctively adapting to the contours of their personalities and moods. But if this is what they want, they must accept that women can be equally chameleon-like with other men, until they are changed beyond recognition. The real tragedy of *Troilus and Criseyde* is not simply that Troilus is separated from Criseyde, it is that she ceases to exist as the Criseyde he has known and loved. (*Feminizing Chaucer* 25)<sup>55</sup>

An integral part of Mann's larger argument is her sympathetic reading of Troilus as a "feminized hero." But without recognizing that the "external stimuli" to which *Criseyde* responds are in fact coercive, and that Troilus is complicit in the coercion, Mann's account leaves out any explanation for *Criseyde*'s change "beyond recognition": on this reading, *Criseyde*'s mutability is simply an aspect of the "human condition" (*Feminizing* 24).

I agree that Chaucer is careful to expunge the rationale for antifeminism, but his method of doing so is not simply to remove the association between inherent changeability and femininity: in other words, the problem of agency considered in the poem is not only *Criseyde*'s; it is, in fact, primarily Troilus's. Indeed, there is a causal link between the extent to which Troilus abdicates free

---

<sup>55</sup> Mann quotes Shakespeare's phrase "Diomed's Cressid" to illustrate the fluidity of her identity. And indeed, Shakespeare's version emphasizes the problem of agency and identity to the point of utter fragmentation and dissolution, without the comforting vision of Troilus's ascent to the eighth sphere. Perhaps an even stronger statement of the de-stabilizing effects of change and mutability is Troilus's avowal, after physically witnessing *Cressida*'s infidelity, "This is, and is not, Cressid" (5.2.143).

will in favour of fate and fortune and the extent to which Criseyde becomes constrained by the pressures of honour and shame. There is, in other words, a sense in which Troilus's resignation, "all that comth, comth by necessittee," creates a situation in which Criseyde *must* lie at all wards, "at a thousand watches," and not simply in the sense of failing to take practical measures to keep Criseyde with him, as Pandarus suggests. That is, I am not suggesting that Troilus ought to "be a man" in a way that opposes masculine activity with feminine passivity—such coercive action would constrain Criseyde as much as taking no action at all. Rather, the point goes back to the equation of destiny or Providence with bondage in Troilus's speech. In Boethius, as in most traditional formulations, the question of free will in relation to Providence is seen, first and foremost, as a question of God's justice and human morality. In the absence of free will, Boethius argues, there would be no reason to strive for good and avoid evil, and the idea of God rewarding good and punishing evil would become absurd: as Chaucer translates, "Thanne ne schulle ther nevere be, ne nevere were, vice ne vertu, but it scholde rather ben confusion of all dissertes medlid withouten discrecioun" (*Boece* 461). This is the kind of passivity that Troilus demonstrates: not a kind of effeminacy, but a kind of moral paralysis, encapsulated in the image of a rudderless boat tossed about on waves of "contraries." Criseyde attempts to negotiate her conflicting ethical obligations and is ultimately unsuccessful, but Troilus chooses to opt out of the field of human ethics altogether.

Quite logically, therefore, Troilus's philosophical abdication of free will is followed closely by the near-suicides of both Troilus and Criseyde: in the absence

of free will, Chaucer seems to suggest, life itself is no longer viable. Mark Lambert argues that Troilus and Criseyde's near-suicides can be read as an "alternate ending," which would have resulted in a tragic love story, along the lines of *Romeo and Juliet*, rather than the classic betrayal story ("Telling the Story" 68-70). As Lambert points out, Criseyde emerges from this "pseudo-death" or even "ritual death" with a renewed commitment to survival, while Troilus emerges still languishing. After the drama of her swoon and Troilus's declaration, sword in hand, to follow her in death, Criseyde swiftly changes her tone: "But hoo, for we han right ynogh of this" (IV.1242). Moreover, Criseyde's plan to return to Troy after ten days—the conventional exile-and-return pattern—is a plan "to be not a romance heroine but a romance hero, a Gawain or a Lancelot" (70). Troilus, in contrast, is "comparatively timorous" and "unheroic" in his plan to "stele away" lest Criseyde succumb to temptation among the Greeks (Lambert 70; IV.1503). Criseyde, in other words, rejects the romantic ending in which the love between hero and heroine is too pure for the messiness of the fallen world; she also rejects the fate of Dido, who chooses death over shame. But the wicked tongues that plague Dido, the wildfire of rumour spreading her shame throughout history, create an equally intractable either/or for Criseyde: in choosing life and claiming her freedom to act, she too becomes bound by shame. Indeed, Troilus's heroism depends upon the foil of Criseyde's shame in her betrayal of him, for it is precisely this foil and his resultant "sorwe" that creates his identity as "faithful Troilus." This moment, in which Criseyde chooses life and moral agency, and the narrator chooses Criseyde as the story's chief protagonist, parallels the narrator's



choice of Dido over Aeneas in the *House of Fame*. It is another critical moment in which Chaucer as author signals the guiding principle of his poetic enterprise, an enterprise committed to re-aligning the lenses of history, to looking beyond and beneath shame and honour to the question of “existence,” or “what ech deserved.” Rather than rehearsing the old narrative that re-inscribes the shame of the fallen woman, Chaucer asks, how did Criseyde really feel? Why did she do what she did? What kind of person must she have been, must Troilus have been, for this kind of story to be told?

On the other hand, Criseyde’s would-be heroism—her intention to return—is thwarted by the poet-narrator’s acknowledged complicity in the shame ethics of the story he is committed to telling. The difference between the moral paralysis I identify in Troilus and the argument that Pandarus puts forward (“Go ravysse her! Ne kanstow nat, for shame?” [IV.530]) is that the necessity that Troilus resigns himself to is not one of his own making. That is, Troilus’s renouncing of free will is not simply a bogus excuse to avoid action. It is rather the necessity of *auctorite*, the fact that the story he is here enacting is one whose ending is already known; it is a necessity, in other words, self-consciously called into being by Chaucer himself. If the demands of honour and shame within the world of the poem lock Criseyde in a dilemma, in which she must face shame no matter which course of action she pursues, the demands of tradition place Chaucer in a dilemma, voiced by the narrator, and dramatized in the figure of Troilus, between wanting the tale to turn out differently and being powerless to change it. As Troilus laments to Pandarus,

Thus am I with desir and reson twight:  
 Desire for to destourben hire me redeth,  
 And reson nyl nat; so myn herte dredeth. (IV.572-74)

At the meta-level, the narrator's frequent disavowals of responsibility for the moral ramifications of the story he is telling mirror Troilus's abdication here: Chaucer represents his own authorship as "with desir and reson twight." Desire in this sense refers not necessarily to sexual desire, but to moral will, and reason, to a discursive knowledge of "how the story goes."<sup>56</sup> The narrator's tactics of evasion have been observed many times: "as myn auctour seyde, so sey I" (II.19).<sup>57</sup> And nowhere does the narrator strain against his text more than when he must tell of Criseyde's betrayal. At this point, it is not so much that he does not want to accept the "truth" about Criseyde—or that, as Dinshaw comments, "the lady and the fable have disappointed him," and that his disappointment centres on the "seemingly uncontrollable feminine [that] threatens to destroy masculine lives and masculine projects" (*Sexual Poetics* 46). The disappointment centres not on Criseyde at all but on his "auctour" and the sense that Criseyde is herself wronged

---

<sup>56</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw also aligns Chaucer (or, more specifically, his narrator) with Troilus and Pandarus, but argues that theirs is very much a sexual desire: "the narrator, emphatically masculine, engages with his pagan source texts as if they were women, treats them in ways analogous to the ways in which male lovers in the narratives treat their women; . . . interpretive acts are performed on an ultimately powerfully feminine corpus" (*Sexual Poetics* 25). Dinshaw's analysis of how these male figures exemplify "reading like a man" is apposite to my discussion, however. Dinshaw points out, for example, a similar ambivalence in Troilus who, "as an individual man, . . . is deeply attached to, deeply believes in the uniqueness and singularity, the free and individual subjectivity, of a woman; but he is simultaneously implicated in, indeed complicit in, a larger societal attitude that sees women as mere counters in a power-asymmetrical patriarchal social structure" (30).

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Evan Carton, "Complicity and Responsibility in Pandarus' Bed and Chaucer's Art"; Leonard Michael Koff, "Ending a Poem before Beginning It; or, The 'Cas' of Troilus." Derek Brewer, "The History of a Shady Character: The Narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*." For a review of critical work and a refutation of the "unreliable narrator" in Chaucer, see Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity* (68-100).

by the way the story has always been told. The narrator aligns himself not with “masculine lives and masculine projects” but with Criseyde: “I fynde in stories elleswhere / . . . Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte” (V.1044, 1050). Here, the narrator does not even distinguish between the “envious jangle” of antifeminist slander and the truth of “auctoritee”—both the instability of rumour and the authority of *fama* are collapsed into the category of “what men say”—*men* say one thing about Criseyde and the inconstancy of women, Chaucer suggests, but *I* am trying to say something else.

This note of protest, however, gives way to the uncomfortable awareness of complicity, when Criseyde herself is allowed to lament her own literary destiny, a destiny that is not doled out by indifferent fate but is the result of human action—and inaction: “O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge! / Thoroughout the world my belle shal be ronge!” (V.1061-62). Here, of course, Criseyde echoes both Dido herself (“alle myn actes red and songe / Over al thys lond, on every tonge” [347-348]) and the supplicants in Fame’s castle (“Allas, thus was her shame yronge, / And gilteles, on every tonge!” [1655-1656]). The difference is that Geoffrey in the *House of Fame* is merely a sympathetic observer in Venus’s temple and Fame’s palace. By contrast, the narrator of *Troilus*, as much as he presents himself as a passive conduit, is still a transmitter of tidings, one of the wicked tongues mixing truth with lies of which Dido, Criseyde, and their company complain. Geoffrey’s tale is in the form of a dream: by its very nature, a first-person account of a private, internal experience. But *Troilus and Criseyde* is an episode from one of the most important chapters in medieval history, in the

story of how Rome and thus Britain itself arose from the ashes of Troy. And, of course, in light of Criseyde's literary identity before Chaucer but also after him, in Henryson and Shakespeare, and even, ironically, in much of Chaucer criticism, Criseyde's grief and Chaucer's regret are entirely warranted.<sup>58</sup> The narrator's insistence that Criseyde has suffered "ynogh" for "hire gilt," therefore, begins to sound very much like a confession of his own guilt, in following his "auctour" rather than imagining new possibilities, for asserting with Troilus, "we han no fre chois," rather than seeking "art ynogh for to redresse / That yet is mys." That this is, indeed, a confession is further corroborated by the penance that the poet is instructed to perform by Queen Alceste in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, "In makynge of a glorious legende / Of goode women" (G.473-74). His penance, of course, is owed specifically for his complicity with antifeminism in perpetuating the myth of women's inconstancy. What is being dramatized is the way in which the author's moral responsibility stands at odds with the authoritative discourse in which he participates. And ironically, it is precisely in calling attention to his inefficacy as author and his role as mere compiler and translator of sources that Chaucer emphasizes his complicity—and this emphasis

---

<sup>58</sup> Criseyde/Cressida's literary status as an emblem for the fickleness and shame of women is well established. Henryson writes vividly of Cresseid's polluted name, in spite of his professed sympathy for her:

O fair Creisseid, the flour and A per se  
 Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait  
 To change in filth all thy feminitie,  
 And be with fleschlie lust sa maculait,  
 And go amang the Greikis air and lait,  
 Sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance!  
 I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance! (*Testament of Cresseid* 78-84)

See also Dinshaw's discussion of how Criseyde figures as the ultimately unattainable woman not only for Troilus but also for Donaldson and Robertson, the two giants of twentieth-century Chaucer scholarship ( *Sexual Poetics* 28-52).

is intentional. It is an implicit retraction, in the very act of commission, and it looks ahead to the literary “confession” that stands at the conclusion of *The Canterbury Tales*.

#### Honour and Violence in the *Knight's Tale*

Chaucer continues his exploration of “olde bokes” and the ethical project of discerning shame from guilt in another “medievalized” classical text, the tale told by the “verray parfit gentil knight” that begins the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>59</sup> In Criseyde’s negotiation with the external forces of honour and shame, Chaucer highlights the way in which individual agency engages with constraints on “fre chois”; what is being explored, therefore, is the interior experience of shame ethics. In the *Knight's Tale*, however, Chaucer explores how honour and shame make interiority itself problematic. The necessity of Criseyde’s fate is a consequence of human action and politics, as well as the politics of medieval authorship; the fates that unfold in the *Knight's Tale* do so in terms of a necessity that seems almost mechanical, because the public nature of chivalric identity bars access to the inner workings of motive and desire. The *Knight's Tale* shifts focus, therefore, from the interiority of shame to its public, cultural forms, and in particular, to the relationship between honour, shame, and sacrifice.

The *Knight's Tale* opens with the return of “this noble duc” Theseus from battle in Scythia, bringing back to Athens the spoils of his victory (873, 866). The dominant idea in these opening lines is that Theseus is a conqueror—a

---

<sup>59</sup> The notion that Chaucer “medievalizes” Italian and classical sources is articulated by C. S. Lewis, in relation to *Troilus and Criseyde* (“What Chaucer Really Did to ‘Il Filostrato’”), and by Minnis (*Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*) in relation to all of Chaucer’s “pagan” poems.

consummate winner of “maistrie” wherever he goes: he is “lord and governour” (861) of Athens, “a conqueror” without equal (862); he “conquered al the regne of Femenye” (866) and “wonnen” (877) his reward “by his chivalrye” and in “grete bataille” (878-79). But he is also a “gentil duc,” and the brusque and warlike conqueror (“What folk been ye?” [905]) positively melts with compassion when he is importuned by the Theban women on the road to Athens: “Him thoughte that his herte wolde breke” (954). At this point, Theseus seems to embody perfectly the chivalric ideal as it is emblemized on his banner, which contrasts “the rede statue of Mars” against the white of Venusian courtliness.<sup>60</sup>

Thus rit this duc, thus rit this conquerour,  
And in his hoost of chivalrye the flour,  
Til that he cam to Thebes and alighte,  
Faire in a feeld, theras he thoghte fighte. (981-84)

The genteel nobility and careful balance of the white and the red that is suggested by this image is not, however, borne out by Theseus’s private motivations or by his actual conduct when he arrives in Thebes. The oath that he swears to avenge the wrongs committed by Creon leaves out any mention of the people whose cause he is supposed to champion, and focuses instead on his own personal gain:

He wolde doon so ferforthly his might  
Upon the tyraunt Creon hem to wreke  
That al the peple of Grece sholde speke  
How Creon was of Theseus yserved,  
As he that hadde he deeth ful wel deserved. (960-64)

---

<sup>60</sup> Blanch and Wasserman point out the significance of colour imagery in the tale; see “The White and the Red: Chaucer’s Manipulation of a Convention in the *Knight’s Tale*.” I discuss their approach in greater detail below.

It is the people of *Greece* that Theseus considers here, and specifically the honour they will pay him for this feat of military prowess; his prowess is thus imagined as a confirmation and consolidation of his own political authority, rather than his selfless service to the code of chivalry.

Accordingly, the depiction of the battle itself is wholly disenchanting and, from the perspective of chivalric ethics, morally dubious at best. Theseus not only avenges himself on Creon—he “slough him manly as a knight” (987)—he also, inexplicably, destroys the city and scatters the very people whose distress he is ostensibly trying to alleviate in removing the tyrant who had oppressed them. It is not a victory but a decimation in which, we are told, Theseus “rente adoun both wal and sparre and rafter” (990). We are also given a less than heroic vision of the field *after* the heat and glory of battle, where, among the ruins of the levelled city, the heaps of dead bodies lay attracting flies and pillagers. It is from one of these heaps that the half-dead bodies of Palamon and Arcite are pulled. From the first, the two are virtually indistinguishable, “Two yonge knightes, ligginge by and by, / Both in oon armes wrought ful richely” (1011-12). They are identifiable not as individuals but only by their armour which marks them as Theban royal blood and as cousins (1016).<sup>61</sup> Theseus sends them to prison indefinitely without ransom, and returns home once again, “With laurer crowned as a conqueror; / And ther he liveth in joye and in honour” (1027-28). The scene closes, as it were, on a note of seeming order and contentment: the unfortunate survivors of Theseus’s scorched-

---

<sup>61</sup> On the lineage of Palamon and Arcite, see David Anderson, “Theban Genealogy in the *Knight’s Tale*.” Anderson sorts out Chaucer’s hints about the parentage of Palamon and Arcite, and in the process demonstrates that at least one of Oedipus’s sons seems to have imitated his father’s incest (making sure that “royal blood” is not intermingled with any other).

earth policy have been neatly tucked away, out of sight and out of mind, and the happy conqueror is free to live out the rest of his days enjoying the fruits of his labour.

But what feels like the conclusion of one story, Theseus's happily-ever-after, is, in fact, the crucial, inaugural moment in the text, the one that sets in motion the central narrative of the Thebans' rivalry and the sacrificial death of one for the gain of the other. It is precisely Theseus's "perfect" embodiment of the inherently contradictory ideal of chivalric honour, in other words, that gives rise to what Girard calls the "monstrous double" of Palamon and Arcite. If Theseus is the conqueror who orders the world through the imposition of his own will, Palamon and Arcite constitute together the force of nature of youth, desire, and disorder that both resists that imposition and, paradoxically, is born from it; the more that Theseus tries to pull the unruly Thebans into his orbit—into the narrative in which he figures as the hero, living "in joye and in honour"—the more they disrupt the triumphant tale of conquest the Knight is trying to tell. The central dynamic of the tale, then, is one in which the claim for Theseus as simultaneously a "manly" conqueror and a merciful governor is shown to be a contradiction that unleashes chaotic, innate violence rather than one that imposes justice and order.<sup>62</sup> And this dynamic is recapitulated in the unsanctioned rivalry

---

<sup>62</sup> Muscatine, for example, points out the rich symmetry and order of the narrative, plot, and character-groupings, and argues that Theseus is the "centre of authority and the balance between the opposing forces of the knights" ("Form, Texture and Meaning" 914). And, for Muscatine, that authority remains intact: "The impressive, patterned edifice of the noble life, its dignity and richness, its regard for law and decorum, are all bulwarks against the ever-threatening forces of chaos, and in constant chaos with them. . . . When earthly designs suddenly crumble, true nobility is faith in the ultimate order of all things" (929). Along these lines, see also Kathleen Blake, "Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*?" and Robert Hanning, "'The Struggle between Noble Designs and Chaos': The Literary Tradition of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*."



that begins in the prison tower and culminates in the bloody battle in the grove, and again in the sanctioned competition deliberately orchestrated by Theseus.

René Girard argues that, in traditional societies, it is the lack of difference rather than difference itself that is most feared, for it is the breakdown of the normal modes of differentiation that creates a mimetic crisis. Indeed, violence itself involves an intensification of mimesis—of sameness—rather than the clash of opposites, and Girard argues that traditional societies perceived this feature of violent conflict more clearly than we do:

Where we tend to see a difference emerge from the outcome of a conflict, the difference between victory on one side and defeat on the other, traditional and primitive societies emphasize the reciprocity of the conflict, or in other words the antagonists' mutual imitation. What strikes the primitive is the resemblance between the competitors, the identity of aims and tactics, the symmetry of gestures, etc. (*Things Hidden* 11)

The real horror of this reciprocity lies in its potential to reproduce itself *ad infinitum*, in a cycle of violence that seems unstoppable. “In such cases,” writes Girard, “in its perfection and paroxysm mimesis becomes a chain reaction of vengeance, in which human beings are constrained to the monotonous repetition of homicide. Vengeance turns them into doubles” (*Things Hidden* 12). When the monstrous double is formed, and the “brothers” or “twins” become locked in a cycle of reciprocal strikes, the only way for the violence to be quelled is through sacrifice: “the combat of doubles results in the expulsion of one of the pair, and

---

Compare these readings with those who see Theseus's attempt to impose order as tyrannical, and the predominance of disorder to be an indication of Chaucer's attack on late medieval aristocracy and chivalry: Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, and David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination*, 174-95. More recently, Louise Fradenburg has rejected the idea that the tale represents a struggle between order and disorder (“Sacrificing Desire”); I discuss Fradenburg's essay in some detail below.

this is identified directly with the return to peace and order” (*Things Hidden* 142). Girard points out that, in mythology, often “the relationship between brothers or doubles has in the first instance a character of undecidability, resolved by expulsion through violence despite an arbitrary element involved” (142). This dual imperative, both to reinforce difference and to resolve the absence of difference through violence, is clearly manifest in the ethical structure of honour and shame, where the perpetual competition for honour is itself a means of ensuring differentiation (there is always a winner and a loser), and where, when ambiguity arises, “the ultimate vindication of honour lies in physical violence” (Pitt-Rivers 29).

The honour competition that figures in the *Knight's Tale* is, specifically, a competition for chivalric honour, and it, too, is finally resolved through paradoxically necessary yet arbitrary violence.<sup>63</sup> In the tale, the structure of chivalric honour creates a mimetic crisis in which one of the doubles must be destroyed so that the cultural order and the order of chivalry itself may be preserved. Chivalry, in other words, actively calls into being the chaotic, unchecked violence it is supposed to control and channel into socially productive ends. The idea that Theseus's conquest has destroyed the crucial differences

---

<sup>63</sup> As far as I am aware, to date there are only three article-length attempts to trace the Girardian themes in Chaucer. Two of these are Curtis Gruenler, “Desire, Violence and the Passion in Fragment VII of *The Canterbury Tales*: A Girardian Reading,” and Laurel Amtower, “Mimetic Desire and the Misappropriation of the Ideal.” Amtower in particular seems wary of drawing explicitly from Girardian theory more than is absolutely necessary for establishing Chaucer's representation of desire as mimetic and Arcite's death as sacrificial. My reading diverges from Amtower's in other points as well: see below. Ann W. Astell (“Nietzsche, Chaucer, and the Sacrifice of Art”) demonstrates the extent to which Girardian ideas illuminate the way in which Chaucer encourages “anti-sacrificial” reading practices. I discuss Astell's essay at length in connection with the Manciple and the Pardoner (see Chapter 8). John M. Bowers (“Dronkenesse is Ful of Stryvng”) also makes use of some Girardian terms, but stops well short of what we might call a full-fledged Girardian reading.

between the two young knights just as it levelled the city of Thebes—that Palamon and Arcite are to be read as “doubles”—is evidenced in Chaucer’s deliberate characterization. In his adaptation of Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, Chaucer condenses the narrative, often using the device of *occupatio* in place of large sections of the original plot; he also drastically reduces the lines spoken by the principle characters, especially Emelye, who loses the coquettish personality of the original—and, indeed, is left with hardly any personality at all.<sup>64</sup> But Chaucer’s most striking alteration has to do with the characters of Palamon and Arcite, who become much more one-dimensional, and so alike that they are almost interchangeable. As many have pointed out, the only meaningful difference between them is that each pays fealty to a different god.<sup>65</sup> It might be argued that this difference is in itself significant: that Palamon’s association with Venus identifies him as a lover, while Arcite’s association with Mars suggests that his interest in Emelye is subordinate to interest in victory. Even Laurel Amtower, who discusses the mimetic nature of their conflict, assumes Palamon’s superiority and thus perceives an essential, decisive difference between them: Palamon is the one who saw Emelye first and thus occupies the role of the Girardian model, while Arcite is the rival who “copies every action of Palamon and envies Palamon’s position over his own no matter what the circumstance” (“Misappropriation of the Ideal” 135). The preference for Palamon over Arcite

---

<sup>64</sup> See William E. Coleman, “The Knight’s Tale,” in Correale and Hamel’s *Sources and Analogues*.

<sup>65</sup> As Patterson writes, “many readers of the *Tale* continue to balk at the previously *exact* equivalence between Arcite and Palamon, an equivalence that suddenly vanishes, leaving Arcite alone in the cold grave and Palamon in ‘blisse and melodye’ (3097) with Emelye” (*Subject* 205).

has a long tradition in Chaucerian studies, in readings that stress the poetic justice of the tale's conclusion, in which each knight receives exactly that for which he prayed.<sup>66</sup> This preference, however, is not fully supported by the text itself; nor does Amtower's use of the terms "model" and "rival" fit precisely with Girard's own concepts—concepts which, as Girard defines them, are more apt for the tale even than Amtower suggests. In what Girard often refers to as the "positive feedback circuit" of mimetic desire, the model and rival do not occupy distinct roles, but are in fact one and the same; that is, from the perspective of the competitors, each is both model and rival for the other. This duality, in the desire to destroy but also to *be* the other, creates the positive feedback: Palamon desires Emelye, which creates Arcite's desire for Emelye, which in turn intensifies Palamon's desire, and so on. Thus, both Palamon and Arcite are models for each other. Most importantly, however, Girard argues that no one's desire is truly spontaneous; everyone is *always* "copying" someone else. This is the point to which Arcite inadvertently draws attention with his own specious argument that he loved Emelye first "For paramour" while Palamon "woost nat yet now / Wheither she be a womman or goddess" (1156-57). The point is that the moment in which Palamon falls fatally in love with Emelye is most emphatically *not* a moment of spontaneity or originality, but one which borrows heavily from some of the most common, even archetypal, images in medieval romance: the prison

---

<sup>66</sup> One of the earliest critics to advance this interpretation was William Frost, who argued in 1949 that, through the characterization of Arcite and Palamon, the *Knight's Tale* "develops a conflict between an ethic of battle and an ethic of love" ("An Interpretation" 295). Although the problems with this view were pointed out early on by Muscatine and others, variants of the "poetic justice" thesis persist. In addition to Amtower, see also William Woods ("My Sweete Foo"), who argues that Theseus's and Emelye's acts of mediation between the knights represent "a choice between justice and mercy, or between arms and love" (288).

tower, the maiden in the garden gathering May flowers, the lover's complaint that he has been struck through his eye, the lament to Venus. The description of Arcite's love is similarly conventional and emphasizes the equivalency of the knights' amorous feelings:

And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so  
That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,  
Arcite is hurt as muche as he, or moore. (1114-16).

Even if Palamon scores a slight edge by glimpsing Emelye a few minutes earlier than Arcite, in the argument that ensues no indication of the supremacy of his "right" over Arcite's to win her is given in the text. Indeed, every effort is made to stress the parallels between the two knights, an effort which is geared ostensibly toward the *demande* that concludes the first book, "Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?" (1348). What is stressed, in other words, is their "mutual imitation, . . . the identity of aims and tactics [and] the symmetry of gestures" (*Things Hidden* 11) After each knight sees Emelye and they realize that they are in competition, each angrily denounces the other and asserts the sole legitimacy of his claim (1129-51, 1153-86); Arcite takes his "aventure," compares it to Palamon's, and complains about it (1223-74); Palamon takes his "aventure," compares it to Arcite's, and complains about it (1281-333). In both cases, their laments are phrased in terms that measure their relative portions and express "jalousye" (1333). They both attribute the perceived injustice to cosmic forces, but neither of them even mentions Emelye except to envy the other's superior access to her. The parallelism is also a departure from the *Teseida*, where, incidentally, Arcita spies Emilia first but their shared love for one woman results

in commiseration (at least while they remain in prison) rather than immediate hostility. In the *Knight's Tale*, on the other hand, it is precisely the fact that neither one of the knights *deserves* Emelye more than the other that leads to the bafflement voiced by Arcite but shared by all of the characters,

What is this world? What asketh men to have?  
Now with his love, now in his colde grave  
Allone, withouten any compaignye. (2777-79)

It is odd that Arcite ends up suddenly alone, because he has, until this point, been so completely linked to his rival twin. The extent to which the characters of Palamon and Arcite are underdeveloped in this way allows for their representation as Girardian doubles, but it also removes any clear sense of the knights as autonomous agents: any temptation to read the struggle between the knights as noble heroism is relentlessly undercut by the mindlessness of their conflict. Palamon and Arcite claim to follow the rule of Venus and Mars, but what this means, in effect, is that they follow utterly irrational impulses and passions—personified as Idleness, Narcissism, and Conquest, for example—rather than their moral reason. In their own ways, therefore, they are like Troilus, “possed to and fro” on the waves of a necessity that is in fact a projection of their own refusal to take responsibility for their actions. Lee Patterson has discussed some of the ways in which chivalric honour problematizes individual agency in terms that draw from Pitt-Rivers’s analysis. Patterson points out that Palamon and Arcite evince the conception of selfhood that is public, “wholly social,” and material, and that depends upon perpetual maintenance through competition—feats of arms and “making good” one’s word with one’s body (185). Patterson rightly argues that

selfhood externalized to this degree leads to “thwarted self-understanding” (198). Implicit also in Patterson’s reading is the way in which honour and shame undermine moral agency and free will in various forms of fatalism. Connecting the “tragic cosmic view” expressed in chivalry with the role played by astrology in the tale, Patterson argues that,

More than simply a way of thrusting responsibility upon the stars, astrology expresses the protagonist’s sense of having become so inextricably engaged in a course of events that the self can no longer think of itself apart from the action in which it finds itself absorbed. (219)

What is essentially a loss of the private, interior selfhood that makes moral autonomy possible is similarly illustrated in “Complaint of Mars,” where, as Patterson notes, “the protagonists are at once victims of a predetermined structure of action and planets that themselves create this structure: they are themselves the fate of which they complain” (*Subject of History* 219).<sup>67</sup>

*The Knight’s Tale* contends not only with the constraints of fate, however, but also with the implacability and fickleness of fortune. In fact, more often than not, Palamon and Arcite attribute what befalls them to the random workings of chance or “aventure.” And, as with the wholly public self of honour and the invocations of fate, the many references to “aventure” serve to heighten the

---

<sup>67</sup> The idea that honour and shame render human beings “themselves the fate of which they complain” is one that also captures the positions of Troilus and the narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde*, insofar as they choose not to act differently and then lament the bondage of necessity. As Lady Philosophy explains, human beings are free, but they are also free to choose slavery: by giving themselves to “vice” they “become prisoners through the exercise of their freedom” (99). The multiple motivations for the wilful relinquishing of freedom constitute Chaucer’s concern here, not primarily in terms of sin and vice, but in terms of the psychological pressures involved in honour and shame.

knights' sense of their own moral paralysis.<sup>68</sup> The representations of fate, fortune, and chance borrow from Boethius, but the Boethian elements are applied in service of very different conclusions than the ones Lady Philosophy advances.<sup>69</sup> Philosophy provides the classic Aristotelian definition of chance as “the unexpected outcome of a conjunction of causes in actions carried out for some purpose” (98). In other words, the idea of purely random chance—events without causes—is in fact a misunderstanding or a failure to discern the chain of causal links. The overall, cosmic pattern of causes and their effects, moreover, is ordained by Providence, unfolding “in an irresistible chain” and “allocating all things to their due place and time” (Boethius 98). Fate in this context is the process of Providence working in time, and does not preclude free will. Thus, the belief in fate as *necessity* (the absence of free will) and the appearance of random chance are the result of human misperception and the failure to comprehend the true nature of things. *The Knight's Tale* repeatedly invokes these concepts and images, but does so in order to present a view of the cosmos as fundamentally *disordered*, in which human beings are caught, somewhat paradoxically, between chance *and* necessity—as Patterson notes, between “aventure” and “destinee.” And yet the necessity that the characters attribute to cosmic forces is revealed to

---

<sup>68</sup> For a distillation of the Boethian ideas that are especially relevant for Chaucer, see Jill Mann, “Chance and Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*.” Deborah Everhart also explores the idea of “aventure” and the related term, “hap,” in an unpublished dissertation, “The ‘Kynge of Hap’ and Haphazardness: The Meanings of ‘hap’ in the Works of Chaucer, Malory and the *Patience*-Poet.”

<sup>69</sup> Peter Camarda (“Imperfect Heroes and the Consolations of Boethius: The Double Meaning of Suffering in Chaucer’s *Knight's Tale*,” argues that the Boethian elements of the tale work against the elements of courtly romance, and that, ultimately, Chaucer uses Boethius to condemn the carnal passion represented by Palamon and Arcite. On this topic, see also Edward Schweitzer, “Fate and Freedom in *The Knight's Tale*.”



be rooted, in fact, in natural, violent, and thoroughly human impulses.<sup>70</sup> “Opting out” in *Troilus and Criseyde* is a failure to imagine oneself beyond one’s immediate social and political horizons; in the *Knight’s Tale*, it is a failure to imagine oneself beyond one’s base self-interest and natural inclinations.

In Palamon and Arcite’s argument over Emelye in their tower prison, the resignation to the ineluctable force of “aventure” that characterizes the tale as a whole is made clear and explicit. Palamon is “complaining of his wo” when he, “by aventure or cas,” catches sight of Emelye gathering May flowers in the garden below (1072, 1074). He is immediately lovestruck, and when Arcite comes to the window to see what is ailing his cousin, he too is “hurte” by the sight of Emelye’s “fresshe beautee” (1114, 1118). They each proceed to claim a right to love the as yet unknown lady: Palamon because he saw her first, and Arcite because he first loved her as a real woman, rather than with an “affeccioun of holinesse” such as Palamon’s (1158). They move from disagreement to a declaration of all-out war, “Ech man for himself,” with startling speed (1182). The terms of their rivalry, however, are not based on respective merit, or what

---

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Mark Miller, “Naturalism and its Discontents in the *Miller’s Tale*.” Miller writes,

everything in the *Miller’s Tale*, from narrative structure to characterization to tone to descriptive detail, suggests a picture of the human creature as a happy animal inhabiting a world in which it is perfectly at home. Unlike the *Knight’s Tale*, which takes place against a barren landscape in which all human projects seem to need elaborate management and are constrained by loss, absence, and ultimately death—so that, as Theseus says at the end of the tale, it seems that our true home must be somewhere else—the *Miller’s Tale* represents a world of wonderful plenitude and freedom, alive with sensual experience and youthful energy, a place in which immersion in the pleasures of the here and now is all anyone could want. (3)

Arguably, however, there is a different kind of naturalism at work in the *Knight’s Tale*, one rooted in an idea of the natural as will-to-power and thus as potentially chaotic and destructive. Theseus may attempt to impose anti-naturalist ideals upon the chaos but is ultimately unsuccessful. Perhaps it is more accurate, therefore, to say that the *Knight’s Tale* and the *Miller’s Tale* present two conflicting views of the natural, rather than an opposition between idealism and naturalism.

they will *do* to win her love, but in the random chance of fortune, wherein each man will “take his aventure” as it comes (1186). In the action that follows, every event is one that “happed on a day” (1189) or “by aventure” (1506). Arcite’s “aventure” is to be released from prison through the advocacy of his old friend Perotheus, but exiled from Athens, while Palamon remains captive. The different fates that here present themselves afford the opportunity to reflect on the nature of fate. Arcite muses on the irony of getting the escape he wanted, only to realize he was better off in prison, where he could at least *see* Emelye from the tower window:

We witen nat what thing we prayen heere.  
 We fare as he that dronke is as a mous:  
 A dronke man woot wel he hath an hous,  
 But he noot which the righte wey is thider. (1251-64)

Palamon, meanwhile, jealous of Arcite’s “freedom,” rages at the cruelty of his own fate:

. . . O cruel goddes, that governe  
 This world with binding of youre word eterne  
 . . .  
 What is mankinde moore unto yow holde  
 Than is the sheep that rowketh in the folde?  
 . . .  
 What governaunce is in this prescience  
 That giltelees tormenteth innocence?  
 . . .  
 The answer of this lete I to divinis;  
 But wel I woot that in this world greet pine is. (1303-24)

In both cases, therefore, once they have taken their “aventure” and find it lacking, their courageous acceptance of random chance turns to protest at the tyranny of cosmic *misgovernance*. In Arcite’s description, not only is the divine plan obscured from human perception, but human beings are incapable of

discerning the proper course of action—what is the “righte wey” in human life. The image of man as spiritually and morally “drunk,” senseless and stumbling, is important throughout the rest of the *Tales*, most notably for the Miller, the Cook, the Pardoner, and the Manciple.<sup>71</sup> In Boethius, while man is unable to comprehend the “eternal present” of Providence, the “righte wey” in avoiding sin and vice is amply clear; for Arcite, however, “possed to and fro” between the contraries of hate and desire, fortune and misfortune, the incomprehensibility of Providence leaves him spiritually and morally blind. The misgovernance of the cosmos is articulated even more clearly in Palamon’s speech, which expresses a deep sense of human impotence in the face of cosmic forces that are not only binding on human will but malignant: human beings are like cowering sheep who are “tormented” by the cruelty of the gods. Both pictures stress the animality of the human being as a form of passivity and moral paralysis: whether drunk as mice or helpless as sheep, human nature in this view lacks moral agency because we are essentially at the mercy of the whims of the gods. This is how the tale reconciles the seeming openness of chance with the fixity of fate. In Boethius, notions of randomness and fixity are results of human error in perception, notions that separate the unified “complex simplicity” of Providence and human freedom and reduce both to caricatures. But *The Knight’s Tale* takes these misperceptions and, rather than refuting them, creates a world that corresponds to them, exactly and bleakly. Fate means necessity without freedom (rather than Providence

---

<sup>71</sup>Interestingly, the two critics who discuss the significance of drunkenness in *The Canterbury Tales* do so in connection with Girardian theory, apparently independently of each other: see John M. Bowers, “‘Dronkenesse is Ful of Stryvyng’: Alcoholism and Ritual Violence in Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*”; Ann W. Astell discusses the silencing of the Cook through drink as a kind of scapegoating (“Nietzsche, Chaucer, and the Sacrifice of Art”).

unfolding in time) because the “eterne word” of divinity is binding on human will and choice, but “aventure” is random insofar as the dictates of that “eterne word” are unpredictable and irrational.

The Boethian language invoked at these moments, therefore, serves to point out the vast discrepancy between Boethian metaphysics and the world of honour competition as it is represented in the tale. Palamon and Arcite are not bound by cosmic ordinances but by their own violent instincts, instincts that are called forth in the circumstances created by Theseus; far from constituting the tale’s “centre of authority” (Muscatine 914), Theseus is the source of its disorder. Just as Theseus’s “gentil herte” is belied by his destruction of Thebes in the first part of the tale, so is the Boethian idea of cosmic order undermined by his “governance” of Palamon and Arcite in the latter sections.

When Theseus decides to hunt in the grove and encounters the duelling knights by seeming coincidence, the knight-narrator explains,

The destinee, minister general,  
 That executeth in the world overall  
 That purveiaunce that God hath sein biforn,  
 So strong it is, that thogh the world had sworn  
 The contrarye of a thing by ye or nay,  
 Yet sometime it shal fallen on a day  
 . . .  
 For certainly, oure appetites heer,  
 Be it of were, or pees, or hate, or love,  
 Al is this ruled by the sighte above. (1663-72)

And yet how we are to read this blithe assurance in light of the tale’s conclusion, which gives an unambiguous victory to the violent and chaotic rule of Saturn, is not immediately clear. Indeed, the unpredictability and irrationality of the gods is nowhere more apparent than in the elaborate paintings on the temple walls that

Theseus himself builds for his “noble theatre” (1885). Far from representing the differences between Palamon and Arcite, moreover, the temples depict Venus and Mars as equally destructive forces, as two alternate paths to the same misery and death. And this representation suggests that, in reality, “oure appetites heer,” as well as the appetites of the gods, run rampant, unchecked by “purveiaunce” and without reason. The scenes of tortured love associated with Venus are “ful pitous to behold,” and include “lesynges,” “flaterye,” and “jalousye”; the porter of Venus’s garden is Idleness, accompanied by Narcissus, Hercules, who was literally slain by his beloved, and Circes, best known for turning Odysseus’s men into pigs.<sup>72</sup> The depiction of Mars is similarly negative—“hidouse” and full of “derke ymaginyng” (1978, 1997). What is striking here is not only the gory violence, but the absurdity of the events attributed to Mars, events due to what the Knight calls the “infortune of Marte” (2021), and portending, of course, the absurd and violent demise of the martial Arcite. Alongside murder and suicide is painted the cook who scalds himself even though he holds a long ladle and the carter crushed by his own cart (2020-23). And presiding over all is Conquest, “sittyng in greet honour” (2028). Theseus’s temples, therefore, represent fortune and fate, and the cosmos in which honour is won or lost, as destructive forces threatening to overwhelm his claim to authority and his establishment of order. As Patterson points out, “endowed with the power to imagine his own gods, Theseus

---

<sup>72</sup> Cf. the temple of Venus in *Parliament of Fowles*, which is also a place of suffering, sterility, and death. These temples are both derived from Boccaccio, but owe much to Jean de Meun, who comes, in the end of the *Roman*, to declare that the Garden of Mirth with which the poem began represents a sterile form of love, in contrast to the procreative love promoted by Nature and Genius (and this, of course, is in turn based on Alain de Lille’s *Complaint of Nature*).

is nonetheless able to imagine only his own helplessness: power portrays itself as weakness” (224). This is the “self-cancelling rhetoric” of chivalry that, for Patterson, collapses in “meaningless competition” and “a surface pattern of ritual and replication” (227-28).

But the competition in the tale, which consists of the tournament itself but also the violent struggle that characterizes human life generally, is not simply meaningless. It is, first of all, an existential situation that reduces human beings to brute animals lacking the moral capacity to reason and to choose freely. Theseus thus parallels Pandarus insofar as he enables the moral passivity of Palamon and Arcite, just as Pandarus enables Troilus. Both Theseus and Pandarus are self-styled mediators, but their attempts to shape and control events are equally coercive; they do, indeed, claim moral agency—each is the representative “man of action” in his narrative—but it is an agency aimed solely at controlling others. What we are presented with, in other words, is a universe governed solely by a Nietzschean will to power: like the Gawain-poet, Chaucer’s “reading” of his literary inheritance is rooted in keen, psychological insights. And, just as the coercive forces in *Troilus and Criseyde* consign Criseyde to her literary fate, so does Theseus’s self-appointed role as arbiter of earthly justice render Palamon and Arcite mindlessly bound to their violent desires. Thus Palamon and Arcite describe themselves in animalistic terms; the Knight also, in describing their combat in the grove, goes on in excess, emphasizes their “woodness” or madness, claiming they fight ankle-deep in their own blood; Arcite is “as fiers as leon” and “as a crueel tigre,” Palamon is like a “wood leon,” and they are both like “wilde

bores,” foaming at the mouth (1598, 1656-60). Their allies in the tournament, Lygurge and Emetreus, are similarly depicted as strange animal-human hybrids. Despite the long descriptions provided by the Knight, the role of these warriors in the action of the tale is marginal at best, and they have no counterparts in Boccaccio’s *Teseida*. They function in the tale not as characters but as a kind of iconography, emblemizing the brutal violence and irrationality that underlies not only the rivalry between Palamon and Arcite but the tournament itself.<sup>73</sup> The King of Thrace’s eyes glow red and yellow like a griffon’s, his black hair looks like raven’s feathers, he dons a bear skin instead of armour, and keeps twenty wolfhounds (2132-49). The King of India looks around “as a leon,” as if he is sizing up his prey, and is accompanied by a white eagle (2171-78). Theseus establishes a long list of rules to ensure civilized conduct, to prevent the spilling of “gentil blood,” but the overwhelming sense we are given of the tournament is that it far exceeds a typical courtly joust in ferocity and violence.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the battle scene that ensues is the most graphically detailed of any in Chaucer’s texts:

In goon the speres ful sadly in arrest;  
 In gooth the sharpe spore into the syde.  
 Ther seen men who kan juste and who kan ryde;  
 Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke;  
 He feeleth thurgh the herte-spoon the prikke.

---

<sup>73</sup> Leicester (*Disenchanted Self*) points out that the portraits of Lygurge and Emetreus “resonate” with the depictions of the temples, especially that of Mars. Leicester considers the portraits suggestive but ultimately enigmatic: “The description of Emetrius in particular has a specificity that creates a ‘reference effect’ . . . that invites equally iconographic or historical explanation without settling clearly on either” (297). Patterson, on the other hand, sees the portraits as ultimately meaningless, analogous to heraldry in fourteenth-century aristocracy—a matter of appearance and superficial prestige (*Subject* 207).

<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the rules of engagement forbid the use of axes and short swords (2544-46), but permit spears (2540), long swords, and maces (2559). Maces, indeed, rarely “spill blood” but one can imagine that they cause horrific injury nonetheless, crushing bone, for instance (2611), and causing internal bleeding—not unlike the injury that will cause Arcite’s death.

Up spryngen speres twenty foot on highte;  
 Out goon the swerdes as the silver brighte;  
 The helmes they tohewen and toshrede;  
 Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede;  
 With mighty maces the bones they tobreste. (2602-11)

Even before Arcite's horrific death, then, gentle blood is not only spilled but rather bursts forth in streams. The extremity of the violence alone contradicts the notion that Theseus is a champion of moderation and good governance. Even more to the point, the purpose of the tournament, to win Emelye through feats of arms—productive rather than destructive combat—is completely undermined when Arcite, the official victor of the contest, is immediately thrown from his horse and fatally wounded through malign Saturnalian intervention. At this point, all human striving, hoping, and desiring come to nothing. Palamon's and Arcite's fates are sealed, not because of personal destiny or because of the "parfit and stable" order of "purveiaunce," but because Venus complains petulantly to Saturn, "I am ashamed, doutelees" (2667). The principle of competition informing chivalric practice, in which men gain or lose honour by physical prowess, is rendered null and void by the honour competition among the gods. Similarly, the entire medieval tradition of "trial by combat," founded on the assumption that God grants victory to the righteous, is turned on its head. In this sense, the passivity of Troilus, the "aventure" of Palamon and Arcite, and the governance of Theseus end up amounting to the same thing: neither abdication, nor mindless aggression, nor even the attempt to control the aggression has any real efficacy. And yet the Knight purposely avoids placing Arcite's death in the redemptive context that turns Troilus's woe to eternal joy:



His spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,  
 As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.  
 Therefore I stynte; I nam no divinistre;  
 Of soules fynde I nat in this registre,  
 Ne me ne list thilke opinions to telle  
 Of hem, though that they written wher they dwelle.  
 Arcite is coold, ther Mars his soule gye!  
 Now wol I speken forth of Emelye. (2809-16)

This is one of the few points in the narrative where we can identify clearly the Knight's own voice, and it is a crucial point. It recalls in some ways the evasive tactics of the *Troilus* narrator: protesting ignorance and referring the reader to the experts if they want to learn the full story, in this case, about what happens after death. It serves not to register moral discomfort, however, and thus the very authorial responsibility the narrator attempts to evade, but to deny any stake or interest in the possibility of an other-worldly perspective. As Leicester observes, the Knight is here "resolute in cutting off all other consideration of consolatory possibilities in higher realms" (342). But Leicester reads this attempt to focus exclusively on "human actions and meanings" and to exclude "transcendent justice" as heroic; it is the Knight's this-worldly vision that renders Arcite's heroism "poignant" (342). But there can be little poignancy in the meaningless death of a character so one-dimensional that he is almost a caricature of knightly prowess. Rather, the Knight's refusal to consider Arcite's death in terms of any "higher" meaning or purpose has the effect of sharpening the moral and spiritual limits of fatalism: it does not end up enlarging the scope for "human actions and meanings" at all, but instead shows how all human actions and meanings collapse in on themselves in the absence of transcendence.

There is a sense, therefore, in which Theseus's attempt at order is not undermined in any significant way because he, too, resigns himself to the workings of fortune and fate: he cannot really be said to attempt to establish order over chaos in the first place when he himself accepts so bluntly the arbitrary and relentless turning of Fortune's wheel. After all, Theseus does not state that the purpose of his tournament is to discover which of the two knights is the most deserving, but "to whom that Fortune yeveth so fair a grace" (1861). At this point, we must revisit the seeming contrast between Arcite's despair at his moral and spiritual "drunkenness" and Palamon's outrage at the cruelty of the gods on the one hand, and Theseus's acceptance of whatever "Fortune yeveth" on the other. Or, more directly, we are in a position to question the seeming contrast between Theseus's "first mover" speech, in which he affirms the "fair cheyne of love," and Egeus's bleak assertion of "this worldes' transmutacioun" (2839).<sup>75</sup> Both echo the Boethian worldview, but only in part, omitting Philosophy's emphasis on human freedom in order to present a view in which the changing of joy for woe and back again serves no higher purpose than to provide sport for the gods. Egeus's "pilgrimage," lacking any sense of destination or eschatology, is certainly not a Christian pilgrimage. Moreover, the only difference between this position and that of the young knights is their attitude of protest—an attitude, it must be noted, that evaporates as soon as they are confronted by Theseus in the grove, and Palamon inexplicably shifts from his "wood" fighting to answering Theseus "hastily,"

---

<sup>75</sup> See Patterson, who emphasizes this contrast, and argues that Theseus, as representative and mouthpiece for the Knight, "tries to efface Egeus's bleak wisdom. . . . But nothing in the Tale suggests that he is right and Egeus wrong" (*Subject* 203).

“Sire, what nedeth wordes mo? / We have the deeth disserved bothe two” (1715-16).

Thus, the idealism of chivalric honour that conflicts with the animalistic excesses of Palamon and Arcite ultimately collapses the apparent differences between the noble duke and the lovesick knights. The common denominator uniting the “gentle heart” of Theseus with the “wood” violence of the Theban cousins is their fatalism, a fatalism that represents their submission to the rule of honour and shame and renders passivity *and* activity equally impotent in the face of human violence. The overall movement of the narrative is toward a horrifying sameness, that fatal lack of differentiation that Girard identifies as the mimetic crisis. Consequently, the abdication of will and agency that turns men into animalistic brutes ends the only way it can, in violent death. Mars grants Arcite the victory in battle, but, before he is allowed to enjoy the spoils, Saturn instructs Pluto to send a “furye infernal sterte” from the bowels of the earth which throws Arcite from his horse. His “brest to-brosten with his sadel-bowe” (2691), he is (according to medieval medical ideas) poisoned by the internal bleeding that cannot be purged. The response to his death, however, ignores the patent absurdity of it, and elevates both Arcite and his demise to the level of tragic heroism. His sworn brother and sworn enemy—his Girardian double—Palamon howls with grief, and then dons black mourning clothes and sprinkles ashes on his head for the funeral procession. Emelye shrieks and weeps like a properly devoted wife, and Theseus spares no expense for the ceremony. Indeed, all of Athens joins in the mourning:

Infinite been the sorwes and the teeres  
 Of olde folk, and folk of tendre yeeres,  
 In al the toun for the deeth of this Theban. (2827-29)

This dramatic show of grief for one who was an enemy, an unwanted suitor, and a prisoner of war constitutes an effective diversion from the hard truth of the matter, that Arcite's death was meaningless and random.<sup>76</sup> But the elaborate, ritualized mourning also conveys the idea that, in the world of the tale, the world of chivalric honour and shame, Arcite's death is construed as a noble sacrifice. The disjunction between rhetoric and reality ("appearance" and "existence"?) that marks Theseus's "pitous" response to the Theban women, Palamon and Arcite's lofty philosophizing, the tournament's "bloodless" alternative to combat, and Theseus's final affirmation of perfect cosmic harmony is here elevated to a fever pitch. The irony consists in the fact that the reader is given a dual perspective: we are told how all of Athens responds to the death, and yet the text emphasizes its arbitrariness: the fact that Arcite has prayed to Mars is not represented as the reason for his downfall in the sense that Venus is morally superior to Mars, but in the sense that Saturn decides to take Venus's side in their dispute. Moreover, if we are to trace back from the conclusion to the true source of the violence, the aggression and fatalism to which Arcite and Palamon resign themselves, the mimetic rivalry itself, begins on the battlefield in Thebes, where Theseus's personal desire for conquest leads to the chaos that collapses differences between all men. Creon is a tyrant who is deposed by a worse tyrant:

---

<sup>76</sup> Arcite was also, of course, Palamon's kinsmen and sworn brother, but the point remains that Palamon has spent most of the poem trying himself to kill Arcite.

oppressor and saviour are indistinguishable. The death of Arcite is not figured as a solution to the chaos, but simply another aspect of it

In his counsel to “maken vertu of necessitee,” Theseus celebrates Arcite’s death in the heroic terms of honour culture. While Philosophy advises Boethius to accept the things he cannot change in order, stoically, to turn men’s hearts away from the snares of the world, Theseus applies the same moral to a diametrically opposed purpose, in the affirmation of this-worldly glory:

And certainly a man hath moost honour  
 To dyen in his excellence and flour,  
 Whan he is siker of his goode name;  
 Thanne hath he doon his freend, ne hym, no shame.  
 And gladder oghte his freend been of his deeth,  
 Whan with honour up yolden is his breeth,  
 Than whan his name apalled is for age,  
 For al forgeten is his vassellage.  
 Thanne is it best, as for a worthy fame,  
 To dyen whan that he is best of name. (3047-56)

Here Theseus rehearses the male version of the shame dilemma, that it is better to die than to be shamed, and thereby attempts to make of Arcite’s death a heroic sacrifice to the ideal of honour. The juxtaposition of this sentiment with a Boethian-inspired paean to God’s “wise purveiaunce” (3011) indeed produces a “self-cancelling rhetoric.” But more than that, the attribution of honour to the mimetic rivalry that wreaks violence and destruction makes a virtue not out of necessity but out of the ideal of honour itself: this is the circularity that Pitt-Rivers identifies behind the dynamics of honour and shame, a circularity that serves to reinforce the social and political status quo, turning what is into what ought to be. Arcite’s death becomes honourable because Theseus declares it to be so, and this act of declaration in turn both announces and confirms Theseus’s own authority.

## Conclusion

Louise Fradenburg has argued that the “logic of sacrifice” that “lies at the heart of the *Knight’s Tale*” is also central to the discourses of charity and penitence that shaped Christian medieval cultures. In her analysis, the differences between heroic sacrifice for the pagan ideal of honour and the penitential sacrifice of the knight of faith are ultimately illusory; in her reading, therefore, the contradictions of the *Knight’s Tale* cannot be explained in terms of the tensions between Chaucer’s classical and Christian inheritance, between classical fatalism and the Christian affirmation of free will. For Fradenburg, the “hypereconomy of sacrifice” is both monolithic and ubiquitous, manifest in every facet of medieval culture. As she writes,

The logic of sacrifice structures the militant European Christian subject (Derrida, [*Gift of Death*] 29-33). This logic, the function of which is to recuperate aggressivity and loss, includes the infinite compassion that requites and corrects, and the renunciation of life, for example the penitential subject’s gift, without hope of reward, of one “broken heart” (far more satisfying to God than the rectitude of many men) to an inscrutable and incalculable divinity, whose response (the gift of ultimate enjoyment) is assured in the apparent indeterminacy and infinity of the hypercontract of mercy. (“Sacrificial Desire” 48)

Another way of putting Fradenburg’s point here is to say that the differences between shame ethics, which require the expurgating, purifying force of violent sacrifice, and guilt ethics, which posit “infinite compassion” and the grace that allows the forgiveness of sins as an alternative to sacrifice, are themselves illusory, too. It is fitting, therefore, that Fradenburg includes a passage from

Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* in a series of epigrams at the opening of her essay:

The justice which began with the maxim, "Everything can be paid off, everything must be paid off," ends with connivance . . . at the escape of those who cannot pay to escape—it ends, like every good thing on earth, by destroying itself. . . . The self-destruction of Justice! . . . We know the pretty name it calls itself—Grace! . . . it remains, as is obvious, the privilege . . . of the strongest, better still, their super-law. (*Genealogy* 83-84)

As we have seen, for Nietzsche the selflessness involved in penitential guilt is itself a form of sublimated aggression—it is not an alternative to or an escape from sacrifice, but a kind of self-deception that perpetuates and intensifies the imperative of sacrifice and directs it back towards the self. This is an idea which Fradenburg takes up here in relation to medieval penitence, a model of subjectivity that, she suggests, ends up perpetuating scapegoating rather than alleviating the need for it. What she borrows from Nietzsche is the notion that the ideal of Christian guilt, an ideal that understands itself in opposition to the sacrificial logic of pagan justice (that everything must be paid off), in fact perfects that logic but does not recognize it as such:

That there is a *jouissance* of sacrifice, of responsibility, that sacrifice and responsibility give us access to an obscene enjoyment; this is what the discourse of charity seeks to obscure by driving its absolute wedge between selfless love and love of self. There is no pure self, no pure selflessness, as late medieval English theology itself makes all too evident. ("Sacrificial Desire" 51)

Fradenburg uses the Nietzschean insight underlying the idea of the "obscene enjoyment" of charity that tries to pass itself off as selflessness, and the ethics of renunciation, penitence, even self-laceration that it promotes, to deconstruct the standard reading of the *Knight's Tale* as representative of a conflict between the

order and the disorder of chivalry. The same sacrificial logic that masks the expression of power in penitential renunciation here obscures the “*jouissance* of aggressivity” in chivalric discipline: the knight performs his noble sacrifice not out of selflessness and charity but because of the enjoyment he derives from it, out of sheer selfish desire to discharge his aggressive urges. Fradenburg argues,

The fantasy of chivalry is a sublime economy that powerfully recuperates the *jouissance* of aggressivity by rewriting it as incalculable, inscrutable love; it is a structure through which a certain obscene destructivity may be glimpsed and enjoyed, but only to the extent that the gift of death is offered in payment thereof. Military discipline and its breakdown are not opposing forces, as a traditional ethics would have it; they are hand-in-glove. (54)

The apparent meaninglessness of Arcite’s sacrifice, therefore, poses no threat to the viability of the Knight’s chivalric project but is central to it: quoting from Žižek, Fradenburg writes, the “true value of sacrifice ‘lies in its very meaninglessness,’ and its enjoyment is the enjoyment of renunciation itself” (Fradenburg 59).

What is curious about Fradenburg’s essay is the sense in which the basic point she is making here about the internally self-defeating movement of the *Knight’s Tale* is one that—far from exposing Chaucer’s investment in chivalric ideology—merely phrases in different terms the purposeful artistry of the narrative itself. It is the purpose of the tale neither to celebrate the self-overcoming of noble sacrifice nor to mourn the failures of fourteenth-century chivalry, but precisely to point out the ways in which Theseus’s “herte pitous” and his brutality in “plein bataille” are two inherently conflicting facets of the same chivalric ideal. It would not be news to Chaucer, in other words, that



Theseus's pity is just another, less direct and honest way of venting his aggression, just as it would not be news to the Gawain-poet that courtliness can also function as an expression of the will to power. But in conflating the heroic ideal and the Christian ideal into one monolithic, medieval "logic," Fradenburg misses the nuance of Chaucer's anatomizing of this inherent contradiction, which traces the way in which the chivalric contradiction *in particular* creates and fosters the violent rivalry it presumes to contain. Fradenburg claims that, with Theseus's "maken vertu of necessitee" speech and his prayer to God on the occasion of Palamon and Emelye's wedding, "the emergence of the Christian hypereconomy is unmistakable" (67). But the de-contextualized Boethian allusions, set to ironically anti-Boethian purposes, and the theatrical representation of the pagan deities throughout, mean that the status of the Christian God in the world of the tale is anything but unmistakable. Indeed, the classical setting of the tale foregrounds the same theological lacunae that haunt Chaucer's other "pagan" tales, such as the *Physician's Tale*, in which Virginia asks of this world, "is ther no grace?"; similarly, Palamon demands, "What governaunce is in this prescience / That giltelees tormenteth innocence?" The problem posed by the tale is indeed the problem of grace that is not grace—the power that expresses itself as pity but that requires blood payment nonetheless. But, for Chaucer, the problem of sacrifice cannot be easily contained in particular cultural forms, whether pagan or Christian heroism, because it is a problem that is intimately connected to the fundamental and transhistorical experience of shame.

Moreover, in Fradenburg's usage, the sacrifice offered by the knight of faith, who literally lays down his life in battle for Christ, is the same in structure and in meaning to the figurative sacrifice of the penitent, whose contrite heart is given as an offering to God: both evince the *jouissance* of renunciation.<sup>77</sup> But in

---

<sup>77</sup> Here and throughout, Fradenburg refers to Derrida's discussion of "sacrificial logic," the economy of sacrifice, and the knight of faith in *The Gift of Death and Literature*, originally published as *Donner le Mort*. Derrida in turn is reflecting on (among other things) Kierkegaard's discussion of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac as the quintessential example of the "suspension of the ethical," which Derrida considers in relation to the question of responsibility. For Derrida, there is no escape from the economy of sacrifice: "There is no front between responsibility and irresponsibility but only between different appropriations of the same sacrifice: different orders of responsibility also. . . . I can respond to the one (or to the One), that is to say to the other, only by sacrificing to that one that other. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to the other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality" (*Gift of Death* 70-71). But Derrida's use of the word "sacrifice" is slippery, to say the least, and it is arguable that here he is, in fact, moving toward a very different understanding of self-sacrifice and self-denial than Nietzsche's. Indeed, the two philosophers could not be more different in their attitudes toward the idea of responsibility. Derrida champions the infinite responsibility imparted to us by religion and he affirms the idea that it is precisely religion and nothing else that creates this responsibility (*Gift* 3-8). It is the context of affirming a religious idea of responsibility that Derrida makes his comments about the necessity of sacrifice, for each time I fulfill my responsibility to one, in that moment I am failing to fulfill my responsibility to all others. Fradenburg's references to the two philosophers, however, occlude this crucial difference, just as she occludes the differences between chivalric and penitential shame.

On the other hand, because Derrida does not clearly distinguish (at least in this context) between the self-interested violence against the other and the selflessness demanded by responsibility, in his discussion of sacrifice in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, there is no giving which is not also a taking, there is no self-denial which is not also a self-assertion. Our conscription within this economy is made known even in the fact that Abraham, in renouncing his son, "is in a relation of nonexchange with God . . . and expects neither response nor reward from him" (96). For it is precisely here, in the act of sacrificing, that God gives as a gift to Abraham "the very thing that he had already . . . decided to sacrifice" (96). This life-preserving gift "reappropriates" the sacrificial renunciation of exchange and reward back into an economic relationship: Abraham's selfless renunciation of reward produces his reward (96).

The same economy is operative in the teaching of Christ, who promises an absolute reward for an absolute sacrifice, but a sacrifice which involves "breaking with exchange as a simple form of reciprocity" (*Gift* 101). Christ's injunction to "turn the other cheek" constitutes, like Abraham's willingness to give up his son, a suspension of the ordinary economy of exchange, "of payback, of giving and getting back . . . of that hateful roundabout of reprisal, vengeance, blow for blow, settling scores" (102), and thus seems, on the surface, to amount to a transcendence of economic calculation, a true selflessness. But if Abraham's reward consists of God's giving back to him in the very moment of renouncing it what is most important to him in all the world, then the reward for Christ's followers "integrates absolute loss," for the reward of salvation is both eternal and priceless: "This capital, unable to be devalued, can only yield an infinite profit; it is an infinitely secure placement, better than the best, a chattel without price" (98). The Christian is called to give without calculation, without concern for bodily integrity or even survival, and this very act of giving without reward produces a reward that also exceeds calculation. And what kind of selflessness is it that can be accounted for in an exchange of reciprocal gifts? The cycle of

the *Knight's Tale*, the interior “sacrifice” of the contrite heart is conspicuously absent, and that is precisely the problem: lacking the private interiority that makes possible, and is made possible by, penitential self-reflection, the principle characters behave in purely externally oriented modes. Theseus’s “manly” vengeance becomes absurd brutality because he thinks only of the honour he will win in the eyes of his people; the courtly wooing of Emelye becomes a vicious, animalistic rivalry because Palamon and Arcite do not really *think* anything at all but simply react to one another in an aggressive reciprocity. To conflate the violence of an “actual” sacrifice, such as the death of Arcite, with the figurative sacrifice that is required of each individual in the medieval penitential model—to equate, as Fradenburg does, the metaphorical “breaking” of the penitent’s heart with the violence by which Arcite’s breast is “to-brosten” (2681)—seems to miss this fundamental point of the tale: the honour code that constructs chivalric identity from the outside in ends up requiring violent sacrifice precisely because it leaves no space for a private, interiorized self. The central flaw in Fradenburg’s own logic is the failure to recognize that penitential self-sacrifice is, both as an idea and a practice, essentially distinct from, even opposed to, the act of sacrificing someone else through violence. To borrow Fradenburg’s own terms, surely it is preferable to “recuperate aggressivity and loss” through the creation of an interior, penitential space than it is to discharge that aggressivity outward onto another. To deny this essential difference is to commit us to Nietzsche’s view: that real violence is better because it is honest, because it ensures the domination

---

reciprocity that characterizes the human economy is, thus, not cancelled out or negated, but deferred and made infinite in the divine economy of sacrifice.

of the strong while keeping the weak in their place, and because it brings greater psychological peace of mind.

Whatever commitments we as critics want to espouse personally, we must admit that Chaucer is clearly rejecting the Nietzschean view here. That he is rejecting it is evident, first of all, in Theseus's failure to unite the demands of chivalry with non-violence, and in the conspicuous absence of anything resembling penitential self-reflection. But there is also the question of the role of women in the tale: the one figure who stands outside the chaotic world of male competition for honour is Emelye, whose presence in this world is paradoxically crucial and marginal, and whom Fradenburg does not consider at all in her analysis. Theseus attempts to integrate the opposing forces into a harmonious whole, but he does so through the imposition of his own will onto others; Emelye, on the other hand, suggests the possibility of integration through non-coercive means. Like Criseyde, Emelye is a victim of male competition for honour—first, as the spoils of Theseus's conquest of "Femenye" along with her sister, and, secondly, as the promised but reluctant reward for the tournament's victorious knight. Emelye also engages in a kind of practical morality, to the extent that her muted presence in the Knight's narrative allows, with the aim of optimal survival in the hostile world of honour and shame. The clearest expression of Emelye's Criseyde-like adaptability is her prayer to Diana, which is also one of the few times she actually speaks in the tale. Just as Criseyde struggles between her desire for freedom and her awareness of Troilus's desire for her, so, too, does Emelye initially plead for freedom from "love" and matrimony, to remain one of Diana's

chaste maids, to “love hunting and venerye / And for to walken in the wodes wilde, / And noight to been a wif and be with childe” (2308-10). In his prayer to Venus, Palamon makes one request: give me Emelye; Arcite also has a single desire: victory. But Emelye phrases her prayer in terms of a flexible either/or: give me my freedom, but, if that is not possible, then “send me him that moost desireth me” (2325). Julian Wasserman and Robert Blanch observe a similar dynamic in their discussion of colour symbolism in the tale. As they point out, Palamon wages his war on Arcite under the white flag of Venus, and Arcite opts for the red of Mars alone. Theseus combines the two polarities, but as part of a symbol of his chivalric prowess and military conquest: he rides to Thebes to avenge the widows under a white banner featuring the red figure of Mars. But when we first catch a glimpse of Emelye, she is weaving flowers “party white and rede / To make a subtil garland for hir hede” (1053-54).<sup>78</sup> The violent opposition of the two knights limits possibilities for moral action, and forecloses on change, as each remains locked in a static and destructive aggression until external forces (Fortune, or Theseus, or Saturn) prompt change from without. Theseus combines the opposing forces, but he does so violently, and thus the union requires the same continual reinforcement as the performance of honour itself. Emelye, on the other hand, weaves the opposing forces together in an act that is both creative and non-violent. But she is in the garden to “doon honour” to May, and, as such, she recalls many other courtly ladies in gardens: like the tableau of Lygurge and

---

<sup>78</sup> But for Blanch and Wasserman, it is Theseus, as the tale’s Boethian spokesman, who epitomizes the harmonious unity of white and red. Blanch and Wasserman point out that, traditionally, the union of white and red (in the daisy described in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, for example) is “the result of an act of completion or perfection” (181).

Emetreus, she is more icon than human character. Missing from the picture is the sensitive and psychologically realistic description of Criseyde's mental and emotional processes. But the "subtil garland" functions metonymically, expressing with economy the intricate workings of her mind, as Criseyde's resourcefulness is conveyed when she "gan to caste and rollen up and down / Withinne hire thought" (660-61). Emelye's prayer, her weaving of "white and red," then, suggests an active engagement with "how the story goes" in a way that is analogous to Criseyde, who also negotiates a plan "A" (remain happily ever after with Troilus) and a plan "B" (make the best of things with Diomedes).

*The Knight's Tale* also raises the question, although more subtly than *Troilus and Criseyde*, of how we are to read this feminine adaptability. The Knight suggests the traditional view: Fortune is a woman, and both Fortune and women are inherently fickle. We are told that Emelye casts a "freendlich ye" at Arcite after he is declared the winner, she mourns as a "wife" should when he later dies, and she accepts Palamon at Theseus's behest once the appropriate mourning period is past. Thus, the Knight comments, "wommen, as to speken in commune, / Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune" (2681-82). Criseyde's adaptability, on the other hand, is represented sympathetically by the sustained contrast between external pressure and internal response. But if Criseyde is a victim of the constraints of honour culture—within the world of the narrative, but also of "wikked tonges" who tell her story—Emelye is even more so. Relegated to a marginal status in the narrative, Emelye endures conquest and exchange, from

Scythia to Athens, from Arcite to Palamon, as an almost purely objectified, and silent, commodity.

Emelye thus fits well Girard's idea of the object of mimetic desire as ultimately inconsequential. But it is precisely her silence that figures in the tale as the source of destructive violence: her attempt to weave a "subtil garland" is dismissed in favour of Theseus's attempt to govern and control the violent tendencies in human nature, and the consequence of this dismissal is the sacrifice of one for the other, rather than the integration of all into one. In the *Canterbury Tales*, however, the Knight's is the first word, not the last: the ethically problematic outcome of the tournament and the self-defeating dynamic of chivalry establishes shame ethics as the dominant mode of social interaction, but this ethos is subsequently questioned and critiqued from multiple perspectives as the pilgrimage progresses.

Chapter Six: Mimetic Rivalry, Mimetic Grace: Revenge and Forgiveness in the  
*Tales of the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, and the Melibee*

Structures of Reciprocity in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

The central idea expressed in Criseyde and Emelye's ultimately failed attempts at ethical creativity, their essential responsiveness and willingness to consider alternative possibilities, is fittingly taken up by the pilgrimage's self-declared spokesperson for all womankind, the Wife of Bath. In her own way, both through her autobiographical prologue and the tale she tells, the Wife also makes a case for the possibility of reconciliation without sacrificial violence. The Wife too unites "the white and the red," the contradictory impulses of love and aggression: "For certes, I am al Venerien / In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien" (WBP 609-610). But the kind of reconciliation the Wife envisions, first in recounting her journey to marital harmony with Jankyn, and then in her tale of knightly reformation, is one that begins from the destructive dynamic of mimetic or reciprocal conflict, or what Chaucer and the Wife call the struggle for *maistrie*: the eternal tit-for-tat in the battle of the sexes, in which each side conceives of freedom and satisfaction only in terms of winning the upper hand and wielding control over the other. Initially, it might seem a stretch to call this struggle "mimetic," as Girard defines the quintessential mimetic triangle as one between male rivals and a female or feminized object, while Chaucer represents the gender wars as a polarized duality. But what is striking about the Wife of Bath (and many of Chaucer's unsaintly women) is precisely the fact that she *is* a rival for the men



in her life: she is neither a purely innocent victim nor a distant, one-dimensional object, but a psychologically complex and shrewd player in the field of social and economic competition. In this way, Chaucer destabilizes the gendered dimension of Girard's mimetic model: we have already seen the classic mimetic love triangle in the *Knight's Tale*, and it is one in which it is precisely the marginalization of the feminine voice that leads to the need for sacrifice; here, Chaucer expands the scope of mimetic rivalry by recognizing that men and women can be rivals and obstacles for each other. The Wife of Bath's response to the sacrificial imperative is also one that depends not upon the release from shame in guilt, but upon an alternative use of shame from what we see in the *House of Fame*, *Troilus*, and the *Knight's Tale*, where shame is primarily a tool of the powerful used to shape the "fates" of the weak. Here, in a dynamic that is echoed in both the *Franklin's Tale* and the *Tale of Melibee*, shame acts as a means of moral transformation for those who need it most: those to whom fame and fortune have been kind but who use their power to control and exploit others.

We might say that the Wife of Bath, like the "virago" Sultanness of the *Man of Law's Tale* (MLT 359), is a rival for men to the extent that she is *like* a man, and thus that women who are active, who seek empowerment and independence, are demonized or parodied in the *Canterbury Tales*, in contrast to the ideal model of submissive and patient femininity such as Constance and Griselda. But this reading misses what is most important, and most Girardian, about Chaucer's representation of mimesis throughout the *Canterbury Tales*: Chaucer does not present us with two kinds of desire, one male and one female,

one lawful and one subversive; rather, he shows us that acquisitive mimesis itself, regardless of gender, is, at best, a “cul-de-sac” (*Things Hidden* 298), a self-defeating dead-end, and, at worst, the impetus for sacrificial violence. Girard writes, “desire seeks only to find a resistance it is incapable of overcoming” (297); Chaucer writes, “Men loven of propre kinde newfangelnesse” (SqT 610)—in other words, it is in the nature of human beings to seek out ever-new objects of interest and desire. Insofar as he is concerned with the problem of mutability, Chaucer is thus concerned with the problem of desire *per se*, the *objet a*, desire that ceaselessly shifts from one object to another because it does not realize its mimetic nature, and thus is intent on overcoming any obstacle in its path.<sup>1</sup> If anything, the fact that women are not socially constrained to pursue honour leaves them better able to perceive the cul-de-sac of desire: that is why Chaucer’s exemplars of virtue tend to be women. And, just as women are not immune to the contagion of rivalry, so are men called to imitate the models of non-acquisitive mimesis in figures like St Cecilia and Constance.

Girard has been careful to recognize the fact that mimetic desire has both positive and negative effects, but the upshot of his theory has been to emphasize acquisitive, and therefore conflictual, mimesis to the near-exclusion of positive or productive mimesis.<sup>2</sup> The *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* are similarly built

---

<sup>1</sup> Mutability is a standard medieval *topos*, and its prevalence in Chaucer’s work is widely acknowledged: see Joseph Mogan’s study, *Chaucer and the Theme of Mutability*.

<sup>2</sup> Girard takes some pains to remedy this imbalance with his discussion of the injunction to imitate Christ in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*: see especially Chapter One, “Scandal Must Come” (1-17). Ann W. Astell has explored some possibilities for thinking about non-violent mimesis in her comparative reading of Girard, Stein, and Weil (“Saintly Mimesis, Contagion, and Empathy in the Thought of René Girard, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil”). Astell’s essay provided the inspiration for me to consider if and how Chaucer represents non-violent mimesis

around a principle of reciprocity, but it is one that, like Emelye's subtle garland, balances the reality of mimetic competition against the possibility of reconciliation without sacrificial violence. For the Wife, reconciliation originates spontaneously, in the choice to forgo the reciprocity of aggression, but is fulfilled through a process of empathetic contagion—a form of mimesis that unites rather than divides. Moreover, the mimesis of reconciliation that is played out in her tale is one that answers the quintessential instance of female shame in rape.<sup>3</sup> The question that is addressed in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and, as we will see, in the *Franklin's Tale* as well, is *not* about the possibility for a shamed woman to retain or regain her purity, but, rather, one that considers how the (mimetic) desire that leads to male aggression and violence might be subverted, so that the model for imitation becomes one of humility and self-denial rather than acquisitiveness.<sup>4</sup>

This question presupposes that rape ought not to be a matter of shame and purity at all, but a matter of responsibility and punishment for the perpetrator alone. In

---

(notwithstanding the irony of thinking about the decidedly non-mystical Wife of Bath alongside saintly exemplars of non-violence).

<sup>3</sup> There have been many studies on the Wife of Bath and the issue of violence against women in the Middle Ages. See, for example, Elizabeth M. Biebel, "A Wife, A Batterer, A Rapist: Representations of Masculinity in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*"; H. Marshall Leicester, "'My Bed was Ful of Verray Blood': Subject, Dream, and Rape in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*." Several feminist analyses have pointed out the prevalence of violence against women in Chaucer's poetry, but have tended to read Chaucer's representations of such violence as non-critical and complicit with ideologies of misogyny. For example, see Angela Weisl, "'Quiting' Eve: Violence against Women in the *Canterbury Tales*"; Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* and "'Of His Love Dangerous to Me': Liberation, Subversion, and Domestic Violence in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*." But as I argue throughout, in many different ways, Chaucer not only conveys ideals of anti-violence, but actively and purposely sets out to deconstruct the social and psychological impulses that lead to and justify the use of violence.

<sup>4</sup> In this, I again agree with Mann, who argues that "the tale is not to be read in realistic terms as a serious proposal for the rehabilitation of sexual offenders; rather it is (like all good fairy-tales) the imaginative embodiment of aspirations towards a transfigured reality, a vision of the way things might be. It addresses itself not to the pathology of rape, but to the imaginative representation of the processes which male psychology (in its social rather than individual form) would have to undergo to purge itself of the drive towards 'oppressioun' [889]" (*Feminizing* 70). Mann goes on to point out that that what succeeds in purging this drive is the "knight's subjection to female power" which is at the same time a "surrender of *maistrie*" (70-71).

seeking to answer it, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* suggests, *contra* Fradenburg, that it is indeed self-sacrifice in the recognition of guilt, sacrificing one's self-centered desires in the form of self-denial and renunciation, that, far from perpetuating the economy of sacrifice, actually undoes it. This understanding of grace as that which releases us from the bondage of reciprocal exchange does not deny the mimetic nature of desire, but it does assert the reality of human will and choice in designating what one's model of desire will be. The question for the rapist, who violently sacrifices the bodily integrity of another to gratify his own desire, is not how do I escape desire; neither is it, how do I desire the right object so that I avoid harm and suffering? It is rather, whose desire ought I to imitate?

The reciprocity that shapes the *Wife's Tale* is first established in her *Prologue*. If the tale addresses and subverts the shame of rape by placing the responsibility for change on the rapist, the prologue traces the roots of the conflicts between men and women in the debate between experience and authority. Jill Mann puts it well when she observes that, in creating the *Wife of Bath*, Chaucer takes on the challenge of speaking in the voice of a woman:

How is the woman who has been spoken *about* for centuries to be represented as speaking for herself? Chaucer's way of dealing with this problem is to meet it head on: what comes out of the *Wife's* mouth is not a naïve attempt at an unprejudiced representation of "how women feel," but rather the most extensive and unadulterated body of traditional antifeminist commonplace in the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*. . . . The prominence of this traditional antifeminist material finds its justification in the fact that the *Wife of Bath* is locked into a continuing struggle not so much with men as with their stereotypes of her sex—or, as she would put it, with "auctoritee." (*Feminizing* 57)

In other words, while the tale deconstructs the psychological motivation behind rape and acquisitive desire, the prologue deconstructs the discursive and textual

justifications for it. Both avoid a simplistic and implausible turning of the tables, in which women are simply granted the authority and voice traditionally denied to them—a move which would too easily serve to perpetuate the stereotypes in a different form—but by advocating, instead, a shared rejection of the will to power that drives the struggle in the first place.

As with the fallen women of the *House of Fame* and *Troilus and Crisyede*, in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* Chaucer represents woman as she is constructed by *auctoritee*—in this case, the shrewish and sexually rapacious Wife—but at the same time allows her to speak about and against that construction.<sup>5</sup> Here, however, Chaucer takes this fictional self-reflexivity to new heights, and endows the Wife with a personality seemingly unique and autonomous.<sup>6</sup> As such, the Wife is not mere passive victim of male tyranny but actively appropriates the tools of that tyranny and uses them to her own advantage. This appropriation is, in fact, an ingenious mimesis, as the Wife repeats back to her husbands the antifeminist slurs that serve to justify the use of women as scapegoats. She introduces each conventional antifeminist attack with “Thow seyst . . . seystow . . . Thus seystow,” attributing the responsibility for authoritative, antifeminist discourse to her husbands, and repeats this phrase twenty-five times over the

---

<sup>5</sup> On the Wife's relationship to the medieval tradition of antifeminist satire, see Peggy Knapp, “Alisoun of Bathe and the Reappropriation of Tradition.” On the debate between experience and authority in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, see Sheila Delany, “Notes on Experience, Authority and Desire in the Wife of Bath's Recital”; Robert Sturges, “*The Canterbury Tales*' Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority”; Mary Carruthers, “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions.”

<sup>6</sup> For a reading that emphasizes the distinctive subjectivity represented in the Wife, see Lee Patterson's chapter entitled “The Wife of Bath and the Triumph of the Subject” in *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (280-321). H. Marshall Leicester goes even farther than Patterson in considering the Wife as an autonomous voice, distinct not only from the authoritative discourses to which she responds, but even from Chaucer himself: see *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*, especially 65-158 and 195-217.

course of one hundred and fifty lines. This repetition, and the Wife's mimicry of *auctoritee* is, as Mann observes, performative rather than descriptive: the Wife acknowledges that her husbands did not actually say any of these things to her, but she uses her performance as the female victim as a means of shaming her husbands, in order to gain control over them; she "uses antifeminist satire as a blunt instrument with which to beat her husbands into submission" (*Feminizing* 63). Girard observes the "resemblance between the competitors, the identity of aims and tactics, the symmetry of gestures" in the mutual imitation of rivals (*Things Hidden* 11), and the Wife, in her parody of *auctoritee*, literalizes this resemblance in purposeful mimicry: the reciprocal strikes of mimetic rivalry are thus imagined as rhetorical thrust and parry, ideological attack and revenge.

But with Jankyn, her fifth, the situation becomes more complicated. What marks this marriage as different from the outset is that the Wife marries Jankyn not for material gain but for love. In her "fair" and "lusty" youth, the Wife used her body to snare husbands and her nagging to cow them (605-06). She was able to tyrannize over them because she was not emotionally invested: her selfishness protected her from the risks and humiliation of object-directed desire. But when it came to Jankyn, the Wife recalls,

I trowe I loved him best, for that he  
Was of his love daungerous to me.  
...  
My fifthe housbonde—God his soule blesse!—  
Which that I took for love, and no richesse. . . . (513-14, 525-26)

In this sense, Jankyn is not a means to an end (money and property), but is himself the very object she seeks. And, consequently, he has the upperhand in

their relationship, at least initially: the Wife's love for him makes her vulnerable in the same way that her previous husbands were vulnerable to her. With her fifth marriage, therefore, the Wife occupies the place of her previous four husbands, as the older, wealthy party who exchanges material resources for in an attempt to find physical and emotional satisfaction. She reports that to Jankyn, the poor clerk of Oxenford,

. . . yaf I al the lond and fee  
That evere was me yeven therbifore  
But afterward repented me ful sore;  
He nolde suffer nothing of my liSt (630-33)

The Wife used to berate her husbands by playing the *role* of the female victim of male tyranny; she reports that she would “chidde hem spitously” for accusing her of stereotypically female vices, when they did not actually do so (223). Jankyn, on the other hand, turns her into the *reality* of the female victim—he really does accuse her by voicing those same stereotypical complaints—and yet these are stereotypes which in many cases the Wife has by now proven accurate. At this point, it appears that the Wife is simply receiving a merited dose of poetic justice, as January does in the *Merchant's Tale*, when he, after using the same arguments as the Wife does in favour of marriage, fixes upon a much younger spouse in order to gratify his own sexual desires: his self-interested blindness to May's desires fittingly renders him blind to the fact of his own cuckoldry.<sup>7</sup> But the

---

<sup>7</sup> The parallels between the Wife and January are perhaps surprising, given the Wife's apparent role as champion of womankind and the comical *maleness* of January, the doddering old lecher, but they are clearly intentional. In their respective defenses of marriage against virginity, the Wife acknowledges that St Paul sets virginity as the ideal, but she argues that “He spak to hem that wolde live parfity; / And lordinges, by your leve, that am nat I!” (WBP 111-12). January echoes this when he rejects the idea of a chaste marriage for the purposes of aspiring to sainthood: “But sires, by your leve, that am nat I” (MerT 1456). Chaucer makes the parallel even more explicit when he has the Merchant engage in a brief metafictional moment, when Justinus, a

prologue does not end here; neither the shrewish Wife nor the wife-abusing husband gets off easily in this story. The Wife goes on to recount in greater detail how Jankyn would read to her from his *Book of Wicked Wives*, and she reflects on the maddening injustice of the theologians' prerogative: "Who peinted the leoun, tel me who?" (692). She then reiterates for her audience examples of the wicked wives whose stories she was forced to hear—Eve, Delilah, Xantippe, Clytemnestra—but breaks off the litany with an outburst of apparent sincerity: "Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose / The wo that in min herte was, and pine?" (786-87). In this way, the Wife rather dramatically re-creates the sense in which she felt oppressed, not by physical abuse (that comes later), but by the mere recitation of the stories themselves. And it is the feeling of being subjected to this monologue *interminably* that causes her finally to reach her breaking point:

And whan I say he wolde nevere fine  
 To reden on this cursed book al night,  
 Al sodeinly thre leves I plight  
 Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke  
 I with my fist so took him on the cheke  
 That in our fir he fil backward adoun. (788-93)

This frustrated, frantic act of violence shows the Wife in very different light from her earlier, gleeful bravado and the frank amorality with which she recalled her exploits in love and marriage. Here, in contrast, having given up her wealth and autonomy, she is utterly lacking control; rather than manipulating the men in her

---

character in his tale, refers directly to the Wife, who has, he feels, done justice to the topic of marriage (MerT 1685-87). In this same cause, both the Wife and January boast of their sexual potency—the Wife speaking proudly of the many uses of her "instrument" and the joys of her "bele chose" (149, 510); January testifying that, despite his age, his "limes" are "stark and suffisaunt / To do al that a man bilongeth to" (1458-59). In January's case, of course, his claims of virility are contrasted hilariously with the scene in which he consummates his marriage—and we are made to endure with May the spectacle of an old man playing at youth, while the "slakke skin aboute his nekke shaketh" (MerT 1849). Jill Mann similarly points out the ironic parallel between January's literal and his figurative blindness (*Feminizing* 55-56).



life with cool calculation, she lashes out in desperation. But it is precisely this moment of her total weakness that precipitates the chain of events that cause another shift in the balance of power and make it possible for husband and wife to reconcile. First, however, Jankyn is enraged and returns blow for blow—the blow that causes the Wife’s partial deafness that Geoffrey reports to us in the *General Prologue*—and she ends up lying on the floor as if dead. Jankyn fears that he has actually killed her and is “agast” (798). Both the Wife and Jankyn here reach their lowest point, and glimpse, as it were, the brutal truth of their conflict—that the unceasing striving for power and *maistrie*, the continual escalation of acquisitive mimesis, ends not in domination of one over the other but only in destruction, “wo” and “pine” for all. What is shocking and decisive about this moment for the narrative as a whole is the way in which the argument between husband and wife escalates so suddenly from figurative to literal violence, and the way in which this escalation emphasizes the important difference between these two kinds of violence. In the power struggle enacted in the realm of rhetoric and *auctoritee*, the Wife can give as good as she gets: there is always room for movement and counter-attack in the form of ironic subversion and appropriation. But in the literal violence that erupts, there is no ambiguity and no room for strategic re-interpretation: Jankyn falls into the fire, and the blow that knocks Alisoun to the ground causes permanent physical damage. In other words, the effects of aggressive and defensive intellectual parrying about female role and male prerogative suddenly become real, and it is precisely the violent reality of their argument that has such a sudden, sobering effect on both parties. Just as there is

an important and real difference between violent sacrifice and figurative self-sacrifice, so is there a difference between discourse and its possible effects, or between psychological manipulation and bodily harm.

Nonetheless, as quickly as the tone of seriousness and vulnerability took over the Wife's performance, it is gone. After this moment, the narrative returns to its lighter, comical tone. But it does so with a crucial difference, for neither wife nor husband is in a position to tyrannize the other anymore. Alisoun is once again the mischievous manipulator, but she has lost her acquisitive edge:

“O, hastow slain me, false thief?” I saide,  
 “And for my land thus hastow mordred me?  
 Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee!” (800-02)

This is the second critical moment in the narrative, for it is the moment in which Alisoun's response to Jankyn's violence decides whether they will continue in their struggle against each other, or whether they will work instead to build some kind of rapport and harmony. The Wife's comical melodrama, rather than escalating their rivalry further, defuses the tension with humour and with the assurance, for us and for Jankyn, that no serious or lasting harm has been done: the Wife remains her playful, incorrigible self, but she is willing to give Jankyn the chance to make it up to her. To spell it out: the Wife knows full well that Jankyn did not strike her in order to inherit her assets. She is trying to heap coals onto Jankyn's guilty conscience, but for the purposes of exacting nothing other than remorse, reconciliation, and affection—and she is successful:

And neere he cam, and kneled faire adoun,  
 And seide, “Deere suster Alisoun,  
 As help me God, I shal thee nevere smite.  
 That I have doon, it is thyself to wite;

Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke.” (804-07)

And while the Wife cannot resist taking a few more swipes, literally and figuratively, the mood of the scene is now playfully benign: the desire for mastery, control and acquisition has been replaced by an underlying desire for accord and a sense of companionship. Thus, although the Wife *claims* that Jankyn has returned to her “al the bridel in min hond” and that she has won from him “al the soveraintee” (813, 818), in truth, Chaucer indicates that their relationship is now one marked by mutuality:

God help me so, I was to him as kinde  
As any wif from Denmark unto Inde,  
And also trewe, and so he was to me. (823-25)

The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* thus charts a movement from competition and acquisition, in which men and women are only means to an end for each other, and in which the vulnerability and weakness of one is the advantage of the other, to reciprocal fidelity and kindness. It is a movement, in other words, from mimetic conflict to a mimesis of grace, and while it represents the escalation of that conflict in violence, it also shows an escape from conflict without sacrifice: Alisoun and Jankyn come to the brink of destruction, as it were, but something causes them to pull back and reconcile *before* the fatal strike.

What it is, precisely, that allows for this mimesis of grace without the purging of desire in sacrifice the Wife illustrates in greater detail in her *Tale*, which explicitly recapitulates the mutual surrender of *maistrie* enacted in the prologue. The tale is set in “th’olde dayes of the king Arthour” (857), when the land was full of fairies and the elf-queen herself danced through the countryside.

The setting, which contrasts with the disenchanting present of “limitours and other holy freres” (866), whose blessings and prayers have driven out the fairies, is crucial because it indicates the romantic mode of the tale, and the broad scope for imaginative and ethical possibilities that romance allows. It is the romantic mode, in other words, that allows Chaucer to flesh out the psychological dimensions underlying the de-escalation of violence that the Wife recounts in her prologue.<sup>8</sup> If we read the prologue in isolation from the tale, the Wife’s incorrigibility keeps open the possibility of reading her reconciliation with Jankyn in ironic or even cynical terms, to infer that the struggle for *maistrie* persists despite the ostensibly happy ending; the romantic world of the tale makes the cynical reading much less tenable. Specifically, Chaucer adapts the familiar folklore motif of the loathly lady, a motif known to medieval readers through the Middle English romance *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* and the “Tale of Florent” in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, among others.<sup>9</sup> But while the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* shares the basic plot and similarly plays on the theme of choosing between beauty and goodness, Chaucer’s is the only version in which the knight who faces this choice is a rapist performing a kind of penance for his mistreatment of women, and who is being held accountable by a supreme court of women. In the other versions, the *aventure* that befalls the knight is more or less random, and is not a consequence

---

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between the Wife of Bath and the romance tradition, see Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*; see also A. C. Spearing, “Rewriting Romance: Chaucer’s and Dryden’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*.”

<sup>9</sup> For a survey of different versions of the story, see S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, eds., *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*. In this volume, the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is considered in relation to Celtic sovereignty tales and medieval ideas about queenship (Biebel-Stanley, “Sovereignty through the Lady”) and a traditional British ballad entitled “The Knight and the Shepherd’s Daughter” (Wollstadt, “Repainting the Lion”).

of his own moral fault. Moreover, in Chaucer's version, in charging the knight with the task of discovering what it is that women want, the Queen substitutes for retributive justice a kind of mercy, but only on the condition that the knight develops the capacity to suppress his own aggressive and sexual urges, and to imagine desire from the other's perspective instead—on the condition, in other words, that the knight himself develop the capacity for mercy. Thus the tale identifies a certain kind of empathy, and the reciprocal exchange or mimesis of empathetic responses, as the foundation and cause of grace.

And yet, as Susanne Sara Thomas has recently pointed out, the knight's empathy is rather slow in coming. What is remarkable about his year-long search, his (forced) marriage to the ugly old woman, and his relentless self-pity, is that it evinces, in Thomas's words, an "impressive and prolonged desire to remain ignorant of the meaning of his quest":

Rather than undergoing what some see as a "final transformation" [McKinley 359] or "steady rehabilitation" [Brown 19] over the course of the tale, and ending up "ready to understand rather than merely to possess" [Van 190], the knight's resistance to the idea of female sovereignty is so pronounced and overdetermined that his apparent reversal of opinion at the conclusion is too improbable to be believed. ("Defining Sovereignty" 87)

That the knight's "conversion" is too improbable to be believed is a point that I will dispute, but it is nonetheless true that, even after spending all that time asking women how they feel and what they desire, the newlywed knight is led to the bedchamber no less concerned with his own needs and desires, no closer to anything resembling selflessness, than he was at the beginning. Thomas suggests that this is because the knight does not really *want* to know what women want;

and, indeed, we can safely assume that even as he is asking every woman he meets for the secret, what he is really fixated on is saving his own life. Once this dire urgency has passed and the judgement found in his favour, we reach the crux of the matter: the knight has not been able to ascertain truly, that is to say first-hand, what women want simply by repeating the words he has been told; his *real* education begins when the old woman corners him in the bedroom, and he faces the prospect of unwanted sexual congress not once but perpetually. The violation of rape is here reflected as the loss of “sovereignty,” not only the loss of mastery and authority in forced marriage, but of the same fundamental bodily integrity of which the knight “rafte” the maiden by the river (888).

The “oppressioun” that the Knight inflicts on the maiden is described in terms that suggest that this is just the kind of thing that knights do when they are riding through the countryside. Just as Palamon and Arcite react to stimuli and circumstances with a kind of animalistic simplicity, without internal reflection or reasoning, and in a way that appeals to “chance” and “aventure” as catch-alls that allow for the evasion of responsibility, so is it simply a matter of happenstance that the knight comes to rape someone:

And so bifel that this king Arthour  
 Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor  
 That on a day cam riding fro river,  
 And happed that, allone as he was born,  
 He saughe a maide walkinge him biforn,  
 Of which maide anoon, maugree hir hed,  
 By verray force he rafte hir maidenhed. (WBT 882-88)

But, unlike in the *Knight's Tale*, in the world according to the Wife of Bath, the general populace demands justice and, perhaps most importantly, a woman holds

a key position of authority. King Arthur sentences the knight to death for his act, but Guinevere intercedes, requesting that his fate be left in her hands. Instead of punishment, the Queen proposes rehabilitation: she charges the knight with the challenge of discovering “what thing it is that wommen moost desiren” (905). If he is able to find the answer in a year’s time, he will be set free, but if he does not, he will face the punishment decreed by the king. The challenge, in other words, requires that the knight suspend the pursuit of his own self-interested desires and reflect instead on what women desire. This challenge implies that he must develop a reflective capacity in the first place, but also that he must consider how he might be of service to the desires of others: implicit in the charge, in other words, is a requirement for the knight to self-objectify, to conceive of himself as a potential object of the other’s desire, rather than simply a desiring subject, and thus to see himself as if through the eyes of the other. The knight has been shameless in his abuse of women, and he must therefore develop the capacity for shame.

The knight sets off throughout the countryside once more, but this time, he is looking for *grace* rather than gratification: we are told expressly that he “seketh every hous and every place / Whereas he hopeth for to find grace” (919-20). The problem is that he is given a different answer from every woman he asks—in a kind of abbreviated recapitulation of the antifeminist stereotypes rehearsed by the Wife in the prologue—there seems to be no consensus on what woman is and what she wants; or, rather, every articulation that attempts to define female nature ends up proving insufficient, and he is starting to run out of time. But on the very

day that he is supposed to return to the Queen, the knight finally finds “grace” in the form of a “wif” who is so physically repulsive to him, we are told, “A fouler wight they may no man devise” (999). In the usual way of poor, old women in romance, the loathly lady possesses a kind of mysterious wisdom whereby she promises to deliver him the true answer in exchange for the knight’s vow that he will do one thing at her request. The knight agrees, pledges his troth, receives the answer, and appears before the Queen’s court of ladies appointed to judge him. With delightful narrative detail, we are told that he presents his answer to them in a “manly vois” (1036):

“My lige lady, generally,” quod he,  
 “Wommen desiren to have sovereigntee  
 As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,  
 And for to been in maistrie him above.” (1037-40)

The irony here can be viewed from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, there is the irony we can assume the Wife intends: that the virile young knight who speaks in a manly voice does so as he is being humbled before not one woman but a roomful, the female power brokers who indeed have *maistrie* over him. Further, as Mann has shown, the answer the knight provides also constitutes a complete reversal of the misogynist myth propagated by the medieval French *pastourelle*,<sup>10</sup> in which knights frequently rape country girls but, “once the act is accomplished, the girl’s screams and struggles turn into sighs of pleasure and requests to come back soon” (*Feminizing* 71). The knight’s subjection to the Queen’s authority and the assertion that women desire sovereignty rather than sexual enslavement

---

<sup>10</sup> And, we might add, the *Reeve’s Tale*, in which the women are not given a chance to protest (“Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie, / That it had been to late for to crie” [4195-4196]), but in gratitude for services rendered, the Miller’s wife tells her rapist where to find his stolen grain.



“shatters” the male fantasy that justifies predatory violence (71). From another, psychologizing, perspective, however, we could argue that the picture of justice presented is a clear case of wish-fulfillment on the Wife’s behalf: this is how the Wife wants things to be, but what it shows is the Wife’s own obsession with power, her virago-like desire to subject all men to her every whim. However we choose to read it, the fact remains that, at this point in the narrative, the reciprocal structure of attack and revenge, or the competitive dynamic of mimetic rivalry, is yet in full swing. But the tale does not end here, with the image of women in charge, teaching the knight a much-needed lesson. For after he has escaped his sentence at the hands of Guinevere, the old woman steps forward and reminds him of his pledge to her: the one thing the knight must do in order to repay the old woman for saving his life is to marry her. The knight is horrified and, in desperation, he tries to buy her off with all of his worldly possessions. But to no avail, for the old woman wants nothing but his heart: indeed, she specifies not only marriage but “thy love” (1066). And the knight must do it; she holds him in her power in a way that is much more personal and direct than the Queen-judge who condemns or releases, and he is powerless to refuse.

Chaucer expresses this feeling of powerlessness as the knight’s sense of being “constrained” to his own ruin and that of his family name. If rape constitutes the quintessential instance of female shame, then, for the Arthurian knight, the quintessence of shame is the loss of his name, what the knight here calls “my nacioun,” in dishonour:

“My love!” quod he, “nay, my dampnacioun!  
 Allas, that any of my nacioun

Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!”  
 But al for noght: th’ende is this, that he  
 Constrained was; he nedes moste hir wedde,  
 And taketh his olde wif, and goth to bedde. (1067-72)

The combination of powerlessness, shame, and repugnance the knight feels is aptly conveyed through narrative detail: the knight weds her “prively” (1080), presumably to avoid the spectacle of a public ceremony; “So wo was him,” we are told, because “his wif looked so foule” (1082); and when they are “ybroght” to bed, the knight “walweth” (meaning to thrash about, or to flail) and “turneth to and fro” in mortification, trying to escape his wife’s embrace (1085).<sup>11</sup> In short, we are presented with the equivalent, as Chaucer imagines it, of a *man* about to be raped by a *woman*: at this point, the knight is as close as he can be to the position of the maiden he attacked.<sup>12</sup> Marshall Leicester has pointed out that, in his quest to discover women’s desire, the knight is put “in a position more familiar to women, who have to cater to male desires” (“Of a Fire” 160). But on his wedding night, this role-reversal becomes even more pointed and even more personal: the knight is forced to imagine not only the perspective of women in general, but of his victim in particular. The shame of violation in rape is here experience by the

---

<sup>11</sup> “Walweth” is not a common word in Chaucer, but very graphic. In the *Reeve’s Tale*, he uses it in a metaphor to describe how the fighting men are like pigs who wallow in the mud (4278). But he also uses it in “To Rosemound,” to describe the feeling of being “walwed and ywounde” in love (18), when speaking of Dido in *LGW* (1166), and of Troilus acting like Nyobe (*Troilus* 1.699). In all three cases, as in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the word suggests a certain “feminine” helplessness in matters of love.

<sup>12</sup> On this point, it is helpful also to keep in mind the various meanings of rape or “raptus” in medieval English. “Rape” could just as easily refer to abduction and forced marriage as it could to forced intercourse. On medieval understandings of “raptus,” see Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Middle Ages* (33-75). The fact that the knight commits himself to the old woman freely in order to get the answer he seeks does not, in my view, mitigate the sense in which Chaucer emphasizes the idea of reciprocity in the *marriage* rather than the quest, as a clear instance of just deserts. Cf. the *Franklin’s Tale*, in which Dorigen freely “promises” her love to Aurelius but, when he fulfills her conditions, she understands her supposed obligation to him in terms of rape and dishonour.

knight as an acute powerlessness over one's own body and the sense of "losing face"—of losing one's very identity. In this way, the knight's education, which brings him from rapist to rape victim, parallels in many ways the Wife of Bath's own progress from manipulative scold to victim of the male tyranny she had previously used to her own advantage.

As with the prologue, however, the tale does not end with a mere turning of the tables, with an easy poetic justice that delivers the punishment to fit the crime. While, in the prologue, the dynamic between Alisoun and Jankyn shifts abruptly and comically because Jankyn worries that his blow has actually killed her, in the tale reconciliation is preceded by the old woman's didactic speech on the nature of *gentillesse* and the virtue of patience. Her speech, as many have noted, draws on Dante, Boethius, and the Stoics, and expresses several medieval commonplaces: true *gentillesse* derives not from birth or material wealth but from virtue and inner merit, and the proper way to respond to poverty and adversity is with patience, in the medieval sense of peaceful acceptance of one's lot. Finally, she consoles him on the fact of her ugly appearance with the familiar notion that a man with an old and ugly wife need not fear the shame of cuckoldry, "For filthe and elde . . . / Been grete wardeins upon chastitee" (1215-16). The knight's problem, she concludes, is that he desires the wrong things (value that is external and liable to loss); only when he starts desiring the right things (value that is internal and lasting) will his woe be cured.

That her insights are, indeed, conventional is less important than the fact of their effect on her reluctant pupil, for the point is that the knight is finally

brought to reason, first, through a complete humiliation, and, second, through the edifying discourse that flows from the female voice of authority that has vanquished him (“‘Thanne have I gete of yow the maistrie,’ quod she” [1236]). Before he is *able* to understand the “meaning” of his quest, the knight’s own pride and sense of entitlement must be thoroughly undermined. In this sense, his trial and quest are not exactly red herrings, but they are devices that put him in the way of the old woman and allow her to exact the promise from him that puts him under her control; the quest itself, in terms of the overall narrative structure, is intended not to teach him what he needs to know, but simply to place him in a position of subordination—to put him literally in the place of the Other.

Alternately, we can consider the challenge to find out what women desire as a cognitive exercise, a challenge to discover a certain idea, when what the knight really needs is a fundamental re-ordering of his ethical orientation, to move from treating women as means to the fulfillment of his own self-interest, to the ability to relate to women as ends in themselves. And *only* when he has been divested of his power and his honour, only once his family name has been sullied in marriage to a poor and ugly woman, is he finally able to pass the test. The purpose of asking him whether he would prefer a wife who is ugly but true or beautiful but possibly unfaithful is not to see if he has learned the lesson of inner merit *per se*, but to see if he has learned the humility to know that it is not his place to decide what “woman” is and how she should be for his sake. The (trick) question itself assumes a thoroughly male perspective, in that it considers marriage solely in the

terms supplied by the antifeminist discourse against which the Wife rails in her prologue:

Thow seyst to me, it is a greet mischief  
 To wedde a povre woman, for costage,  
 . . .  
 And if that she be fair, thow verray knave,  
 Thow seyst that every holour wol hire have.  
 She may no while in chastitee abide,  
 That is assailed upon ech a side. (248-56)

The old woman reiterates this male perspective in her consolation to the knight, that her ugliness will be a guard against infidelity, and, more pointedly, when she asks him what kind of woman is of greater benefit to her husband—or rather, which is the lesser of two evils—but the knight’s answer turns this perspective on its head. We must keep in mind that his wife is still the “loathly lady” whose appearance and poverty has driven him to despair when he answers thus:

My lady and my love, and wif so deere,  
 I putte me in youre wise governaunce.  
 Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesaunce,  
 And moost honour to yow and me also.  
 I do no fors the wheither of the two,  
 For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me. (1230-35)

We might say that he has been defeated, as Thomas argues,<sup>13</sup> that there is less understanding and more baffled resignation in his “Ye, certes, wif,” (1238); but, if so, it is a defeat both necessary and humane (the knight’s alternative to defeat by

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas connects the implausibility of the knight’s transformation to the fact that the meaning of sovereignty is never sufficiently defined in the tale: “the opposite of *sovererynetee*, the state of non-authority and non-mastery, occurs when one allows others to define *for* one what is desirable and valuable. And that is what the wise woman ends up doing for the knight at the conclusion of the tale, because he proves incapable of defining his own desires. Thus the knight ultimately never learns the meaning of the word he seeks, nor does he acquire the power it signifies” (90). On the contrary, I argue that it is not the case the knight is *incapable* of defining his own desires but that he *chooses* to deny them in order to give up the “maistrie” to his wife. He does not say that he *does not know* what kind of wife he would rather have, but that he will defer and give the old woman the prerogative to decide what kind of wife *she* wants to be.

the old woman is hanging by King Arthur), and one that evinces psychological realism instead of glib optimism. In answer to the question of how the violence of mimetic desire can be subverted—and converted—into mimetic, reciprocal love, both the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* represent the possibility of forgoing resentment in response to insult and injury not out of superhuman magnanimity, but in a moment of powerlessness and humiliation.

The speech on *gentillesse* and its effects on the knight are also significant in that they mark another crucial difference between Chaucer's version and others, such as Gower's *Tale of Florent*. As Alistair Minnis points out, in Chaucer's version, the idea of sovereignty is, through the loathly lady's discourse, "desexualized" (*Fallible Authors* 329), as the loathly lady transforms the central moral problem of the tale from one of sexual possession to one of "high philosophical seriousness"—the idea of *gentillesse*—and from sovereignty understood as sexual dominance to sovereignty understood as moral superiority. This speech is thus a critical factor in the narrative's resolution of the mimetic struggle: because the loathly lady redefines her own power in terms of inner worth and moral superiority rather than the ability, through enchantment, to possess the knight, she defuses the cycle of reciprocity. Thus, when the wife asks her husband, have I mastery over you, she is not asserting a kind of totalizing, physical and sexual control (as in a rape) but rather a kind of moral and spiritual prerogative.

The prologue begins with the stereotypical female aggressor and the tale begins with the stereotypical male aggressor; we are shown first how each type of

self-interested aggression ends up punishing itself. But even as the aggressors are, as it were, brought to their knees in shame, they are presented with the possibility, both unexpected and somewhat mysterious, of grace. In this way, the Wife's prologue and tale mirror the cycles of courtly and chivalric reciprocity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, cycles which are broken with the unexpected intervention of forgiveness. Out of remorse for his own violent act, Jankyn relents; in response to the knight's newfound generosity to her, the old woman generously becomes both beautiful and true. In this way, the prologue and the tale challenge the idea that human beings are somehow fated to competitive struggle and violent retaliation, even as they recognize—and anatomize in some detail—the human propensity for violence and selfishness.

“Save oonly deeth or elles dishonour”: Undoing Shame in the *Franklin's Tale*

In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the possibility of mimetic grace is set in motion by the shame of the knight who must be utterly humbled before he is able to understand his own guilt and his responsibility to and for the Other. We see a similar reversal, a process of shaming in order to liberate from shame, in the *Franklin's Tale*. And here, in a very similar vein, the worth of a woman can be recognized as distinct from her husband's honour only when the husband is himself willing to suffer the shame of sexual pollution.

R. Howard Bloch has argued that the courtly lady corresponds to the hagiographical ideal of virginity insofar as she too is always desired but never desires (“Chaucer's Maiden's Head” 122). Both the virgin and the courtly lady

embody a striving after prelapsarian perfection: complete unto themselves, without need or lack, and indifferent to their desires of their pursuers, their perfect intactness suggests a vision of unfallen wholeness and freedom from the shameful realities of desire and procreation. Corinne Saunders also explores significant parallels between romance and hagiography, but in terms of threatened violence instead of threatened shame. As she points out,

violence is to some extent built into the conventions of *fin' amors*. . . . The lady, no matter how improbably, must consent to love—this romance pattern echoes the consistent emphasis on the woman's will in hagiography, where the refusal of consent leads to death. The aim of male attackers in both hagiography and romance is most often to enforce marriage. . . . (188, 198)

Similarly, Chaucer links the *Franklin's Tale*, a “Breton lai,” with hagiography and his own hagiographical tales by reiterating the dilemma of shame versus death, with a slight variation.<sup>14</sup> With Dorigen, Chaucer explores questions of will, consent, and intention that are central in the virgin martyrs tales, but in such a way as to emphasize the role played by the demands of honour and shame in the *constraint* of the will and the *construction* of consent and intention.

One of Chaucer's favourite strategies for highlighting the essential constructedness of the necessity borne of shame is to contrast his characters' claims of inevitability and helplessness against the illogicality and contingency of the plot that actually unfolds. Alternately, when any degree of narrative necessity does, in fact, constrain the agency of a character, the necessity is clearly delineated as arising from social and cultural forces; in other words, while we are *told* that the action is dictated by fate and necessity, we are *shown* how social

---

<sup>14</sup> For my discussion of Chaucer and hagiography, see Chapter 7.



convention and the particular choices of individuals give rise to circumstances that in turn lead to particular outcomes. As we have seen, Chaucer uses this technique to dramatic effect in the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Knight's Tale*. In the *Franklin's Tale*, the ironic distance between an imagined, honour-bound fate and the actual freedom to enact ethical alternatives brings Dorigen to the brink of the virgin's shame dilemma—"save oonly deeth or elles dishonour" (1358). But here Chaucer breaks with the familiar plot in which the once-pure lady must either die or languish in disgrace. While in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, parallel instances of reconciliation are set in motion by the spontaneous forgoing of mimetic, competitive retaliation, in the *Franklin's Tale* similar forgiveness and reconciliation are made possible by Arveragus's self-denying forfeit of honour. In both cases, cycles of mimetic conflict, represented as the struggle between genders and as the conflicting desires of two men for the same woman, respectively, are broken *before* they escalate to the point of sacrifice. In its place, Chaucer envisions mercy, forgiveness, and grace as ideals which require a kind of self-sacrifice, a sacrifice that is, first of all, figurative instead of literal, and one that denies, not desire *per se*, but specifically the self-interested desire for honour and *maistrie*. This kind of self-sacrifice is a sacrifice only in the sense that admitting non-perfection and non-omnipotence requires letting go of one's claim to honour, but also, and more painfully, a rejection or quelling of the instinct for self-protection; it requires an acceptance of the essential fragility of social and physical boundaries, rather than the perpetual attempt to shore them up.

When Dorigen is importuned by her desperate suitor Aurelius, she swears her “trouthe” that, if he removes the rocks “stoon by stoon” from the coast of Britany, she will love him “best of any man” (993, 997). Her oath, which recalls the folklore motif of the “rash promise,” is clearly intended as a definitive rejection of Aurelius’s suit, not only because such a feat is impossible (as Aurelius himself realizes), but also because her desire for the removal of the “grisly feendly rokkes blak” has come to signify, at this point in text, her passionate love for her husband Arveragus and her fear for his safe return from England (1345, 868).

And, yet, Dorigen introduces a degree of ambiguity into her playful promise—enough ambiguity to allow Aurelius scope for willful misinterpretation. In fact, Dorigen states her promise twice, and it is the second articulation of it which opens the door to illusion or appearance versus reality:

But after that in pleye thus seyde she:  
 “Aurelie,” quod she, “by heighe God above,  
 Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,  
 Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.  
 Looke what day that endelong Britayne  
 Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,  
 That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon  
 I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene  
 Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,  
 Than wol I love yow best of any man;  
 Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan.” (988-98)

At line 995 (“I seye”), Dorigen begins to restate the conditions in alternative terms,

and the terms now are those of visibility: make it happen that there “nys no stoon

ysene.” Had she put a full stop after “remoeve . . . stoon by stoon” there would have been no ambiguity and no opportunity for Aurelius to succeed with an illusion, with the mere *appearance* of a clean coast. Dorigen’s flexibility here recalls Criseyde’s and Emelye’s. Although we have no reason to suspect that her refusal is anything but sincere, she does not suggest that she would not consider his suit under any circumstances because she finds him personally distasteful, but simply that she cannot accept him given her current situation and prior commitment. Her “rash promise” seems meant to imply “it’s not you, it’s me.” And we can also imagine that, if her situation were to change, like Criseyde and Emelye, Dorigen too would opt for Plan B. It is Dorigen’s openness to alternative possibilities, however, that allows Aurelius to practice his deception. If she is aligned with the fickleness of woman (and Chaucer’s re-evaluation of it), he is aligned with the male penchant for coercion through manipulative “appareance.” Indeed, Aurelius is like a cross between Aeneas and Troilus: passive yet coercive, clever but duplicitous, all the while pining for his unrequited love.

When Aurelius enlists the help of a learned clerk to create the illusion that the rocks have disappeared, Dorigen takes him at his word that he has actually fulfilled the conditions of her promise, and concludes, rather hastily, that the only way for her to avoid the shame of adultery is to commit suicide. Hence her lament,

Allas . . . on thee, Fortune, I pleyne,  
That unwar wrapped hast me in thy cheyne,

Fro which t'escape woot I no socour,  
 Save oonly deeth or elles dishonour;  
 Oon of these two bihoveth me to chese. (1355-59)

Faced with this seemingly intractable dilemma, Dorigen recounts a litany of true and faithful women, borrowed by Chaucer from a similar account in Jerome's *Adversus Iovinianum*, who chose to kill themselves rather than endure the shame of rape. Critics have often read some irony into these comparisons, suggesting that there is a "dramatic discrepancy between the innocent victims of antiquity and the predicament Dorigen has created for herself" (SA 216). In this reading, in other words, Dorigen is not exactly an "innocent victim." On the other hand, as Anne Scott observes, those who reject the ironic reading in favour of one that takes seriously Dorigen's plight have been faced with a host of stubborn questions:

Why, for example, doesn't Aurelius hear the spirit rather than the letter of Dorigen's rash promise to him? . . . Why does Dorigen's irksome naivete persist: why her seemingly persistent reliance on blind faith? Or why, in fact, does Chaucer even have characters swear impossible oaths to each other that surely cannot be fulfilled in any pragmatic way? (Scott 391)

In many ways, these are not the right questions to be asking of the text, which firmly locates itself in the non-realism of the Breton lai. Jill Mann's comments on the imaginative ethics of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale* are, on this point, astute: both tales represent "the imaginative embodiment of aspirations towards a transfigured reality, a vision of the way things might be" (*Feminizing* 70). The issue, in other words, is not one of irony versus sincerity, but of understanding the way that romance functions as a genre, for Chaucer is explicitly invoking its generic parameters: the romantic tales told by the Wife of

Bath and the Franklin establish ethical ideals through means that are empirically impossible but psychologically realistic.

Persistent questions about the logic of the narrative are also put into perspective when we compare Chaucer's text with his sources. Chaucer's main source for the *Franklin's Tale* is an episode in Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo* which is retold in the *Decameron*. The latter version omits some details and emphasizes Aurelius's abandonment of sexual desire in favour of charity and friendship, whereas *Il Filocolo* stresses the *demande* that Chaucer takes up with variation: "which of the three men acted most generously?" In the *Franklin's Tale*, of course, the *demande* is not limited to the three men, and the question itself is more ambiguous: "Which was the mooste fre, as thinketh yow?" Chaucer also modifies the marriage theme from Boccaccio's texts, in which the husband is undoubtedly the master of his wife. An important aspect of the ensuing debate between Menedon and Fiammetta, therefore, involves the validity of Dorigen's promise, not in terms of her intentions, but its legal status as a contract in the absence of her husband's consent. Fiammetta pronounces this verdict:

You are trying to say that the husband showed no generosity in giving up his wife, since he had to do so by rights because of the vow made by the lady, and this would be true if the vow were binding. But since the lady is a part of her husband, or rather together with him makes up a single body, she could not make that vow without her husband's consent; and if she did make it it was invalid, since no subsequent vow can erode an earlier vow properly made... (*Il Filocolo* 264)

Consequently, Fiammetta concludes that the husband was the most generous, because, of all the interests at stake, he risks what is most "precious": his honour. Much like Girard's mimetic triangle, the view presented in Boccaccio

is one in which the defense of honour emphasizes the homosocial duality of rivals, and excludes the dynamics of shame that constrain the female object. In this version, the lady truly does occupy the position of a kind of commodity, to be fought for or exchanged as a means of competition or to establish a rapport between men.

But Chaucer, as is well-known, redefines the marriage in order to emphasize its mutuality and reciprocity, on the principle of rejecting *maistrie*. The speech on marriage which the Franklin inserts into his narrative echoes sentiments expressed in *The Romance of the Rose*, and stresses the importance of freedom for both partners, as well as a corresponding need to demonstrate patience. A standard line of interpretation is to view these propositions as ironic in light of the fact that Arveragus seems to exercise *maistrie* after all, when he insists that Dorigen fulfill her promise to Aurelius. But this interpretation assumes that *maistrie* is something much more simple and obvious than it really is: it assumes a definition of the term as a kind of bossiness. For Chaucer, the term has much deeper resonances: it suggests a kind of ownership or power over another's bodily integrity, just as, in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, sovereignty implies power over one's own bodily integrity, the ability and right to protect oneself from shame. As we have seen, a prevailing concern involved in the cultural management of shame is the importance of regulating and protecting the boundaries of the "ideal space" around the physical body. Far from eradicating this concern, Christian hagiography only intensifies the importance of perfectly sealed boundaries. The female body is, therefore, a particularly dangerous, because vulnerable, site of

possible penetration. To the extent that the female body is a primary sign and manifestation of male honour (whether of father or husband), and, indeed, a man's most valuable source of cultural capital, the danger of penetration threatens him as much as it does her. The seeming intractability of the shame dilemma rests on this crucial imperative for men to keep their female "property" inviolate. As with Lucretia in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, the pollution of the wife is a deadly offense to her husband and to her entire kin group. This, then, is another variation of the paradox of the virgin martyr (and, by extension, the courtly lady). To a radical degree, she stands outside the social and familial bonds of male ownership that both protect her honour and constrain her to the shame dilemma in the first place. In this way, she is able to exercise (perhaps limited) authority and to transcend inherent female shame. But she must still remain inviolate, and in a more extreme way than the chaste wife: she must be completely detached even from licit sexuality, always desired but never desiring. And, as a consequence, she also occupies a radically unstable position, perpetually threatened by rape and physical violence.

In the *Franklin's Tale*, Chaucer brings together, with some variation, nearly every motif associated with female shame considered thus far: Dorigen is the supremely inaccessible object of desire, but she is also the devoted wife who faces death as the only alternative to bringing shame on herself and her husband, and, like Criseyde and Emelye, she is coerced at every possible juncture in the narrative in such a way as to emphasize the problem of will and intention in the pursuit and defense of honour. And then, despite the array of potential *demandes*

*d'amours* one might anticipate in light of these familiar tensions—not only, who is most free, but also, is Dorigen guilty, is her promise binding, is Arveragus right to hand over his wife?—Chaucer instead imagines an answer to the question, what is necessary in order to escape this dilemma altogether? At two crucial points in the story, the onus for fulfilling this imaginative exercise falls on Arveragus: first of all, in renouncing *maistrie* when he gains “possession” of his courtly lady, and, secondly, when he renounces his honour-bound ownership altogether in sending Dorigen to Aurelius. Arveragus’s response to Dorigen’s confession is interesting in this regard, for he first advises her to keep her promise to Aurelius and asserts “trouthe,” which itself can be understood as honour, as “the hyeste thing that man may kepe” (1479)—that is, a man is only as good as his word; he then forbids Dorigen “up peyne of deeth” (1481) ever to tell anyone of her intended adultery, presumably for the sake of defending his honour, but goes so far as to arrange for her safe conduct to her rendez-vous with Aurelius. Arveragus thus suggests, first of all, a significant re-valuation of the concept of honour, from one that is based primarily or even solely on the maintenance of female sexual purity (this is the one that Dorigen herself is working out of as she recalls the good women of antiquity) to one that recognizes the importance of values that transcend sexual purity—faithfulness to one’s word, for example, or even trust that Dorigen has not nor will be truly unfaithful to him in mind if not in body. Arveragus’s resignation of honour is not something that he achieves without some torment; he does not, that is, deliberately flout the laws of purity and honour because he just does not care or because Dorigen is not important to



him; hence the disturbing death threat. He is willing to grant Dorigen “maistrie” in the sense that he relinquishes control over her body, but he is unable to go so far as to embrace complete shamelessness by having his cuckoldry “red and songe.”

Within the fantastic world of the Breton lai, therefore, the *Franklin's Tale* imagines the possibility of *undoing* the essential conflation of physical and spiritual purity as the husband's choice to relinquish ownership over his wife's body, and to face the shame of her violation in way that parallels the “violation” of the rapist-knight in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. In both, the ethical alternative to shame seems to demand the willingness on the part of men in particular to expose themselves utterly and completely to shame—self-sacrifice in which the self is understood as constituted by honour—in order to relieve the burden of female shame. If Dorigen's role in this ethical re-alignment is marginal, it is because her role as a woman in the world of male honour is marginal. Women are not here called upon to uphold or challenge male honour; neither is the dilemma Dorigen faces one “she has created for herself” (Edwards 216), but one created by violent imperatives of honour and shame. If, traditionally, women have been blamed for shame-producing betrayal and fickleness, as Criseyde was, here, the responsibility for resolving the shame or death dilemma falls, as it ought, on male shoulders. When Aurelius tells Dorigen, “I se wel youre distresse, / That him were levere han shame,” it is indeed true that Dorigen's agency is being effaced as her distress is seen only as expression of her husband's shame, but that is precisely the

problem of shame ethics that the tale ends up undoing.<sup>15</sup> In other words, unlike the Wife of Bath, Dorigen's agency is *not* the issue precisely because she is an innocent victim here: she has literally *done nothing* to earn the potential shame she faces, as an adulteress and the cause of her husband's dishonour.

But the implications of the undoing of the conflation of moral and physical purity are as shocking to us as they are to Arveragus. While he threatens violence if she should tell, contemporary readers will likely balk at any reading that seems to diminish the gravity of Dorigen's possible rape. But the point is not to diminish the seriousness of rape as a form of violence against women; rather, the issue is to contend with the representation of rape as problematic *only* insofar as it constitutes a shameful pollution of the woman herself—and her husband, her family, their names. Chaucer does *not* present us with an actual rape and then suggest that it is a positive thing because Dorigen is able to retain the purity of her will. Rather, Arveragus's renunciation of *maistrie*, of honour-bound ownership, effects *mimetically* the renunciation of maistrie and possession by *all* of the characters in the tale. Aurelius renounces his own specious claim on Dorigen's body, and the philosopher forgives Aurelius's debt to him for creating the illusion that entrapped her.

In other words, Arveragus's renunciation of *maistrie*, as pained and imperfect as it is, amounts to the inauguration of grace, which sets off a kind of

---

<sup>15</sup> This is a point that Francine McGregor makes in her discussion of "ambiguity" and "agency" in relation to this passage: "Dorigen's agency is tenuous at best at this point. And her importance is subsumed under Arveragus's suffering and the apparent generosity of the two men" (370). Even more starkly, Elaine Tuttle Hansen asserts: Dorigen "is not violated or dishonoured at the end; instead, she is alleged to suffer great emotional distress from which she can be released only by male decisions that clearly put her in her place; . . . she is to be chivalrously rescued from humiliation and abasement by the proper intervention of her husband and the chain reaction of male virtue he sets in motion" (273).

chain reaction that carries the narrative to a conclusion in which no real obstacle has been overcome, and no one's situation has been fundamentally altered. Because there is no sacrificial purge, there is also no victory and no clear sense of progressing from one state to another. Precisely because the economy of sacrifice reflects a deep-seated human desire for propitiation—payment in blood just *feels* right, as though some powerful cosmic demand for justice has been fulfilled at long last; in this, at least, Nietzsche is partly right—this is how the forswearing of revenge and the forgiveness of debts often feels: anti-instinctive, anti-climactic, even unsatisfying. Reconciliation *without* violence is not cathartic like a heroic tragedy; in narrative, therefore, it can seem structurally problematic and relatively uninteresting. Thus we find more than one critic who seems a little let down that Dorigen does not carry out her suicide threat, quite piqued that Arveragus willingly faces the prospect of dishonour by sending his wife into the arms of another man, and altogether disbelieving when Aurelius renounces his claim on her.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> On the first of these elements, that Dorigen threatens but does not carry out suicide, older critics such as Edwin Benjamin (“The Concept of Order in the *Franklin's Tale*”), Gerhard Joseph (“The *Franklin's Tale*: Chaucer's Theodicy”), and Robert Burlin (“The Art of Chaucer's Franklin”) have tended to see Dorigen and her complaint not only as hysterical but as morally suspect. At the more outrageous end of the critical spectrum, Benjamin sees evidence of Satan's influence in these “neurotic fancies of a pretty woman” (124). Similarly, Joseph calls Dorigen a “willful Eve,” while Burlin reads her “hysteria” as evidence of Chaucer's “high comic mode” (69, 64). On the second and third points, more recent scholars have criticized Chaucer's apparent complicity with a social model that treats women as objects to be exchanged between men, and thus leave no room for a non-cynical reading of the “grace” that concludes the tale. See, for example, Felicity Riddy, “Engendering Pity in the *Franklin's Tale*”; Elaine Tuttle Hansen, “Making Ernest of Game,” in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 267-92.

“Damages without nombre”: Mimetic Rivalry, Melibee’s Honour, and  
Prudence’s Remedy

Before we are in a position to evaluate the aesthetic merits of grace, and in order to deepen our understanding of the mimetic grace that shapes the happy endings of the *Wife of Bath* and *Franklin’s Tales*, we must turn to the *Tale of Melibee*, that “litel thing in prose,” told by Chaucer the pilgrim himself (937). For it is here that Chaucer makes explicit, which is to say, discursively rather than poetically, the theological and philosophical assumptions that underlie the structures of reciprocity and forgiveness that shape his romance tales. Aside from the *Parson’s Tale*, the *Melibee* is the tale most often considered dull and difficult to read. While the *Franklin’s Tale* has enjoyed great popularity in spite of the fact that its resolution strains the credulity of some, Chaucer’s faithful translation of Renaud de Louens’s *Livre de Mellibee* (1337), an abridgement of Albertano of Brescia’s thirteenth-century treatise *Liber consolationis et consilii*, has not fared well in Chaucer criticism. Indeed, one might be inclined to revolt at the pairing of the *Wife of Bath* and the *Melibee* in a single chapter: with the *Wife*, Chaucer has managed to create, through an ironic redeployment of antifeminist clichés, one of the most “original” and lively fictional characters in medieval poetry; for many readers, any hope of novelty or liveliness fades quickly in the *Melibee* as Prudence takes the floor and begins dispensing wisdom in the form of well-worn commonplaces, utterly without irony. Carolyn Collette has observed that behind the outright dismissals and the silent neglect, one can sense that most readers of the *Melibee* “strongly suspect that something significant is going on in

it, but find themselves hard-pressed to say just what” (416). Collette suggests that this “uneasy feeling of having missed the point” results from the tale’s subtle allusions to sign systems and cultural forms of which modern readers and even most Chaucerians are unaware (416). Collette’s comments are helpful in that she pinpoints the strangely vexed position of the *Melibee* in Chaucer Studies, and yet it seems not quite accurate to attribute this position to scholarly ignorance: there have been many impressive studies that elucidate possible contexts for Chaucer’s translation, identify discourses in which he was participating and texts he may have known, particularly in relation to the pressing political crises of the period.<sup>17</sup> Rather, it seems that critics have not missed *what* the *Melibee* is saying, for the tale has been analyzed and anatomized as thoroughly as any, and it is generally agreed that the content of the *Melibee* is made up of well-known proverbs and moral lessons about the importance of *pacience* and the dangers of vengeance-

---

<sup>17</sup> In this vein, several extremely helpful articles have been produced. See, for example, R. F. Yeager, “*Pax Poetica: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower*,” who points out that the tale expresses a characteristically fourteenth-century disillusionment with chivalric and military ideals and with the Hundred Years War, a disillusionment shared by Lollard pacifists. For an extended discussion of fourteenth-century anti-militarism, see Ben Lowe, *Imagining Peace: A History of Early English Pacifist Ideas 1340-1560*. Lowe makes several observations on the differences between French and English attitudes towards war and chivalry that are consonant with Yeager’s (and my) reading of Chaucer as skeptical of chivalry and profoundly critical of state- and church-sanctioned violence. For instance, Lowe makes a strong case for the relative “indifference” of the English toward papal and imperial politics (William of Ockham notwithstanding), and England’s comparatively “modest” contribution to the crusades (26, 30). The sense that the Church’s basic moral and spiritual authority had been seriously compromised by the crusades, especially for many in England, is also clear in the *Confessio Amantis*, where Gower lambastes clerical corruption, and argues that violence does not convert non-believers but effectively makes them enemies of Christ (2481-546).

On the immediate political context for the *Melibee*, see also Lynn Staley Johnson, “Inverse Counsel: Contexts for the *Melibee*.” Staley draws a parallel between Chaucer’s choice to translate Renaud and the controversies of the 1380s around the king’s authority and his inner circle of advisors. Carolyn Collette (“Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the *Melibee*”) reads the tale in connection with a group of texts designed to instruct aristocratic women, especially in their role as mediators. Collette argues that Chaucer’s tale participates in a discourse that sought to develop the virtue of prudence as a specifically female virtue, exercised in service of “marriage, in order to attain desired goals, a science of patience and indirection, of self-effacement and strict control of emotion” (421).

taking. But because the tale simply reproduces this conventional material in a seemingly uncritical and unremarkable way, the question that often remains is *why* it was important to have it said at all *here*, in the middle of the pilgrimage to Canterbury. In considering the question of “why,” I want to focus primarily on the tale’s thematic links with the Wife of Bath and the Franklin, but also with the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Jill Mann has called the *Tale of Melibee* “a keystone in the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*” (*Feminizing Chaucer* 95) because of its emphasis on patience as a specifically feminine virtue. I agree that, thematically, and because it is the only tale successfully told by Geoffrey the pilgrim, the *Melibee* offers important insight into Chaucer’s overall vision in the *Canterbury Tales*; I also agree that women and the virtues they embody are central to this vision. But I think that the *Melibee*’s relationship to the rest of the *Tales*, and, crucially, to the *Parson’s Tale*, is best understood in terms of its most explicit theme: the forgoing of vengeance and the forgiveness of debt or injury. I want to argue that, in the context of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, Chaucer chose to translate the *Livre de Melibee* in prose, without any of the distancing techniques or playfulness he demonstrates with his sources elsewhere, to present in unambiguous terms the role of mimetic desire in human competition, the dangers of vengeance and reciprocity, and the need for grace and forgiveness. In this regard, the *Melibee* does not represent a departure from the tales that precede or follow it, but rather hammers home these central themes with a different kind of clarity and generic focus. That Chaucer does so by relying on source material and conventional wisdom is not particularly remarkable: we have been tracing the

way in which, from the *House of Fame* onward, Chaucer's engagement with the themes of honour and shame is persistently tied up with his self-reflexive representation of the poet in relation to *auctoritee*, the poet as reader and transmitter. But the comprehensiveness and the serious, objective tone of the *Melibee* mean that it can be used as a kind of lens that sharpens and clarifies the emphasis on reciprocity and the forgoing of revenge in other tales as well.

In Geoffrey's *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the Thopas-Melibee link, we find the familiar strategy by which Chaucer sets up his call for humility and his rejection of the value of honour by foregrounding his own "shame," his own foibles or insignificance, particularly when it comes to his ability and achievement as a poet. The Host invites Geoffrey to tell his tale by mocking his timidity and his appearance, and Geoffrey responds with *Sir Thopas*, a parody of Middle English popular romances in tail-rhyme. Chaucer's parody of romance is a caricature as clear as the Gawain-poet's is subtle: it runs a veritable gamut of romantic excess and cliché. Indeed, Geoffrey's version of chivalric romance is so over-the-top that the Host, who is not always the most discerning listener, interrupts him because he cannot bear to hear any more of Geoffrey's "drasty speche" (923). When Geoffrey asks him why and protests that it is the best he can produce, the Host is merciless: "Thy drasty rhyming is nat worth a tord! / Thow doost noght ellis but despendest time" (930-31). The irony of the master poet subjecting himself to the critique and disdain of his own fictional characters has been noted and appreciated many times. But, to be sure, any humility implied in this metafictional moment is ironic, too, for Chaucer uses his "drasty speche" precisely to showcase his poetic

virtuosity. As E. G. Stanley has observed, “no writer of Middle English stanzaic verse shows such versatile technical mastery as Chaucer does in the Prologue and Tale of *Sir Thopas*—to demonstrate his incompetence” (426). Nonetheless, Chaucer’s dramatization of his inability to perform in a way that will please his audience, and the subsequent necessity of abandoning the attempt in favour of a prose translation, highlights the objectivity of the truth that he is attempting to convey in the *Melibee* in a powerful paradox, in and through the purposely subjectivized, multi-vocal narrative he is constructing: as the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has been literally putting words into the mouths of his pilgrims, but, when he enters the fictional world he has created, he is silenced, and must instead transmit the words of someone else. If the rapist-knight in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* finds grace by inhabiting the position of the woman he has victimized, here, Chaucer envisions his own role reversal—what Mann calls his own “surrender of *maistrie*” (99)—as the ground from which poetic truth emerges.

Also significant is the fact that Geoffrey introduces his “mirye tale” with a disclaimer that distinguishes between the external variables of a story and its inner substance or meaning—its “sentence.” This disclaimer is made ostensibly to preempt any further complaints from the audience, in this case, that Geoffrey does not tell the tale exactly as others tell it: I realize that you have heard this tale before, Geoffrey says in effect, that it has been told “in sondry wise / Of sondry folk” (941-42), and yet there is still a lesson to be learned, though I’m merely re-telling it now in my own limited way. That this process of re-telling does not corrupt the



value of the story itself, Geoffrey establishes by referring to an authority far above that of the poet:

. . . that every evaungelist  
 That telleth us the peine of Jesu Crist  
 Ne seyth nat alle thing as his felawe dooth;  
 But nathelees hir sentence is al sooth,  
 . . .  
 Whan they his pitous passioun expresse—  
 I mene of Mark, Mathew, Luk, and John—  
 But doutelees, hir sentence is al oon. (943-52)

This notion prefigures the Parson's distinction between the chaff of "fables" and the wheat of religious "sentence" in the prologue that introduces the other supposedly dull and moralizing tale in the collection. It also recalls Geoffrey's earlier reference to the narrative techniques of the gospel writers in the *General Prologue*, in which he defends his frank speech in representing the pilgrims as modeled on Christ's speech, for he spoke "ful brode in holy writ" (GP 739). In each instance, Chaucer draws our attention to a slightly different aspect of the nature of truth in language and in poetry, but all three disclaimers indicate the existence of an inner kernel of meaning that maintains its integrity regardless of who is speaking and the manner in which the speaker adorns or conveys that meaning. At the same time, in each instance, we are being given a kind of apology for the way in which Geoffrey, and, implicitly, Chaucer, and then the Parson, use the words of others: in this sense, these are moments of explicit self-reflexivity, which draw attention to the process of literary inheritance and discernment that are so characteristic of Chaucerian poetics in general. These moments, therefore, connect the voice of Geoffrey the narrator, and tales of the Melibee and the Parson,

to the perspective of Chaucer the poet in a way that is unique in the *Canterbury Tales*.

It is significant, therefore, that in the tale told by Geoffrey himself, the main action revolves around the crucial moment in which a man decides how to respond to an affront that has reduced his stock of honour. The entire tale can be seen as revisiting the way in which cycles of reciprocity are broken in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale*: through careful expansion and explanation, the *Melibee* sheds light on how mimetic grace operates in these tales and in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole—what kind of decision is being made when, for instance, Arveragus accepts the dishonour of his potential cuckoldry. While, in the *Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen is made vulnerable to Aurelius's advances because she is pining for her absent husband, similarly, in the *Melibee*, harm comes to Melibee's wife Prudence and daughter Sophia while he is away from home: we are told that Melibee is young, rich, and powerful, and that "he for his desport is went into the feeldes him to pleye" (2). Intruders enter the house through the windows, beat his wife and inflict five mortal wounds on his daughter.<sup>18</sup> When Melibee returns to find his home violated and his family

---

<sup>18</sup> The significance of these five wounds is somewhat confused in Chaucer's version. In Albertano's treatise, the daughter is wounded in each of her five senses, which can be read allegorically in terms of the idea that Melibee's wisdom has been deaf, blind, etc. The general consensus is that Renaud conflated these five wounds with the five wounds of Christ and thus mistranslated "eyes" for "feet." Working from Renaud, Chaucer retains this error, but he also names the daughter Sophia, thereby emphasizing the allegorical significance of the wounds and adding to the confusion. The slip does not end up affecting the *Melibee* in any significant way, however, because Chaucer quickly abandons the allegorical dimension of his sources in order to stress the proverbial elements of good counsel, patience, and non-violence. Another vestige of the allegory which causes some confusion is the point at which Prudence informs Melibee that the

injured, he is utterly distraught. Prudence's cool, stoical response to Melibee's weeping establishes the dynamic that marks their dialogue through the entire tale: hers is the voice of reason and moderation, and one which sounds very much like that of Boethius's *Philosophy*, and his is the voice of unbridled emotion and unthinking reaction.

The counsel that Melibee convenes on Prudence's advice, to help him decide on a course of action in response to his enemies, recalls January's counsel in the *Merchant's Tale*: "what men say" varies widely, some of it is true and some of it is false, much of it is self-interested, but the communal negotiation of truth is scuttled from the outset because Melibee, like January, goes into the discussion with his mind already made up. He indicates to his counselors what he wants to hear, and then waits for confirmation of his own view:

And whan this folk togidre assembled weren, this Melibeus in sorweful wise shewed hem his cas. And by the manere of his speche it semed that in herte he baar a cruel ire, redy to doon vengeaunce upon his foom, and sodeinly desired that the were sholde biginne, but natheles yet axed he hir conseil upon this matere. (1008-10)

The surgeons say that it is their job to heal those injured in war, not to advocate war; the physicians argue that, since maladies are cured by their contraries, "right so shal men warisshe werre by vengeaunce" (1017). Melibee's envious neighbours, false friends and flatterers tell him exactly what he wants to hear, and they speak as a group, but the wise counselor speaks on his own and advises Melibee to wait and to deliberate carefully before taking vengeance. Similarly, the young and hot-headed jump up together and yell in unison "Werre, werre!"

---

three intruders are to be understood as the flesh, the world, and the devil (1421)—but then advocates peaceful reconciliation with them.

(1036), but the perspective of the old men is voiced by one who reminds everyone of the cost of war (1041). We are, in other words, clearly and firmly in the realm of the proverbial: the wisdom of age and of the few, the folly of youth and of the mob, the dangers of flattery, and the time-tested maxim that “good conseil wanteth whan it is moost nede” (1048).

When all the men have finished talking, the consensus appears to be that Melibee ought to make war on his enemies. And, as when Prudence allowed Melibee to vent his grief before instructing him on the proper way to grieve, here, too, she waits until “she say hir time,” listening quietly until the farce of a debate has come to a close (1051). When she does speak, Prudence counsels specifically against “quiting,” the same term used throughout the pilgrimage to describe the one-upmanship at work in the storytelling competition, here used to denote vengeance in general. But Melibee refuses to heed Prudence’s advice because, as he says, he will be held a fool if he is seen to act on the counsel of his wife. Again, the precise wording is important in that it echoes so clearly the power struggles described by the Wife of Bath: “And also, certes, if I governed me by thy conseil, it sholde seme that I hadde yeve to thee over me the maistrie, and Goddes forbode that it so were!” (1058). What ensues is a lengthy debate between them on the virtues of women, in which Prudence must establish her authority and thus her right to give advice in the first place, before Melibee will listen to her about the folly of vengeance. Melibee rehearses the standard antifeminist arguments familiar to us from the Wife of Bath but also from January’s

counselors in the *Merchant's Tale*, and Prudence refutes each of them logically and definitively, but also calmly and with “gret pacience” (1064).

The fact that Chaucer yokes the question of vengeance to the question of women and their worth is significant, as it is one of his few innovations regarding his source material. As both Delores Palomo (“What Chaucer Really Did”) and Carolyn Collette (“Heeding the Counsel of Prudence”) have shown, as we move from Albertano to Renaud to Chaucer, we can see a steady progression from Prudence as a purely allegorical figure (much like Lady Philosophy), who speaks on a wide range of intellectual and political topics, to Prudence as a much more domesticated figure, a wife who is concerned primarily with her husband’s and her family’s welfare rather than with formal philosophy and matters of state. But this characterization, far from inscribing prudence as a private and gender-specific virtue, a “female science of actions within human relations” (Collette 421), in fact establishes as a model for men *and* women to imitate a distinctly feminine ethics of forbearance and patience, but, even more importantly, of forgiveness—privately *and* politically. The defeat of antifeminism is thus the *prerequisite* for understanding and embodying the capacity to forgive and to be gracious, much as it is in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*.<sup>19</sup> Here and throughout Chaucer’s poetry, antifeminism is emblematic of the human propensity for blaming and

---

<sup>19</sup> Celia Daileader has pointed out the similar role played by antifeminist discourse for both the Wife of Bath and the Melibee in an article that supports my discussion here: “The Thopas-Melibee Sequence and the Defeat of Antifeminism.” Daileader performs an insightful comparison of the two tales and argues that “Chaucer’s apparent concern with the problem of feminine discourse and its repression by men inspires him to create two outspoken woman characters whose strategies against misogyny and misogynist violence effectively complement each other. . . . In this way the Thopas-Melibee sequence, operating on the echoes of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, allows Chaucer not merely to challenge the antifeminist patristic tradition, with its hermeneutic of sexual violence, but actually to uproot the very concept of a unified patriarchal authority” (27).

scapegoating, and thus for evading responsibility and for violence. Melibee's "cruel ire" and his intense, blinding desire to "wreke him on his foos" (1051) is part and parcel of his fear of being a "fool" in submitting to a woman. In both cases, he understands human relations purely in terms of competition, of "quiting": one must either rule or be ruled. Prudence counters this vision by arguing that she acts not for her own sake, not to increase her power and honour at his expense, but for him, and for what is "good and profitable" in general (1109).

At long last, Melibee is won over, and the second phase of his education can begin. The next section thus presents Prudence's discourse on the nature of good counsel, and her argument that Melibee's counsel was in fact "a moeving of folye" (1239). Prudence lectures Melibee on the failures of his own counsel, but the ultimate significance of her discourse touches on the issue of discernment in the quest for truth—the very question that Geoffrey alludes to in his opening disclaimer about distinguishing the "sentence" or core meaning of a text. The ability to receive good counsel is the ability to discern the proper course of action from an array of choices or suggestions. The plurality of voices and perspectives that constitute the counsel of a great man is analogous to the plurality of voices that constitute *auctoritee* for the poet, but also the social, historical negotiations by which truth and knowledge are established for all. In this way, the representation of contending voices in Melibee's counsel recalls the many parliaments in Chaucer's poetry, a word which has its roots in "parler," to speak, but specifically in the sense of an assembly gathered for a certain purpose. In the

*House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the *Canterbury Tales*, the matter of the poem is conveyed by means of an assembly of voices (poetic, avian, social), in which difference is encountered and negotiated through speech—not necessarily to affirm the equal truth of all that is said, but in a way that presents the poet as much as the reader with the task of discerning which voice or voices to believe. Often, for Chaucer, the diversity of voices is not an end in itself to be celebrated, but an unavoidable fact and a challenge to overcome in the process of discovering truth.<sup>20</sup>

The counsel of Melibee re-enacts this process in miniature, but accompanies it with Prudence's commentary as a kind of interpretive key. According to Prudence, discernment depends first of all upon a particular moral orientation: a man cannot receive good counsel, and thus cannot ascertain the truth, if he is angry, covetous, or hasty, because each of these obstructs the course of truth in its own way (1121-36). Secondly, one must take into consideration the source and thus the possible psychological motivations of one's counselors. This is why Prudence advocates that Melibee keep his own opinion a secret when he is soliciting advice in the same section as when she tells him to avoid the counsel of flatterers, fools, the wicked and the young (1138-99): in each case the point is to be aware of how the self-interest of others can affect the "truth" they offer, just as

---

<sup>20</sup> As I have pointed out, the assemblies in the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Melibee* come to faulty conclusions by means of communal negotiation. Similarly, the discourse of the birds in the *Parliament of Fowles* is actually a digression from the business at hand, a debate which reaches no decision at all, and which Nature shuts down by calling everyone back to order. And in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the parliament of Troy makes the profoundly bad decision to exchange Criseyde (who was not even a prisoner) for Antenor (who, with Aeneas, will open the gates to the Greeks). In short, in Chaucer's world, parliamentary assemblies certainly allow diverse folk to say diverse things, but they do not, necessarily, achieve wisdom thereby.

much as one's own ire and envy affect the truth one is willing to accept. The uniting factor in all these potential obstacles is self-interest, or rather the failure to set aside one's own self-centered desire. The challenge for Melibee is not unlike the challenge for the Wife's knight in that he, too, must find a way to imagine himself beyond his own self-interest—and here, too, it is a process rather long in coming to fruition. Thus, when Prudence asks Melibee to examine the counsel he has received from the physicians, he fails to detect the contradiction between the analogy and the moral they draw from it, but rather hears in it what he wants to hear: “for right as they han venged hem on me and doon me wrong, right so I shal venge me upon hem and doon hem wrong, / and thanne have I cured oon contrarye by another” (1279-80). Prudence's correction goes to the heart of the mimetic rivalry in which Melibee is embroiled and beyond which he cannot see, stressing the violence of sameness and reciprocity:

“Lo, lo!” quod dame Prudence, “how lightly is every man enclined to his owene desir and to his owene plesaunce! / . . . for certes, wikkednesse is nat contrarye to wikkednesse, ne vengeance to vengeance, ne wrong to wrong, but they ben semblable. / And therefore o vengeance is nat warished by another vengeance, ne o wrong by another wrong, / but everich of hem encreseth and aggreggeth oother.” (1281-87)

What Prudence spells out here is the Girardian insight that violence is ultimately a product of mimesis rather than of difference and opposition, but also the sense in which to recognize ourselves in our enemies—the fact that our acts of self-defense simply mirror what appears to us as aggression—runs counter to our instincts. This is an irony that Girard is fond of pointing out: that we feel most at odds with and most different from our opponents when we are engaged in struggle with them, and yet it is precisely at this moment when we are most alike.



Prudence teaches Melibee that peace is found only when we can overcome the instinct toward mimesis in violence and seek true difference instead: “But certes, wikkednesse shal be warisshed by goodnesse, discord by accord, werre by pees” (1290). Moreover, Prudence’s reference to “Seint Poul” in the next line, in light of Geoffrey’s opening reference to the gospel writers, suggests that such difference does not emerge spontaneously but, for Chaucer as for Girard, such difference is the result of non-violent mimesis, the imitation of Christ.

Judith Ferster reads the *Melibee* as a meditation on “the choice between accepting advice from outside sources and maintaining one’s own boundaries,” but also argues that this choice ultimately represents an unresolved paradox between individual identity and the meaning of texts (19). Ferster writes further, “as the story unfolds its lesson about mercy, the right use of power, and the abjuring of violence, it also shows that it is impossible to avoid impinging on others. Melibee cannot be entirely separate from the world” (21). And yet it seems that the choice *not* to accept advice from outside sources is never entertained in the tale as a viable option; rather, Melibee’s instinct to “maintain his boundaries,” to be impermeable to views and perspectives different from his own, is presented in purely negative terms, as nothing other than a lack of reflection, a lack of maturity, and a lack of wisdom. Prudence’s “principle of maintaining the integrity of the self” (Ferster 21) does not depend on keeping the boundaries between self and other untrampled, but rather upon the exercise of discernment, of the ability to “read” the various perspectives on offer, to reflect on them critically, and to judge their relative value, which is a process that posits the self primarily in terms

of its capacity for rational, “disembodied,” moral judgement, and thus one that does not bear on materially conceived boundaries at all. This process of discernment is thus a cognitive process of continually moving between one’s own perspective and the imagined perspective of the other: it is not a paradox so much as a challenge of ceaselessly *balancing* individual identity (desires, needs, fears, experiences) with the needs and views of others.

Consequently, in the section concerning the counsel of Melibee’s envious neighbours and flatterers, counselling him that he ought to avenge himself on his enemies, Prudence does not advocate a closing off to “outside sources,” but promotes a rational analysis of and thus engagement with them. In her refutation of their counsel, Prudence draws on Cicero and Seneca, and focuses on two main points: the cost of vengeance and the need for penitence in its stead. The cost of vengeance she identifies is, again, made up of well-known sentiments both medieval and classical, but it is important because it is the clearest philosophical articulation of anti-violence in the *Canterbury Tales*, and a crucial point linking the tale and the collection as a whole to Chaucer’s concern with honour systems and shame ethics. She begins by pointing out the fact that violence begets violence, and that Melibee’s choice to make war on his enemies will only bring more harm to him, in that it will establish a blood feud that he, a man with only one daughter and few kinsmen, cannot hope to win. The possibility of a blood feud that is carried on from one generation to the next evokes the sense of a proliferation of violence without end, and Prudence stresses the unpredictable, uncontrollable nature of such rivalries. Vengeance differs from lawful retribution

in this regard: legal judgments conclude a dispute, but vengeance produces mimetically only more and more vengeance, “damages without nombre of whiche we be nat waar as at this time” (1389). A wise man avoids sparking cycles of violence that spiral out of his control, that create scenarios in which violence becomes a fate, for it is precisely these scenarios that render free choice and thoughtful reflection problematic.

The remedy for Melibee’s deep-seated desire for vengeance is, of course, penitence, a course of action Prudence recommends as a result of considering the difference “causes” of his predicament; for, she concludes, he is partially to blame for the attack, “for which defautes God hath suffred yow have this tribulacioun” (1495). Indignant outrage belongs only to the totally innocent and, to paraphrase the Wife, January, and Melibee himself, that is not him. The larger point here is not to become embroiled in questions of theodicy—if Melibee suffers because he deserves it, what of Prudence’s and Sophia’s suffering?—but rather to return to the question of perfectionism and its connection to honour and shame. For Melibee’s desire for vengeance assumes that the boundaries of an ideal order have been transgressed, and so material steps must be taken if that order is to resume its proper shape: Melibee’s anger is not a reaction to the injustice of innocent suffering, but to the insult of being attacked and thus diminished. On this point, Prudence’s response echoes the Green Knight’s to Gawain: “be not so gryndel.” She argues that punishment should be meted out “by the lawe” (1529) to ensure the functioning of a safe and just social order, but that Melibee, a private individual, ought to show mercy and forgive his enemies. Melibee, however—and

recalling Gawain—objects that forgiveness can only be a sign of shame: “wol ye thanne that I go and meke me and obeye me to hem and crye hem mercy? For soothe, that were nat my worship!” (1685). Any reading that attempts to see the “prudence” of Prudence, her embodiment of the ideals of patience, self-denial, and compassion, inscribed as a specifically female virtue must somehow account for the fact that Melibee is here called upon, and eventually submits, to embrace the shame of violation and humiliation so that room can be made for grace and forgiveness. Indeed, Melibee “converts” to Prudence’s vision at long last, and then only under some duress precisely because what is being emphasized is the painful metamorphosis of shame, a transformation that requires a kind of forfeiting of one’s identity, at least as that identity is conceived in terms of one’s honour.

But convert he does, in part because he can offer no satisfactory refutation of Prudence’s patient, methodical, and dispassionate argumentation, and in part because his wife “bigan . . . to maken semblant of wrathe” when he persists in his misguided opinion (1687). This moment in which Prudence puts on a stern face and Melibee tries eagerly to assuage her displeasure recalls other moments of “tough love” between husbands and wives, such as Prosperina’s scolding of Pluto in the *Merchant’s Tale*, and, most clearly, the loathly lady’s education of the rapist knight in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*. Like the knight, Melibee’s transformation is brought about by a combination of shame and sermonizing, and his response to both sounds much like the knight’s: “. . . seyeth and conseileth me as yow liketh, for I am redy to do right as ye wol desire. / And if ye repreve me of my folye, I

am the moore holden to love yow and to preise yow” (1703-04). In both cases, the obstacle to morally right action is a kind of pride that goes hand in hand with male honour and with power, and instruction alone is not enough to break through it. The kind of shame required to “meke” Melibee (1684), to prevent a cycle of reciprocal violence, is the same in structure but very different in its purpose from the guiltless shame of Dido and Criseyde and from the chivalric shame that drives Palamon and Arcite into mindless rivalry; for the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, and the Melibee, shame is used in service of the just assignment of guilt. And yet, what Melibee is converted to is not so much a newfound understanding—if anything Melibee is even slower on the uptake than the knight is, and still wishes for non-conciliatory punishment even after he has agreed to Prudence’s counsel (1835)—as it is a new willingness to suffer the shame of diminishment. This willingness does not suggest that it the violation itself is right and just, but asserts, instead, that it is a crime that reflects the criminals’ need for forgiveness rather than Melibee’s need to regain his honour: recognizing the violation in terms of guilt emphasizes the lack on the part of the violators rather than the lack on the part of the victim.

## Conclusion

The *Tale of Melibee* concludes with precisely the same kind of mimetic proliferation of grace and forgiveness with which the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* and the *Franklin’s Tale* conclude. Here, again, the formerly powerful but now shamed figure chooses to forgo retaliation in favour of letting go of honour:

it is a movement that does not impose a solution on an ethical dilemma, but one that holds back the instinct to lash out in self-defense and vengeance. It is not an act that necessarily puts everything right or everything in its place, but rather an act that restrains from the attempt to do so—an act that *refrains* from meting out just deserts. And it is this holding back that opens up a new kind of ethical space, a space that allows for similar movement on the part of his enemies. When Melibee's enemies hear Prudence's call to "greet repentaunce" they are "ravished" (1734) by her words, and while the word in this context clearly indicates they are awed and enraptured by her eloquence and intellect, there is also the sense in which they experience a similar, transformative diminishment to the knight who ravishes maidens but now faces "ravishment" by the loathly lady, and to Melibee, whose spatially conceived portion of honour has been penetrated and thus "ravished" by his enemies. Rather than enacting a mimetic contagion of violence, therefore, Melibee's choice to forgo violence results in contagious grace, as his enemies immediately express "greet contricioun and humilitee" about their trespasses and, in response to Prudence's discourse of peace and forgiveness, similarly become "debonaire and meke" (1740). Their willingness to expose themselves to Melibee's wrath, in turn, produces a gracious response. In another of Chaucer's significant additions to the story, Melibee's closing speech constitutes a model for reconciliation that explicitly opposes the code of honour and the desire for vengeance against the Christian ideal of forgiving as we are forgiven, and it effectively *becomes* a prayer of penitence in its final lines:

"Wherfore I receive yow to my grace, / and foryeve yow outrely alle the offenses, injuries, wronges that ye have doon agein me and mine, / to this

effect and to this ende, that God of his endeless mercy / wole at the time  
of oure dyinge foyeven us oure giltes that we han trespassed in the sighte  
of our Lord God / he is so free and merciable / that he wole foyeven us  
oure giltes, / and bringen us to the blisse that nevere hath ende." Amen.  
(1881-87)

Chaucer thus emphasizes the centrality of penitence in his response to the problem of vengeance in a way that is unique among the tale's source and analogues. The *Melibee*, the pilgrim Geoffrey's only complete contribution to the storytelling competition, represents the gracious alternative to mimetic rivalries that spread uncontrollably as a perpetual turning inward in penitence, an ever-mindfulness of one's own guilt and responsibility, which replaces the perpetual desire to weigh and measure one's worth in comparison with others. What we are beginning to see, moreover, is that this is a moral vision that Chaucer presents consistently, in tales that otherwise seem to have little in common in terms of tone and genre. All of Chaucer's power brokers, from the Wife herself, to the noble example of *gentilesse* in Arveragus, to the wealthy but hot-headed Melibee, are confronted by the limits of their own power and thus the fragility of their own honour. Whether this fragility is accepted with calm rationality and good humour or with anger and retaliation is what determines the moral possibilities for all the other characters in the world of the tale, whether they are constrained to a fate of violence or set free from the oppressive bondage of shame.

Chapter Seven: "Is ther no grace?" The Economy of Sacrifice in Chaucerian  
Hagiography

Chaucer's Good Women

In Chaucer's representation of pagan antiquity, honour and shame correspond to a man-made fate that holds sway only because the characters mistakenly believe it is divinely ordained. These narratives are locked into what Visser calls the "diagrammatic" metaphors of chivalric fatalism, in which the transcendent dimension of ethical life is undermined by a physical conception of selfhood, and in which all human beings, but especially women such as Dido and Criseyde, are threatened with the impossible choice of shame or death. In this context, attempts to find creative, alternative ethical possibilities register only as faint glimmers of hope between the lines, and are consummately defeated by the demand for sacrifice: Dido's suicide, Criseyde's exile and disgrace, Arcite's death. In his (romantic) response to romance, Chaucer presents the remedy for sacrificial violence in terms of mimetic grace, in the establishment of an essentially self-denying model of imitation: men and women are here called to renounce their claims to *maistrie* in favour of a mutually re-inforcing forgoing of reciprocity and revenge. But what of the sacrifices made to the true God of medieval Christianity? One possible implication of Fradenburg's Nietzschean reading of the *Knight's Tale* as expressive of medieval sacrificial logic is that we cannot really distinguish between shame and guilt ethics in terms of the difference between the desire for mastery and the discipline of self-denial because in reality both necessitate the violence of sacrifice.



And, indeed, as we move from the world of chivalry to the world of Christian hagiography, the spiritual purchase of laying down one's life is only intensified. Similarly, Chaucer's dramatization of his own culpability as the teller of tidings, who pronounces guiltless shame despite his own good intentions, concludes the "sorweful tale" of *Troilus and Criseyde*, but it also begins another poem, in the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women*. In Chapter Two, we saw how the conventional plot of the virgin martyr stories rests on the saints' choice between shame (typically, the shame of rape) and death. In the *House of Fame*, Dido also martyrs herself for love by choosing death over shame. Faced with a similar dilemma, Criseyde chooses life and agency, and is therefore consigned to the role of she who "falsed Troilus," both bearing and epitomizing the shame of all womankind (V.1053). This stark opposition, inscribed in hagiography, between shame and death—and the idea that shame is, in fact, a fate *worse* than death—is one that seems to have captured Chaucer's imagination, and it recurs throughout his works with significant frequency. The pervasive influence of Christian hagiography generally on Chaucer's thought and writing has been noted often by critics, but usually only in passing; few have explored the connections in any systematic way.<sup>1</sup> In the *Canterbury Tales*, the tales of the Man of Law, the Physician, the Prioress, and the Second Nun draw explicitly on the genre, while

---

<sup>1</sup> On the hagiographical aspects of the *Legend of Good Women*, see Sanok, "Reading Hagiographically" and Delany, *The Naked Text*. On various of the *Canterbury Tales*, see Spearing, who devotes a chapter in *Textual Subjectivity* to the *Man of Law's Tale* and compares Chaucer's Custance to the saintly heroines of the tale's sources and analogues; William Keen, "Chaucer's Imaginable Audience and the Oaths of the *Shipman's Tale*" on the relationship between hagiography and oaths; Kathryn McKinley, "*The Clerk's Tale*: Hagiography and the Problem of Lay Sanctity"; Eileen Jankowski, "Reception of Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*: Osbern Bokenham's *Lyf of S. Cyncle*"; Gail Berkeley Sherman, "Saints, Nuns, and Speech in the *Canterbury Tales*."

echoes of it can be found in the *Clerk's Tale*, in the motif of the suffering woman as a Christ-like figure. In the *Legend of Good Women*, perhaps the most maligned of Chaucer's genre hybrids, Queen Alceste demands that the poet do penance for writing *Troilus and Criseyde* by producing "a glorious legende of goode wymmen . . . / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves" (F.474-75). In response, Chaucer casts the stories of virtuous pagan women in terms of the conventions of Christian hagiography. As the God of Love says in his charge against the poet, the pagan women praised by Jerome "chose to be ded in sondry wise," some by burning, others by having their throats cut, rather than fail in chastity or fidelity, for they "were so adrad of alle shame" (F.290, 300).

But Chaucer's deployment of the motif of sacrifice is here, as it is in the *Knight's Tale*, a means of reflecting critically on the ethical value of shame. Catherine Sanok notes that "the interestingly inappropriate patronage of a Christian genre by a classical woman initiates a disjunction between the poem's form and content" ("Reading" 324). *The Golden Legend* constitutes a close analogue for Chaucer's *Legend*, but Chaucer's exemplary women are pre-Christian devotees of Venus, and martyr themselves not for the sake of consecrated virginity but for faithfulness and constancy in romantic love.<sup>2</sup> This theme is repeated again in the *Parliament of Fowls*, in yet another temple of Venus (cf. *The Knight's Tale* [1918-66]), where, as in the *House of Fame* and the *Legend*, the portraits of the erotic martyrs are notable particularly for "in what plyt they dyde" (*Parliament* 294). As in Christian hagiography, the focus is on the

---

<sup>2</sup> There some exceptions to this, such as Philomela, who does not martyr herself for love, but is simply the victim of male cruelty and violence.

details of the suffering and death, the *passio*. In the *Legend*, Chaucer follows the formal conventions of hagiography closely, constructing a series of brief and repetitive tales that celebrate an extreme example of a particular virtue, thereby reflecting the widespread medieval fascination with the genre even as he interrogates the underlying ideals that inform it. But the overall effect has not been well-received by Chaucer scholars, many of whom conclude that Chaucer left the work unfinished because even he grew tired of it. While Sheila Delany's extensive study of the poem (*The Naked Text*) stands out as an exception to the rule, most concur with Carolyn Dinshaw's dismissal of the work as "boring," its heroines "passive" and "enervated," its abrupt ending a relief (*Sexual Poetics* 86, 75).<sup>3</sup>

But what Sanok considers an "interesting" generic disjunction warrants further attention. Part of what makes Chaucer's structural choices so interesting is the fact that, in traditional hagiography, the devotional value of the individual tales rests on the recurring image of the impenetrable, impermeable virgin body that remains unassailable and immovable to the last, whether preserved intact by the virgin's saintly will alone or through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit. The affective appeal of the hagiographic form—an appeal perhaps not

---

<sup>3</sup> Delany and Dinshaw do agree, however, on the salient points that the poem is to be read ironically, as a parody of the genre, and as a deeply antifeminist text. For a similar view, see also Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*", and John Fyler, "The Legend of Good Women: Palinode and Procrustean Bed" in his *Chaucer and Ovid*. Conversely, on the importance of attending to the contradictory impulses of the genre, including those aspects which are potentially empowering for women, see Robert Mills, "Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?" See also the introduction by Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans to the volume in which Mills's essay appears, *Medieval Virginites*. For a discussion relating the gender politics of hagiography to Chaucer's work in particular, see Catherine Sanok's enormously helpful article, "Reading Hagiographically: The *Legend of Good Women* and its Feminine Audience."

immediately accessible to the modern reader—is the essence of the genre. The reader (or listener) of medieval hagiography is required to participate vicariously in the re-enactment of martyrdom: moved to pity by the suffering, to religious awe by the faith and courage of the martyr, and, by identifying through the martyr with the suffering and death of Christ, to glimpse her own salvation through such acts of purification.<sup>4</sup> The narrative of the martyr is, in its general outline, always the same because there is only one way to the kingdom of heaven: the way of Christ. The impression that the “repetition of a single narrative pattern” is “dull” and that the central virtue illustrated constitutes “a never-varying caricature” (Dinshaw 86) represents the assumptions underlying a modern aesthetic: it may be valid in itself, but it is not particularly helpful to explain the remarkable popularity of the genre in the late Middle Ages, nor to understand what Chaucer is doing in his *Legend* in particular. In other words, if the hagiographical story of the suffering woman is “the same old story” (*Sexual Poetics* 86), its familiarity did not appear to provoke weariness or boredom in medieval audiences; nor did it for Chaucer, who repeatedly turned to this basic pattern and the motif of the suffering woman as a means of conveying complex philosophical ideas, from his earliest poems to his last

On the other hand, while Christian martyrs are to provide us with examples of faithfulness for us to emulate, it is arguable that Chaucer’s erotic martyrs constitute negative examples, warning us away from venial passion and

---

<sup>4</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne has studied the readership of the saints’ lives, and points out that most collections of hagiographical texts in medieval England were produced for women in religious houses. See Wogan-Browne, “Saints’ Lives and the Female Reader.”

back into the moderation and rational desire of the garden of “noble goddesse Nature” (*Parliament* 303). And yet, in Chaucer’s *Legend*, the pathos—what makes the tales hagiographical in tone as well as structure—consists in what is construed as an essentially feminine but dangerous tendency to open oneself to another: loving, trusting, and committing oneself without reserve, in spite of the irrefutable proof of male inconstancy. This tendency is a variation of what Alcuin Blamires aptly calls the Wife of Bath’s “policy of bodily largesse” (138), and what Robert Hanning similarly identifies as the Wife’s imperative “towards gratuitous outpouring, towards undammed, unrestricted giving of words or of self” (122). Blamires too makes the connection between the Wife’s “generosity” and Dido’s, who is described in the *Legend* as “she that can in fredom passen alle” (F.1127). How we are to read such bodily largesse depends, therefore, on whether we read feminine liberality as largesse rooted in charity or as prodigality. Blamires’s discussion of the tension between charity and prodigality as it existed in medieval ethical thinking is apt here. On the one hand, medieval ethicists inherited the Aristotelian idea of virtue as the mean between two vices. On the other hand, medieval writers often

used the analogy of a great “comune” wine-cask of God’s love in eternity, giving forth so generously and inexhaustibly that everyone is filled as if to drunkenness. . . . God’s largesse was the model of boundless selfless giving, of utterly un-calculating charity. . . . The moral imperative of giving uncalculatingly might be said to have been always in tension with the received reverence for liberality as a rationally guided mean. In a later period Sir Francis Bacon knowingly put in a nutshell the contradiction between Aristotelian and Christian understanding when he wrote, “In charity, there is no Excesse.” (*Chaucer, Ethics* 137)

The Wife, of course, is highly conscious of the spiritual value of such excess, and uses or misuses it to her own rhetorical advantage. But the humour generated by the more ribald facets of the Wife's generosity does not necessitate the idea that Chaucer sides with Aristotelian moderation over charitable excess in every case. The key point in the *Legend*, moreover, is that women's "incautious givingness" (*Ethics* 151) yields tragic consequences not because it is wasteful, but because men fail to reciprocate it; the key ethical problem arises, as it does in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, not out of decadence or incontinence, but in failures of mutuality and productive, non-violent reciprocity. The sense is not that we need less giving but even more, and less concern for the kind of fastidious personal and bodily integrity that is maintained through sacrifice and purgation. Thus, despite the fact that feminine "bodily largesse" contradicts the ideal of moderation in liberality, it does so in a way that parallels God's superabundant grace, which exceeds the bounds of rational human comprehension. Accordingly, it is something that strikes awe in the voice of the narrator, as both a mystery and a sheer, ineluctable force:

O sely wemen, ful of innocence,  
 Ful of pite, of trouthe and conscience,  
 What maketh yow to men to truste so?  
 Have ye swych routhe upon hyre feyned wo,  
 And han swich olde ensamples yow beforn? (F.1254-58).

One of the problems with reading irony into this passage and Chaucer's *Legend* in general is the fact that this sentiment is repeated so often in so many different contexts throughout Chaucer's work. It is the "pite" and "trouthe" of women that the narrator invokes in *Troilus*, against the weight of antifeminist

slander and Criseyde's undeniable "slydyng corage," in order to remind his readers of the historical burden of *male* inconstancy. Conflicts between womanly pity or generosity of spirit and male cruelty are, with some variation, of concern in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, where, as we have seen, the rapist-knight is given a chance to redeem himself in the court of ladies; in the *Squire's Tale*, where Canacee is overcome with pity ("verray womanly benignitee" [486]) for the falcon wronged by the tercelet; in the *Clerk's Tale*, where Griselda's unending patience overcomes Walter's tyranny; and in the *Tale of Melibee*, where Prudence's mercy overcomes Melibee's desire for vengeance.<sup>5</sup> The difference is that, in the *Legend*, women's patient and compassionate love does not triumph over men's cruelty as it so often does in the *Tales*. But that is because the dynamic in which the reader is here invited to participate echoes hagiography not only in form but in the kind of ethical orientation it encourages, by invoking pity for suffering and identification with the victim.

The ideal embodied in Chaucer's erotic martyrs, in contrast to the complete transcendence of physicality in the saints' lives, implies a profound *unity* of mind, body, and soul. While the virgin martyrs renounce femaleness—and its inherent shamefulness—for the sake of holiness (for in Christ there is neither male nor female), the "goodness" of Chaucer's women consists precisely in those aspects of femininity deemed "shameful": openness, permeability, physical and sexual weakness. These traits are re-imagined as saintly virtues that allow women to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all

---

<sup>5</sup> See Mann's discussion of Chaucer's identification with "suffering women" and "pity" as a specifically feminine trait in *Feminizing Chaucer* (especially 32-38 and 100-12).

things for the sake of the men they love.<sup>6</sup> The identification of romantic love as a figure for divine love is not unique to Chaucer in the Middle Ages; indeed, this identification has a tradition going back to the Song of Solomon. But, typically, this identification works in such a way as to use romantic or erotic language or images to convey aspects of the love between Christ and his church, for example, or between human and divine in general. In the saints' lives, the point is precisely to appropriate profane language and imagery for sacred purposes in order to *reject* entirely the profane realm in which this language originates. Thus, a frequent source of conflict is the fact that the virgin refuses to marry the man intended for her or the man who desires her because she is already betrothed to Christ, and the virgin's devotion to her saviour is often described in highly erotic terms. Against this context, then, the trope of suffering and sacrificing oneself for secular romantic love in Chaucer's *Legend* takes on a particular significance. Not only does this trope allow Chaucer to avoid the paradox of purity, in which woman avoids shame through virginal impenetrability but can only preserve her purity through death; it also constitutes an interrogation of the conception of purity itself that underlies the imperative of shame or death. But, just as the ideal of virginity rests, to some extent, on a conflation of spiritual and sexual purity, so, too, is the material and immaterial conflated here, insofar as the "sely innocence" of women and their emotional commitments to men invariably result in physical suffering: rape, mutilation, and death, self-inflicted or otherwise. While the virgin martyrs incur physical suffering as imitators (and lovers) of Christ, the redeemer who

---

<sup>6</sup> Mann makes a similar observation of the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale*, who construes female sexuality as an "inexhaustible credit": "Sex has the same careless abundance, the same inexhaustible outpouring, as God's grace" ("Satisfaction and Payment" 48).



appears in the world as a radical offense, as socially and politically beyond the pale, the suffering of good women in Chaucer's *Legend* is figured as an inevitable, even *normal*, state of affairs, given the respective natures of men and women. In both, sexual love represents a dire threat; in traditional hagiography, the truly "good" woman risks life and limb to avoid this fate worse than death; in Chaucer's *Legend*, she embraces this fate, and the shame of doing so becomes, for Chaucer, an emblem of her virtue.

In his retelling of the story of Lucrece, for example, Chaucer uses the generic disjunction between form and content to comment explicitly on the social and historical conditions that give rise to the shame dilemma. By way of emphasizing Lucrece's extreme distress and her resulting swoon in the graphic rape scene, the narrator explains,

These Romeyns wyves lovede so here name  
 At thilke tyme, and dredde so the shame,  
 That, what for fer of sclaunder and drede of deth,  
 She lost bothe at ones wit and breth,  
 And in a swogh she lay, and wex so ded  
 Men myghte smyten of hire arm or hed;  
 She feleth no thyng neyther foul ne fayr. (F.1812-18)

This passage marks Chaucer's decisive departure from Livy's version of the Lucretia story, where the mere fact of her consciousness leaves open the possibility that she might have enjoyed herself.<sup>7</sup> Augustine discusses the problem

---

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of medieval ideas about rape and women's sexuality, see Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Middle Ages* (2001). Saunders points out that rape in general, and Lucretia's rape in particular, provided a case study of the problem of human will to which theologians returned again and again. Saunders writes,

The issue of rape focuses the difficulty of discerning the truth of human will and motivation, for this truth is crucial in any assessment of the raped woman's virtue. On a theoretical level the purity of the unwilling victim of rape was absolutely held to endure; in reality it was difficult to distinguish cases where pleasure had been experienced or consent willingly given from those where spiritual resistance had been absolute. This

of rape at length in Book 1 of the *City of God* where, in theory, he affirms the innocence of the rape victim and the centrality of the will. Since “purity is a virtue of the mind,” a woman cannot be polluted by another’s lust (27). The case of Lucretia, therefore, a figure much praised for her modesty, poses a special moral problem for Augustine: how are we to reconcile her innocence with her decision to commit suicide? In Augustine’s words, “If she is adulterous, why is she praised? If chaste, why was she put to death?” (29). By way of emphasizing the sinfulness of suicide without exception, Augustine suggests the possibility that Lucretia must, on some level, have been overcome by her own desire and so consented to the act; thus, “in killing herself it was no innocent which she killed, but one conscious of guilt” (29-30).

In Chaucer’s version, however, the issue at hand is emphatically not Lucrece’s guilt but her shame. Lucrece’s swoon is Chaucer’s invention; we are told that she lay as though dead, that “She feleth no thyng neyther foul ne fayr” (1818). In this subtle but significant move, Chaucer removes the possibility of consent or that Lucrece may have enjoyed herself against her better judgment.<sup>8</sup>

---

difficulty was compounded by the belief that physical pleasure was hard to avoid, particularly for women, because of the physical and instinctive construction of desire. (97)

For a good overview of the Lucretia story as it was understood by Chaucer and his contemporaries, see also Louise Sylvester, “Reading Narratives of Rape: The Story of Lucretia in Chaucer, Gower, and Christine de Pizan.”

<sup>8</sup> As Saunders writes, the “onus to redeem Lucretia’s character is perhaps best illustrated in the celebrated Middle English versions of the story, those of Chaucer and Gower. . . . Strikingly, both these authors exonerate Lucretia from guilt by describing her swoon at the moment of rape” (165). Chaucer and Gower differ from Jean de Meun, who offers a more ambivalent perspective in the *Romance of the Rose*:

Here in the speech of the jealous husband narrated by Ami, the conquest of Lucretia becomes an emblem of the skilled lover who can persuade even the most unwilling woman

Rather, the issue for Chaucer is one of cultural and historical context: Lucrece is motivated by fear of shame and concern for reputation *because* she is a Roman woman, living “at thilke time.” The guilt, the culpability, is all and unmistakably Tarquin’s; the shame that attaches to violation regardless of will is what motivates Lucrece’s suicide. The generic conventions of the *Legend* that elevate Lucrece to the status of a pagan martyr, therefore, serve to highlight the differences between a cultural understanding of purity as a virtue of the mind and one in which the violation of a woman has the potential to “foule” the name of her husband irrevocably (1845).

Thus Chaucer, working from Livy and Ovid, depicts her husband and kinsmen assuring her of her innocence: “they forgave yt hyr, for yt was ryght; / It was no gilt, it lay not in hir myght” (1848-49).<sup>9</sup> Lucrece does not dispute that she is innocent; contra Augustine, the question of her innocence is beside the point. Thus, for Lucrece, the “forgiveness” of her kinsmen is irrelevant: “‘Be as be may,’ quod she, ‘of forgyvng’” (1852). For both Lucrece and her kinsmen the shame requires expiation, not forgiveness; the only difference is that Lucrece feels so irredeemably sullied by the violation that she prefers death to life, while her kinsmen would rather expiate the shame by avenging themselves on the culprit.

---

to yield. . . . Whereas Livy emphasises Lucretia’s belief that the public will perceive her rape as a sin, Jean’s Lucretia appears imprisoned within a restrictive set of classical social values whereby her own physical corruption becomes an offence. (165-66)

<sup>9</sup> Jerome, on the other hand, seems to grasp the fact that Lucretia suffers from shame rather than guilt, but, curiously, affirms her decision to commit suicide as proof of her innocence and virtue. Extolling the secular chastity of pagan women, he considers Lucretia as the worthiest of the Romans: she “who, not wanting to survive the violation of her own chastity, blotted out the stain on her body with own blood” (262). Similarly, commenting on the willingness of Alcibiades’ concubine to risk her life to provide him with a proper funeral and burial, Jerome writes, “let married women, Christian wives in any event, imitate the faithfulness of concubines; and let them, being free, exhibit what she protected as a captive” (260).

In a particularly profound way, therefore, Chaucer's *Legend* explores the question of purity and radically problematizes the medieval religious ideal of purity as dependent upon sexual inviolacy. In the saints' lives on which the *Legend* is modelled, purity as "matter in its place" and purity as moral innocence are conflated, as there is no possibility that a woman shamed in rape could be, at the same time, spiritually pure. For Chaucer's erotic martyrs, purity is not measured by sexual continence but by its opposite—"bodily largesse" expressed in romantic devotion.

#### Chaucer's Good Children

Chaucer explores further the question of purity through the lens of hagiography in tales of the Man of Law, the Clerk, the Physician, and the Prioress. In these tales, however, the question of purity is explored not only in terms of erotic love but primarily through various representations of parents and children. Jill Mann has traced parallels between the many child-parent relationships depicted in the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the story of Ugolino in the *Monk's Tale*, Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale* (as a daughter and a mother), Griselda and Walter and their children in the *Clerk's Tale*, Virginius and Virginia in the *Physician's Tale*, and the mother and son of the *Prioress's Tale* ("Parents and Children"). Mann argues that Chaucer often uses the parent-child relationship as an illustration of the relationship between God and human beings, as a way of questioning the *apparent* cruelty in the governance of the universe, but ultimately affirming of God's justice. And yet the differences between these various

representations are significant enough that, taken together, it is more difficult to discern a single view of divine governance than Mann's discussion suggests. We must consider, first of all, the differences in degree and kind of harm inflicted on children, and by whom: Custance effectively protects her son from harm and is not herself violently sacrificed by her father, as Virginia is, and there is (arguably) a significant ethical difference between sacrificial killing and marriage; Walter pretends to sacrifice his children but does not; and the children in the Prioress and the Monk's tales are harmed by adults others than their parents. Further, it would appear that in some cases "suffraunce" is a virtue to be lauded (such as Custance's) but in others it is taken too far (Virginia and Griselda)—as Prudence says, "over-muchel suffraunce is nat good" (1467)—just as in some cases the parental or divine figure is the agent responsible for the violence or cruelty, but in some cases he or she is as much the victim as the child. Perhaps most importantly, at least two instances of parental cruelty stand out as being not merely "apparent" but actual: Walter's mock-sacrifice of his children and Virginius's real sacrifice of his daughter.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>In addition to sharing concerns and conventions with hagiography, the tales told by the Man of Law, the Clerk, the Prioress, and the Second Nun are linked in the collection through their versification—all four are written in rime royal. The Second Nun tells the story of St Cecilia, which was, for a medieval audience, a historically authentic Christian martyrdom, while the Prioress alludes to another "real" martyr, a boy named Hugh of Lincoln, whose murder was purported to have taken place in England in the mid-thirteenth century. The tales of Custance and Griselda, however, involve the marriages of the two heroines, and focus especially on their roles as mothers. In their marital chastity, they are far from the erotic martyrs of the *Legend*, and yet Custance and Griselda both "leye a lite hir holinesse aside" in the marriage bed to produce children (MLT 713). But, as in the virgin martyr stories, the patient suffering of Custance and Griselda inspires religious awe and leads to triumphs over their would-be oppressors. Custance, like Cecilia, also engages in active teaching and preaching, while Griselda "converts" Walter from his cruelty through sheer stoicism alone. The *Clerk's Tale* also features a sacrifice of sorts, when Griselda allows her two children to be taken from her, presumably to be killed on her husband's orders: "as a lamb she sitteth meke and stille," thereby evoking the sacrifice of another Lamb of God (CIT 538). Custance, on the other hand, defends herself and her son against harm both cosmic

The *Physician's Tale* and the *Prioress's Tale*, however, stand out in the collection as the only tales in which violence (as opposed to other forms of cruelty) against children is not threatened or symbolic but actual.<sup>11</sup> These tales also share an implicit reflection on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and the role of sacrifice in each. As in the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer here refuses to glorify violent sacrifice as a noble ideal, and, instead, explores the psychological motives behind the desire for scapegoats: in Girardian terms, both tales present us not with a mythological reading of violence but one in which the achievement of sacrifice is exposed as messy, incomplete, and essentially unjust. Indeed, the question of justice is crucial to both of these tales, and both represent outrages of justice committed by the supposed arbiter of law and order: the judge Apius in the *Physician's Tale* and the provost in the *Prioress's Tale*.

“Outher deeth or shame” in the *Physician's Tale*: The Shame Dilemma Revisited

*The Physician's Tale* plays on a generic disjunction similar to the one that structures the *Legend*. Here, Chaucer imposes a hagiographic form on what was originally a story about the corruption of judges. *The Physician's Tale* borrows much of its subject matter from Livy's telling of the overthrow of the *decemviri* in his *History of Rome*. Chaucer, however, comes to the Physician's “historial thing notable” by way of Jean de Meun, who retells the story in brief in Chapter 4 of the

---

and earthly (MLT 836, 921-24). Interestingly, it is indeed the two virgins—the little clergeon and Cecilia—who are violently sacrificed for the faith, while the two maternal figures escape threatened violence to enjoy happy endings.

<sup>11</sup> One might be tempted to add Melibee's daughter Sophia, but she is not killed and is, moreover, as much an allegorical figure as she is a “real” child (and narrative interest in her quickly dissipates as the story focuses upon Melibee's desire for vengeance).

*Romance of the Rose* (113-15). In these versions, and in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the emphasis remains on the problem of corrupt governance. For Livy, the tale illustrates the triumph of Roman liberty; in the *Romance of the Rose*, it serves to prove Reason's point that justice depends upon, and is subservient to, proper moderation in love and desire; in Gower, Genius uses the story to emphasize the importance of chastity and virtue in kings. Chaucer shapes the story uniquely by casting the original plot in a form that recalls medieval saints' lives. Accordingly, the emphasis shifts from the domain of political and judicial governance to Virginia's defense of the female saint's chief virtue, her virginity. Placing the conventions of hagiography in a Roman, pagan context, however, Chaucer gives us a martyr without a metaphysic—and thus robs Virginia's sacrifice of any clear meaning.<sup>12</sup>

The tale opens by introducing Virginius, a knight who is “fulfild of honour and of worthinesse,” and then his daughter, who excels all others in her beauty and virtue (3). Significantly, she remains nameless for most of the tale, only to be called Virginia, a derivative of her father's name as well as a sign of her physical purity, when her father returns from court to issue his “sentence” (213, 224). Almost immediately, the Physician launches into the first of several digressions that continue to vex readers and critics, when he imagines Nature's encomium to her most prized creation, and then presents a lengthy description of Virginia's

---

<sup>12</sup> The range of critical puzzlement about the tale is vast, much of it focused on its generic oddity. Sheila Delany, for example, has argued that Chaucer intentionally depoliticizes the context of the tale, transforming a pagan political narrative into a static Christian exemplum. Others have wondered at the apparent “incongruence between motivation and action” that results (Bloch, “Chaucer's Maiden's Head” 114). Sandra Pierson Prior sums up the problematic nature of the tale this way: “it is, by virtually any critical judgement, a badly told story: inconsistent in tone, inept in story line, incoherent in sentence, and devoid of solace” (“Virginity and Sacrifice” 165).

appearance and her many virtues. It fits well with Virginia's namelessness that the Physician refers to Pygmalion and compares Virginia to the statue that is forged, engraved, and painted lily-white and rose-red (14)<sup>13</sup>: Virginia, too, is more an *objet d'art* than a flesh-and-blood woman, coveted not only by Apius but also by her father, who guards his eponymous possession jealously. Virginia's catalogue of virtues, however, resembles those of the medieval virgin martyrs: she

. . . floured in virginitee  
 With alle humilitee and abstinence,  
 With alle attemperance and pacience,  
 With mesure eek of bering and array. (44-47)

That she is to be taken as a saintly exemplar is further emphasized when the Physician comments that "in hir lyvyng maydens myghten rede, / As in a book, every good word or dede / That longeth to a mayden virtuous" (107-09). Virginia speaks little, but, when she does, she is as "wis as Pallas," her eloquence is "ful wommanly and plein" without "countrefeted termes" (49-51). And she is as careful about what goes into her mouth as she is about what comes out: perfectly "shamefast," Virginia not only abstains from wine but even shuns "revels" and "daunces"—feigning illness—in order to avoid potentially harmful influences (55, 65).

Like the virgin martyrs, Virginia's supreme continence evokes an idea of the body "as an imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable" (Douglas 159), and she differs from earlier incarnations in this respect. In Livy's story, the daughter is engaged to be married, and her betrothed

---

<sup>13</sup> And here we may recall the possible significance of "the white and the red"; the feminine tendency to unite opposing impulses, as in Emelye's "subtil gerland" (KnT 1054) and the Wife of Bath's union of Mars and Venus (WBP 609-612).



plays a key role in the narrative, as a plebeian soldier who, along with Virginius, opposes the tyranny of the *decemviri*. But for Virginia there is no suggestion that she will ever forsake her virginity for the marriage bed; she takes on the role of the consecrated virgin, but for no clear purpose. Virginia's radical impermeability in turn gives rise to the same dilemma faced by the virgin martyrs: "Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame, / That thow most suffre . . ." (214-15). Unlike in hagiography, however, her death does not constitute a glorious triumph over temptation and a trial of purification that promises an eternal reward. St Jerome admonishes young virgins to remain ever in fear: "You walk laden with gold; you must keep out of the robber's way" (23). For Jerome, the reward for such vigilance is precisely the "dissolution" of the flesh in death, but for Virginia, without promise of eternal life, death is a punishment for which there is no remedy.

If Virginia does not die a martyr for Christ, why is she killed? The Physician follows the description of Virginia with another seeming digression, advising governesses and parents to keep careful watch over their daughters. Echoing a medieval commonplace, the Physician claims that old women "knowen wel inow the olde daunce" of love and courtship, and thus are especially suited to the task of teaching young women how to protect themselves (79).<sup>14</sup> The Physician charges parents to keep their children always under "surveaunce," reminding them of the wolves that prey on the lambs of negligent shepherds (95, 101-2). At this point, we might surmise that Virginia runs into trouble because she

---

<sup>14</sup> That aging coquettes know best about love is a conventional notion, recalling the Old Woman in *Romance of the Rose* and, of course, the Wife of Bath.

lacked adequate parental guidance. And yet Virginia's saintliness renders her effectively self-sufficient: as the Physician takes pains to stress, she "so kepte himself, hir neded no maistresse" (106). Thus, when Apius sees Virginia and decides he must have her, he knows the only means of doing so is "by slighte" (131). It is precisely because the barriers protecting Virginia's chastity are so ironclad—she cannot be won by force, by bribery, or through her own volition—that he resorts to fraud and deceit.

It is at this point that the Physician's digressions give way to disproportionately quick and dramatic action. Apius enlists the help of a "cherl" named Claudius, who presents the fraudulent case before Apius's court: he claims that Virginia is not actually Virginius's daughter, but rather his own "thral" who has been stolen from his household (183). Virginius is summoned to the court and the charge is laid to him. He denies it, tries to give his defense, and "wolde have preved it as sholde a knight" (194). But, without further ado, Apius rules in favour of Claudius and then orders that Virginia be placed in his own "warde." When Virginius perceives that the purpose of the ruse is for his daughter to be given to the judge "in lecherye to liven," he returns home to kill her (206). The scene that follows between father and daughter is strange, poignant, and surely Chaucer's most original addition to the story. Virginius calls his daughter to him "with fadres pitee stikinge thurgh his herte, / Al wolde he from his purpos nat converte" (211-12). He then presents her with an impossible dilemma: she must choose the shame of rape and "lecherye," or death by his hand. Virginius's grief at this point, his "fadres pitee," is genuine, but, at the same time, his speech reveals the extent

to which he considers Virginia, like her name, a mere derivative of himself—or, rather, a beloved object whose destruction wounds its possessor at least as much as it wounds the object itself:

Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame,  
 That thow most suffre—*allas that I was bore!*  
 For nevere thow deservedest wherefore  
 To dien with a sword or with a knif.  
 O deere doghter, *endere of my lif,*  
 Which *I* have fostred up with swich plesaunce  
 That thow were nevere out of *my remembraunce,*  
 O doghter, which that art *my laste wo,*  
 And in *my lif my laste joy* also,  
 O gemme of chastitee, in pacience  
 Tak thow thy deeth, for *this is my sentence.*  
 For love, and nat for hate, thow most be deed;  
*My pitous hand* moot smiten of thin heed. (214-26; my italics)

In addition to that familiar phrase, “outhere deeth or shame,” it is significant that Virginius refers here almost exclusively to himself and to the suffering that her death will cause him, and not only because it illustrates his egoism and his own tyranny—although it does that, too. The painful irony of the phrase, “O deere doghter, endere of my lif,” is compounded by the studied irrationality of Virginius’s position. The fact that it is Virginius’s *belief* in the necessity of her death that is at issue here contrasts with both Livy and Gower, in whose versions the father kills his daughter in a spontaneous, violent rage in the middle of Apius’s courtroom. In these texts, the violence is the product of a kind of temporary madness, whereas Virginius’s act is premeditated and much more chilling precisely because it is carried out “for love,” and because we realize that Virginius’s “fadres pitee” is, in fact, a kind of self-pity. But if Virginia has

remained a one-dimensional character to this point, the tale reaches its emotional climax when she speaks for the first time:

“O mercy, deere fader!” quod this maide,  
 And with that word she bothe hir armes laid  
 Aboute his nekke, as she was wont to do.  
 The teeris borste out of hir eyen two,  
 And seide, “Goode fader, shal I die?  
 Is ther no grace? Is ther no remedye?”  
 “No, certes, deere doghter min,” quod he. (231-36)

The poignancy of this scene has been commented on before: Virginia’s youth and the sense of a warm and affectionate family life (“as she was wont to do”) confronting the sad resignation of a grieving father (“No, certes”). The tenderness evoked and Virginia’s expression of her own grief and fear, however, raise the question, unasked and indeed irrelevant in the other versions of the story, about the necessity that Virginius so starkly asserts. Readers and critics have proffered many possible “remedies” to Virginia’s dilemma, the most obvious of which being that Virginius could simply refuse to hand over his daughter, he could flee the city with his daughter, and then mobilize the people who are loyal to him in an uprising against Apius. We know this is a viable option because, of course, the people do turn against the corrupt judge when they hear of Virginia’s fate; and we are told outright, “They wisten wel that he was lecherus” (266).

The wrong-headedness of Virginius’s conviction that his daughter must die to avoid shame is further emphasized by Virginia’s curious and oft-debated reference to Jephthah’s daughter. Once Virginia realizes that her father cannot be swayed, she pleads for “a litel space” to lament her death:

For, pardee, Jepte yaf his doghter grace  
 For to compleine, er he hir slow, allas!

And God it woot, nothing was hir trespass. (240-42)

This reference is curious because, first of all, Jephthah's daughter is granted a brief respite specifically so that she may mourn the fact that she will die a virgin before she can be a mother, in contrast to Virginia, who dies in order to remain a virgin. It is instructive, however, in that Jephthah chides his daughter—i.e., blames the victim—for the event of her own sacrifice, when his own fault is outrageously clear: “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me” (Judges 11:35). The reference also links the death of Virginia at the hand of her father to the profoundly complex theme of blood sacrifice in the Bible, of central importance from the story of Abraham and Isaac to the crucifixion itself.

The tradition of medieval commentary on the story of Jephthah and his daughter is also complex, and in many ways represents inherent tensions in medieval concepts of justice and—as Virginia's plea suggests—grace and mercy. On the one hand, Jephthah's action contradicts well-established biblical prohibitions against human sacrifice, ironically so in light of the fact that the Ammonites, whose defeat God grants to Jephthah, were themselves associated with child sacrifice as followers of the deity Molech (Linton 238).<sup>15</sup> Jewish writers Josephus and Pseudo-Philo criticized Jephthah for making a foolish vow in the first place, and argued that he could have redeemed his vow according to

---

<sup>15</sup> Hyam Maccoby comments that it is “surprising that such explicit stories of human sacrifice were told with approval even when human sacrifice had been officially banned, both in Greece and Israel” (78). Maccoby goes on to suggest the possibility that the story, and the four-day annual mourning rite for Jephthah's daughter, “may be a survival from the early matriarchal age, when daughters were sacrificed by preference, as being superior to the male” (78).

law (Leviticus 27 contains explicit instructions regarding vows of precisely this nature).<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the story is vexing because God seems to sanction the vow when he grants Jephthah victory in battle, and, unlike in the story of Abraham and Isaac, He does not intervene to save the innocent victim. And, indeed, in Hebrews 11, Jephthah is named as one of the great *heroes* of faith, alongside Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Consequently, patristic commentators disagreed on the question of Jephthah's guilt. Jerome issues one of the strongest condemnations, not only of Jephthah's foolishness but also of his daughter as a "worldly virgin" and therefore not a model worthy for Christian saints (Thompson 121-22). Augustine, on the other hand, attempts to exculpate Jephthah—although not without some discomfort—by reading the story typologically, in the same vein as Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. In his reading, Jephthah sacrifices his daughter as Christ sacrificed his humanity: he is thus a sympathetic figure who, like Virginius, destroys his most beloved possession for love and not for hate.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> The differences between the readings of these early Jewish scholars, however, are significant: both deny the legitimacy of the vow, but Josephus does so by drawing parallels with the story of Iphigenia and other classical stories of sacrifice, while Pseudo-Philo portrays God as punishing Jephthah for his blasphemy by actually causing the daughter to appear first (*Writing the Wrongs* 107-08).

<sup>17</sup> Augustine is ambiguous on this point. He is careful to define "true sacrifices," those that are pleasing to God, as "acts of compassion" (*City of God* X.6, p. 380). God's acceptance of slaughtered animals in the Old Testament is to be understood as "the sacred sign of the invisible sacrifice," or the sacrifice of the will in obedience to God and neighbour-love (377). He considers the case of Jephthah as an example of "homicide which is not murder," alongside instances of killing in a just war, but he phrases it as an open-ended question: "One is justified in asking whether Jephthah is to be regarded as obeying a command of God in killing his daughter, when he had vowed to sacrifice to God the first thing he met when returning victorious from battle" (I.21, p. 32). Thompson observes that

Jephthah emerges from Augustine's study as a man who was probably well intended, pious, and faithful, but also sadly misinformed to think that God would be pleased by human sacrifice, whether of his wife or anyone else. God, on the other hand, rises above human failings, even as he seems somehow to direct them, ultimately bringing good out of evil. From Judges 11, Augustine concludes, two good things emerge. First, Jephthah is

Aquinas reiterates Jerome's condemnation of the vow itself, but qualifies it in light of Jephthah's good intentions, and affirms Jephthah's place in the catalogue of the faithful. According to Aquinas, while we cannot defend the killing itself,

Yet the Scripture says that *the Spirit of the Lord came upon him*, because his faith and devotion which moved him to make the vow were from the Holy Spirit. For this reason, because of the victory he won and because he probably repented of his sinful deed (which, however, prefigured something good), he is placed in the catalogue of the saints. (*Summa Theologiae* 2.2 Q.88 a.2)

Rightly or wrongly, Jephthah's sacrifice is in some way the fulfillment of his vow to God. Regardless of the purpose the story has served for theologians throughout the centuries, Jephthah's perspective and motivation are clear and unmistakable: in a sacrificial economy, blood is the required payment for services rendered. But the biblical God is missing from *The Physician's Tale*, as is any clear sense of what, exactly, *is* the virtue for which Virginia dies. The virgin saints, of course, defend their chastity to the death because they have consecrated themselves in mystical marriage to Christ. But Virginia has not sworn a vow of chastity and so it cannot be said that she is defending her virtue in the sense that the virgin martyrs do. Neither can we say that her death is necessary in order to avoid the horror of a lifetime of rape, for the tale itself suggests alternatives that Virginius appears wilfully to ignore.<sup>18</sup> Rather, as Virginius states clearly, the

---

appropriately and definitively punished for his rashness, and any dangerous precedent that might be drawn from Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac is henceforth dismantled and disgraced. Second, these events bequeath to the people of God a riveting adumbration of the sacrifice that Jesus was one day to make, for Jephthah is a type of none other than Christ himself. (129)

For a full discussion of early Christian and medieval responses to the story of Jephthah, see Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation*.

necessity arises from the threat of shame, and hence it is Virginius's honour that requires the blood sacrifice, and seems to require it regardless of whether the act is carried out or not. That is, Virginia has already been polluted by the shame of Apius's corruption, and that is why she must die; the uprising of the people serves to restore order to the realm, but it does not, and could not, affect Virginia's dilemma.

In this way, the tale brings into sharp focus once again the problem of free will or intentionality in connection with shame. Virginia's shame is contracted through a kind of figurative contagion, not through any action or failure of her own, and for this reason alone her father (the Physician suggests) is justified in killing her as an act of mercy: it is an honour killing in the clearest sense of the term. But Chaucer lines up the possible rationales for the legitimacy of honour killings, as it were, only to knock them down one by one. As in the *Knight's Tale*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Franklin's Tale*, the fate or necessity insisted upon by the characters has been shown to be a figment of their own misguided imaginations. What emerges, therefore, is a picture of honour that is nothing more than the projection of male narcissism, and of shame as a convenient excuse for murdering an innocent child.

Sandra Pierson Prior argues for the centrality of Virginia's reference to Jephthah's daughter in the tale's "implicit critique of virginity" (165). Not only does this reference draw attention to the fact that Virginius's killing of his

---

<sup>18</sup> In *Feminizing Chaucer*, Jill Mann argues that Virginius's critics are insensitive to the fact that he is trying to spare his daughter the horror of a lifetime of rape. But if Virginius's concern truly was for his daughter's welfare, he could have protected her without killing her. This reading, moreover, misses the fundamental point that the tale—through Chaucer's aegis rather than the Physician's—seems actively to provoke readers' discomfort with Virginius's action.



daughter is indeed a sacrifice, and a foolish one at that, but the irony of it adds to the pathos of Virginia's martyrdom. In response to the critical tradition of disregarding the tale as a "badly told story," Prior interprets the apparent inconsistencies and digressions in light of this critique: "Once viewed as a story of child sacrifice, *The Physician's Tale* makes far more sense" (169). Prior also notes the relevance of Girard's theory of sacrifice and violence for the tale, in particular Girard's idea that sacrifice lies behind all sacred ritual, and constitutes a kind of release valve for the accumulation of violence that threatens to destroy the social order from within. Prior comments,

I find it remarkable that Chaucer too [along with Girard] apparently saw the connection between justice systems, violence, and sacrifice; . . . as Chaucer has the Physician retell the story, Virginia's death demonstrates the necessity to meet corruption with the ritualized violence of sacrifice. Implicit in this necessity for sacrifice is the value of virgins as spotless and inviolate victims, with an emphasis upon bodily wholeness in general and an intact hymen in particular. (174-75)

In drawing attention to the Girardian dimensions of the tale, Prior's analysis hits on the crucial point that questions of innocence, purity, and violence lie at the centre of the tale, and that Virginia's death does evoke the sense of ritual sacrifice.

And yet the emphasis in the tale falls more directly on the relationship between Virginius, Apius, and Virginia, which can almost be called a "love triangle," than it does on the justice system Apius is supposed to represent, or the social and political order that is of greater import for Livy and Jean de Meun. The supposed digressions are united to the action of the tale in this sense: all serve to emphasize, or to fixate upon, the trajectories of desire that link the three principle

characters. We are told emphatically how desirable Virginia is, how important it is to protect desirable girls from the desires of others, how much Virginia desires nothing other than to remain herself inviolate (going so far as to feign illness so that she can avoid the dangers of revels and public places), how much Apius desires her, how much Virginius desires to keep her under his watch and inviolate, etc. In this light, Chaucer represents Virginia as the object *par excellence* of mimetic desire, lusted after by Apius precisely because she is so closely guarded by her father: Apius's desire to violate her chastity is in direct proportion to Virginius's desire to protect it. Virginia's unattainability—her perfect intactness, extreme continence, and indifference to the desires of those around her—correspond to the mimetic attraction of the “narcissistic” woman, whose “blessed self-sufficiency” excites the desires of those around her (*Things Hidden* 327). Similarly, the strife in the tale is properly understood as a competition between the two men, and the violence sparked by the conflict “which the convergence of two or several avid hands toward one and the same object cannot help but provoke” (*Things Hidden* 8).

As we have seen, in Girard's discussion of mimetic competition, as the conflict between the rivals intensifies, the significance and particularity of the object fades into the background. The rivals become increasingly fixated on each other while their rivalry spreads, mimetically infecting the entire social order. But as I argue in Chapter 1, this aspect of Girard's theory is itself problematic, in that it accounts for the pressures involved in male honour to the exclusion of the problem of female shame. In *The Physician's Tale*, however, the object of

mimetic desire, marginalized in Girard's account, becomes herself the sacrificial victim whose death restores order and justice, and not in the way that Girard understands the scapegoat mechanism. For the mob clearly recognizes the injustice of Virginia's death: they unite against Apius, blaming him as the true source of corruption, *after* the sacrifice has taken place. The regenerative impulse here comes as a response to the truth of what had been suspected ("They wisten wel that he was lecherus"), and in moral outrage against one who is truly guilty, in direct opposition to Girard's understanding of the scapegoat, in which the concealment of victim's innocence is paramount. Chaucer's interpretation of mimetic desire is thus more in line with Girard than even Prior suggests, but his representation of the scapegoat avoids the potential for reductionism in Girard's account. Chaucer places the third point of triadic desire, the female object, front and centre, and, consequently, underlines the extent to which the desires of the male rivals involve the contradictory impulse of shame: each desires possession but also fears it, and this fear (of weakness, vulnerability, shame itself) is what provokes the sacrifice of Virginia, rather than an arbitrary mechanism for the sake of preserving societal order.

Moreover, if we agree with Prior that Chaucer is "critiquing virginity" in *The Physician's Tale*, of what, exactly, does the critique consist? As we have seen, one of the most prominent features of the late medieval hagiographies on which the *Physician's Tale* is modelled is the emphasis placed on female virginity as a sign and physical manifestation of spiritual purity. But in the saints' lives, and in the patristic writings that were so powerful in shaping the late medieval

religious ideal of virginity, sexual renunciation is imagined not as a repressive regime of painful self-denial, but as the path to the highest form of freedom possible in this life: freedom from corruption, from loss, and, indeed, from death itself. For Augustine, sexual desire divides the will against itself, enslaving the mind to a helpless need that can never be fulfilled: “wretched is every soul bound by the love of perishable things; he is torn asunder when he loses them, and then he feels the wretchedness, which was there even before he lost them” (*City* 49). Jonathan Dollimore argues that, for Gregory of Nyssa, human sexuality and the products thereof are linked inextricably with the horror of mortality:

the bodily procreation of children . . . is more an embarking upon death than upon life. . . . Corruption has its beginning in birth and those who refrain from procreation through virginity themselves bring about a cancellation of death by preventing it from advancing further because of them. . . . The goal of true virginity is a freedom from death and mutability in order to be able to see God. . . . Again, death is seen not simply as eventual demise, but as a devastating, living mutability which overdetermines life with a terrible sense of loss, and does so even or especially before anything has actually been lost (*Death and Desire* 46)

Similarly, comparing the Christian quest for sanctity with the noble aspirations of the Ancient Stoics, Clement of Alexandria writes, “. . . our ideal is not to experience desire at all. Our aim is not that while a man feels desire he should get the better of it, but that he should be continent even respecting desire itself” (qtd. in Bloch 120). The desire to transcend mortality, the desire for freedom *from* desire, is a desire to be without need or lack, and utterly set apart from the vicissitudes of earthly, human life.<sup>19</sup> The ultimate motivation behind such desire

---

<sup>19</sup> Bloch also observes that the “desire to transcend desire, to be beyond perception, is indistinguishable from the desire to escape the body altogether” (“Chaucer’s Maiden’s Head” 120). Bloch, however, connects this desire to “the unmistakable symptom of a death wish” rather than to the desire to transcend shame in particular by *escaping* death (120).

can only be a fear of shame: not the moral shame of having failed to live up to one's ideal, but the shame of embodiment, that consists in the awareness that we are, in fact, helplessly permeable, and that no matter what spiritual heights the soul may achieve, the embodied self remains tethered to the dust from which it was molded. As Jerome writes, "so long as we are held down by this frail body, so long as we have our treasures in earthen vessels, so long as the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, there can be no sure victory" (23).

In the patristic tradition of writing on virginity, moreover, the female body represents an acute realization of this fear of shame. An *especially* leaky and porous vessel, the female body elicits the desire which makes men "wretched." At the same time, made up of cold and moist humours, associated with the messiness of reproduction, and with all that is earthly and therefore subject to decay, the female body repulses as much as it allures. In both ways, the female body is "dangerous," in Mary Douglas's sense of the word: a site of particular vulnerability in the boundary demarcating the body social. The persistent focus on the saint's impenetrability in the virgin martyr stories, reflecting this desire for freedom from desire, inscribes the female body as *inherently* shameful, quite apart from the shamefulness of sexual violation. The idea that physical purity is merely a sign of inner sanctity is thus revealed to be, in fact, a conflation of sexual and spiritual values—a conflation made possible by the "ontological insecurity" of

virginity—that catches the virgin in an impossible dilemma.<sup>20</sup> Despite the sense that the drama of the plot seems to rest on the threat of rape, the true source of shame, as it is for Virginia, is the simple fact of female embodiment, the only remedy for which is not avoidance of rape, but death.

Chaucer's critique of virginity, therefore, consists in questioning the violence inherent in the medieval religious ideal, in exposing the paradox of purity that conflates the spiritual and the material and thereby necessitates violence as the only sure way of avoiding and containing shame. Virginia's death is indeed a sacrifice, but it is not the sacrifice of a scapegoat in a true Girardian sense: Chaucer does not give us a persecution text, but one in which the circular logic of sacrifice is exposed. The conflation of spiritual and physical values—the confusion between inner and outer realities—lies at the root of the economy of sacrifice, in which honour and shame are the primary means of measuring value and truth. In this economy, shame is a deficit that must be paid in bodies and in blood; to leave the debt unpaid is to risk exposure, fatal penetration, loss of one's own physical and moral integrity. The fact that Chaucer draws a parallel between Virginia and Jephthah's daughter serves to emphasize the problematic nature of this violence in a way that goes to the heart of Christian revelation. The discomfort provoked by the story in Judges for medieval commentators has to do with the nature of divine justice. It is not, contrary to the common refrain, a question about how to reconcile the bloodthirsty Old Testament God with the kinder, gentler God of the New Testament. In the traditional understanding of

---

<sup>20</sup> I borrow this phrase from the editors of *Medieval Virginites*, who use it to describe the ultimate impossibility of representing virginity. See the introduction by Bernau, Evans, and Salih (9).

Christ's atonement, it is the God of the Old *and* the New who requires the blood sacrifice, not of goats and lambs, but of His Son, as recompense for the sins of humanity. If Abraham's hand was stayed, if Jephthah was indeed wrong to fulfill his vow, then what of a God who refuses to grant grace without a ransom? The full weight of Virginia's plea for grace is felt in the disjunction between the pagan world of the tale and the Christian, hagiographical tone invoked throughout. The fact that Virginia is denied grace in pagan Rome ought to point, by way of implicit contrast, to the grace made manifest in Christian revelation, but it points instead to Jephthah's daughter. The artistic power of *The Physician's Tale* lies precisely in the fact that it raises the question so disturbingly: can there be grace without blood?

But Virginia's question, "Is ther no grace?" remains unanswered at the close of the tale, despite Virginius's negative response. The fissures and tensions in medieval ideas about virginity, purity, and shame are brought to the surface and left starkly on display, without any clear guidance from the Physician as to how we are to resolve them. Indeed, the Physician's misunderstanding of his own tale is so complete the effect of it is comical. We are told in the *General Prologue* of the Physician's dubious ethical practices: he "was but esy of dispence; / He kepte that he wan in pestilence" (441-42). And, despite his supposed professional skill, his "pitous tale" leaves the Host in need of a "triacle" (302, 314). In other words, the physician's "urinals" and "jurdone" are as ill-suited to proffering medical cures as his ostensible moral, "Forsaketh sinne, er sinne yow forsake," is to explaining the meaning of his tale (286). Even as Virginius asserts the necessity

of his daughter's death, therefore, the *Physician's Tale* is structured in such a way as to emphasize the falseness of this necessity. As in Chaucer's tale of Lucretia, when the shame-death dilemma that serves to dramatize the martyr's transcendence in traditional hagiography is transposed into a secular context, the effect is a kind of de-mythologizing. Precisely because of the dissonance created by the false necessity, we are able to see the irrationality and the fallible human motivations operating behind the constraints of honour and shame; we see the basic *constructedness* of the shame dilemma. In short, our concerns as readers are redirected, from the awe-inspiring, quasi-divine feats of the virgin martyrs, to a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the idea (whether in its theological or literary incarnations) that shame, especially in the form of sexual violation, is a fate worse than death—and ultimate, the *only* option other than death.

“Damages without nombre”: Vengeful Sacrifice in the *Prioress's Tale*

While the *Physician's Tale* gestures towards the role of sacrifice in the Old Testament, the *Prioress's Tale* inscribes as its own sacrificial scapegoat contemporary medieval Jews. Drawing on a tradition of affective piety and a genre of Marian miracle stories not usually known for their overt antisemitic content,<sup>21</sup> it is a story about the murder of a Christian child by a group of Jews and the retaliatory torment and killing of those Jews by the surrounding Christian

---

<sup>21</sup> Patterson observes that “the vast majority of Marian miracles were not antisemitic,” but acknowledges that it “was probably also true that, at some level, some Christians drew a contrast between the purity of Mary (especially as a symbol of the Church) and a totalized Christendom that was tainted by the mere presence of Jews in its midst” (“Living Witnesses” 519).



community. The *Prioress's Tale* is not merely antisemitic; rather, it expresses a kind of medieval antisemitic perspective *par excellence*, containing “virtually every slander against the Jews circulated by medieval Christians” (“Living Witnesses” 520), including, of course, the idea of the blood libel that is central to the tale, in which the killing of the little clergeon re-enacts the Jews’ killing of Christ. And if the Physician’s allusion to Jephthah’s daughter creates fruitful historical and contextual dissonance, the Prioress also throws a contextual wrench into the hagiographical aims of her tale with her reference to Little St Hugh, which concludes her story of the slain clergeon:

. . . yonge Hugh of Lincoln, slain also  
 With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,  
 For it is but a litel while ago. . . . (684-86)

This reference reveals the Prioress’s ignorance as much as her bigotry, as the martyrdom in question in fact happened 135 years prior to the temporal setting of the Canterbury pilgrimage. But it also signals the tale’s complex textual relationship with the notorious historical event in which the discovery of a little boy’s body in a well led to the conviction and execution of nineteen Jews, and helped to foment the anti-Jewish sentiment that culminated in the expulsion of the Jews by Edward II. The *Prioress's Tale* corresponds at several points with the contemporary account given by thirteenth-century English historian Matthew Paris; those points that differ from Paris have analogues in what Brown has identified as the C group of Virgin miracle stories, in which the boy sings the *Alma redemptoris*, prompting the Jews’ murderous rage, his body is thrown into a “privy,” and the story ends with the boy’s funeral and his miraculous continued

singing.<sup>22</sup> Before I turn to the Prioress in greater detail, therefore, I want to review in brief the historiography of Little Hugh's murder and martyrdom, the evolution of the story through time, on which Chaucer models his tale and to which he contributes, so that we can better understand what, precisely, the effects of his contribution are to the history of representations of antisemitic stereotypes and antisemitic violence.<sup>23</sup>

In an excellent study, "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln," Gavin Langmuir points out that the Lincoln affair in 1255 "changed dramatically" the practice of the secular authorities in the investigation and punishment of ritual murders supposedly committed by the Jews (464). The popular belief that Jews annually crucified a child in order to mock Christ originated in England with the death of William of Norwich in 1144.<sup>24</sup> By the mid-thirteenth century, this belief was deeply entrenched and, Langmuir argues, was not strongly opposed by local ecclesiastical authorities (464). And yet,

no responsible secular authority had acted on the charge. Louis VII had not believed the charge [against thirty-one Jews of killing a child] at Blois, and no English king had condemned Jews for ritual murder despite many opportunities. (464)

---

<sup>22</sup> Within the C group, Brown further identifies four versions in which the Virgin places a "magical object" in the child's mouth that allows him to keep singing despite his slit throat. The *Prioress's Tale*, of course, fits into this group.

<sup>23</sup> Langmuir points out that it is "doubtless" also that Paris's account was in Marlowe's mind when it is asked of Barabas, the Jew of Malta, "What, has he crucified a child?" (Langmuir 460). For a thorough analysis of Chaucer's sources and analogues, see Carleton Brown, "Study of the Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer's Prioress"; Laurel Broughton, "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale" in Correale and Hamel, eds., *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales."*

<sup>24</sup> For a contemporary account of William of Norwich's death which records the accusation of Jewish ritual murder, see Thomas of Monmouth's *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*.

In this context, in his influential account of Hugh of Lincoln's martyrdom, Matthew Paris tells us that the Jews of Lincoln stole an eight-year-old boy, kept him locked up and fed him with "milk and other childish nourishment" while they summoned Jews from all the cities of England to participate in his sacrifice (*Chronicles* 138). When all the Jews had convened, they re-enacted the torture and crucifixion of Christ. Once the boy was dead, they took his body down from the cross and disembowelled it, "for what reason we do not know, but it was asserted to be for the purpose of practising magical operations" (*Chronicles* 139). Finally, they disposed of the body by throwing it into a well. Meanwhile, the boy's distraught mother was told by some neighbours that her son had last been seen entering the house of a Jew. She entered the house, saw her son's body in the well, and notified the city bailiffs, who pulled the body out of the well. While the mother and all the townspeople were lamenting, a man named John of Lexington fortuitously took charge of the situation: he reminded the people that Jews are known to commit such crimes "as a reproach and taunt to our Lord Jesus Christ," and then promised the Jew who owned the well, Copin (in other sources, Jopin), that he may spare his life in exchange for a full confession (139). Copin replied, "what the Christians say is true," and proceeded to confirm the accusation of an annual ritual murder (139). Copin also confessed that before the body was thrown into the well it was initially buried in the ground, but "the earth vomited it forth, and the corpse appeared unburied above ground" (140). John took Copin to prison, the canons of the Lincoln cathedral processed with the body and buried it in the church "as if it had been the corpse of a precious martyr" (140). Then the

King himself visited Lincoln and reproached John for promising clemency to Copin. When Copin sees that his death is imminent, he admits that almost “all of the Jews of England agreed to the murder of this boy” and is summarily drawn and hanged (140). The other ninety-one Jews directly responsible for the crime are then arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Eighteen of these were also hanged, but of the remainder, who were in fact released from prison later that year, Paris writes only that they “were kept in close confinement in the Tower of London, awaiting a similar fate” (141).

In a very different vein, Joseph Jacobs’s 1896 analysis of the available evidence (from government and archaeological records, chronicles, and ballads) concluded that the eight-year-old Hugh had accidentally fallen into a cesspool attached to a local Jew’s house. The partially decomposed body was discovered by the family almost a month later as they were preparing to host Jews from across England who were gathering in Lincoln for a wedding, and they quickly moved the body to another well where it was soon discovered. Among the crowd assembled around the unfortunate discovery was John of Lexington, a canon of the Lincoln cathedral, who reminded everyone of the rumour of the annual ritual murders committed by Jews. John then extracted a confession from Copin, and when Henry III arrived, some weeks later, he had Copin executed and the remainder of the Jews imprisoned. To this account, Langmuir adds fascinating details about the identity of John of Lexington, his role in convincing Henry III of the truth of the accusation, and his possible motives for doing so. In light of new evidence, Langmuir is also able to make some adjustments to Jacobs’s timeline.

For instance, Paris's account of John's immediate intervention is false. John was actually travelling with the king around Newcastle at the time that Paris reports him to be at the well where Hugh's body was discovered, and he became involved only after Henry asked him to lead the investigation into the death. Between the time of the body's discovery and the arrival of John and the king, local people had already established a shrine to Little Hugh, and the rumours of both ritual murder and the miracles performed by the new saint were gaining popular momentum—following the typical pattern of popular fervour versus official scepticism or even denunciation of anti-Jewish rumours. At this point, John managed to extort a confession from Copin/Jopin and to convince the king that it was legitimate. Copin's execution followed soon after, and, a while later, another eighteen were hanged. Of the seventy-two remaining prisoners, two were released through the intervention of a prominent Knight of Toledo and a Dominican active at court, respectively. The other seventy-one were convicted by a jury of twenty-four local knights and twenty-four citizens of Lincoln. But this conviction was followed by a wild twist:

The seventy-one were condemned to death together, apparently, with all Jews of England who had consented to the crime. But then, to the shock and surprise of many, either the Franciscans (according to Matthew Paris) or the Dominicans (according to the Burton annals) interceded, and the king's brother, Richard of Cornwall, to whom Henry had temporarily ceded his financial rights over Jews, intervened. In May [of 1256] the remaining seventy-one were liberated. (Langmuir 479)

As Langmuir points out, this surprising turn of events would not have come about unless the friars and Richard of Cornwall were convinced of the falsity of the charges:

Indeed, what is strange is that the king and his advisers had ever believed the charge in the first place. Educated men in high authority had not generally been receptive to the more outrageous accusations against Jews. No king, other than Henry III, had ever executed Jews for ritual murder, and Frederick II and Innocent IV had already officially declared their disbelief in the related blood libel. (Langmuir 479)

Not that this scepticism necessarily indicated a more enlightened view among the upper echelons of the royal and ecclesiastical courts; the Jews were simply too lucrative for the crown to allow mass executions of this sort. But, on another level, the damage had already been done. The incident strengthened popular prejudice against Jews: the written confession extracted by John of Lexington and the King's execution of eighteen Jews granted unprecedented legitimacy to popular fears and anti-Jewish hatred. A mere thirty-four years later, Edward II expelled the vast majority of Jews from England altogether.

To state the obvious, aided by the more recent accounts of the event by Jacobs and Langmuir, we can with almost total certainty reject the account provided by Matthew Paris. To put it in Girardian terms, we are able not only to see Paris's persecution text for what it is—an attempt to justify the scapegoating of the Jews—but also to correct those aspects of his account that are factually untrue. Because Paris's text bears the stereotypical marks of a persecution text, we know that the accusation of disemboweling the corpse for the purpose of black magic, for instance, is false; because we can compare Paris's account with less prejudicial versions, we can infer that Paris alters his timeline specifically to enhance the sense of supernatural intervention and thus lend support to the case for Hugh's canonization. But the question here is whether Chaucer was similarly able to decode the materials on which he drew for the *Prioress's Tale*: does

Chaucer present us with a persecution text, one that, along with Matthew Paris, lends support and justification to scapegoating, or does Chaucer's purpose in retelling the story relate to his larger interest in the ethics of shame and sacrifice, and specifically how the experience of shame constitutes the primary psychological motivation for exacting payment through blood?

Louise Fradenburg's 1989 article "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*" has set the tone for recent critical work on the tale in many ways. Fradenburg challenges earlier twentieth-century readings that attempted to explain away the tale's antisemitism by allegorizing it. Fradenburg insists on the need for Chaucer scholarship to recognize both the "historical specificity of late medieval anti-semitism [and its] status as a widespread cultural phenomenon" ("Criticism" 197).<sup>25</sup> While acknowledging the differences between modern and medieval antisemitism, Fradenburg cites Horkheimer and Adorno, who argue that antisemitism in every epoch shares certain basic characteristics, that it is "a deeply imprinted schema, a ritual of civilisation; the pogroms are the true ritual murders" (197). Thus, rather than simply accepting the Prioress's (and Chaucer's) antisemitism as an unfortunate late medieval convention, Fradenburg addresses the question of *why* antisemitism became conventional in the later Middle Ages,

---

<sup>25</sup> Sheila Delany takes precisely the kind of historicist approach Fradenburg calls for in considering the implications of the tale's setting "in Asye in a greet citee." According to Delany, the tale represents the complex, historical relationship between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, a relationship that was in fact a pressing political reality for Chaucer, who, as a well-travelled government official, would have had first-hand experience with Jews abroad and an awareness of the pressures exerted on the English court by the Islamic presence in Europe ("Chaucer's Prioress, The Jews, and the Muslims"). More recently, Lee Patterson has also sought to contextualize the tale historically, analyzing the tale in terms of its use and treatment of mimesis (in the conventional rather than Girardian sense of the word), both by comparing the *Prioress's Tale* to the genre it parodies and by posing the question of Christianity's mimetic relationship to Judaism ("The Living Witnesses of Our Redemption").

and, in particular, why it was so important in the Marian legends that the Prioress is drawing from in her tale. For Fradenburg, the cult of Mary epitomizes the late medieval desire for purity. Citing the work of Marina Warner (*Alone of All Her Sex*), Fradenburg argues that the “Virgin Mary figured, for the Middle Ages, the inviolacy of the mystical body of the Church, the unassailability of its beliefs, and its perdurability throughout history” (208). In the *Prioress’s Tale*, the killing of a little boy who is on the cusp of leaving infancy (at “seven yeer of age” [PrT 503])—the innocence that speaks in such perfect purity that it speaks without understanding—projects a Christian fear of its own internal divisions and difference, while the killing of the Jews projects a “fantasy of union, of a condition imagined as beyond all difference of subject and object” (“Criticism” 202).

One of the most interesting aspects of Fradenburg’s essay is her comparison of the *Prioress’s Tale* with a twelfth-century text by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, *The Book of Remembrance*. As Fradenburg points out, one of the impossibilities of purity is the way in which it makes mourning problematic. The project of shoring up the inviolable body of the Church, of keeping outsiders outside and insiders in line, requires what Kristeva calls “phobic language.” Phobia “involves the refusal to mourn,” which is a refusal to accept internal divisions, loss, and the Other as subject (202). And it is precisely the impossibility of this fantasy of union and purity, itself experienced as loss, that becomes the “ground for the phobic (and thus the xenophobic, the anti-semitic) experience of aggressivity and aversiveness” (“Criticism” 202). *The Book of Remembrance*



describes the massacre of a Jewish community in Würzburg from a Jewish perspective; it asserts the fact that accusations of murder against the community are both false and used as justification for antisemitic violence, and records the repetitive nature of the persecution. But, above all, *The Book of Remembrance* calls for mourning, for naming the dead and grieving their loss, and is thus “the counterpart to the phobic refusal to mourn” (203). In the *Prioress’s Tale*, by contrast, the fear of “vulnerability to embodiment,” of change and pollution, transmutes mourning into phobic violence. It is the task of the critic to undo the ideological grounds for that violence by recognizing that mourning in the *Prioress’s Tale*

is most profoundly mourning for the losses inflicted by Christian culture on itself, its self-repressions and self-silencings. But the projective character of the *Prioress’s Tale*—the extent to which it re-describes not only what medieval pogroms did to Jews, but also what Christian culture did to itself as what Jews did to little boys—cannot be registered with the necessary force until the Jewish texts themselves are read and heard. (203)<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> But recognizing the brutal facts of medieval antisemitism and violent persecution does not, in itself, answer the question that most often troubles Chaucer scholars about the *Prioress’s Tale*: that of Chaucer’s own position vis-à-vis the Prioress and the tale he writes for her. Michael Calabrese sums up the varieties of response to the question of Chaucer’s own opinion of the Prioress’s antisemitism thus:

Chaucer is anti-Semitic and we have to live with it; Chaucer’s *culture* is anti-Semitic and thus he is too by inclusion; Chaucer’s culture was not wholly anti-Semitic, and Chaucer satirizes those who were by creating insipid anti-Semites; the Prioress, not her maker, therefore is anti-Semitic, and Chaucer was a sensitive, tolerant man, ahead of his time and thus welcomed in our own. (74)

Of these three critical approaches, Fradenburg most clearly falls into the second camp. Although she (oddly) does not raise explicitly the question of Chaucer’s perspective, she argues that criticism which does *not* deconstruct medieval culture’s “representation of itself to itself” ends up participating “in the unmaking of the voice of the Jew” (203). Patterson, on the other hand, espouses the third option, and argues that Chaucer’s “self-restraint” in allowing “the tale to speak for itself” and thus defeat itself at the same time is “a sign of moral sophistication” (543). And Delany concludes that we will simply never know for certain what prejudices Chaucer may or may not have harboured. It is not at all inconceivable that Chaucer held antisemitic views, but it is a historical necessity that he lacked a post-Holocaust awareness of the devastation caused by the deep entrenchment of European antisemitism. Delany’s analysis introduces an important sense of historical specificity into the discussion of the Prioress’s antisemitism, and implies that we do not

Thus Fradenburg identifies the tale's internal resistance to change and growth as central to Marian piety in particular and the Christian desire for purity in general. Patterson notes a similar resistance but detects a tension between the Prioress's "absolutist desire for purity" on the one hand, and an avoidable historical contingency on the other. In part, this sense of "obstinate historicity" that threatens the Prioress's attempt to escape into "the absolutism of the eternal" is conveyed by the many thematic links between her tale and others, such as the *Shipman's Tale*, the *Nun Priest's Tale*, and the *Second Nun's Tale* ("Living Witnesses" 512). This is a point that shifts the focus from Chaucer's personal beliefs to the question of what the *Prioress's Tale* ends up doing in the context of the *Canterbury Tales*. In this context, the tale takes up, once again, the problem of sacrificial violence. This is the theme that links the deaths of the clergeon and the Jews, first and foremost, with the many sacrifices and reprisals that figure prominently on the pilgrimage. And in this context, it becomes difficult to maintain that the *Prioress's Tale* is, in fact, an instance of medieval culture representing itself to itself as a fantasy of purity that "attempts to conceal" its fantastic nature as well as the reasons for this fantasy (205).

Chaucer's practice throughout the *Canterbury Tales* is one that is, as many critics have observed, essentially relativizing or deconstructive. Another way of putting this is to say that Chaucer's poetic practice is one that self-consciously dramatizes the poet's role as a reader (of authoritative texts, of literary

---

have the information required to condemn, excuse, or justify Chaucer's own views. And yet, Patterson makes a valid point when he argues that it makes as little sense to equate the Prioress's opinion with Chaucer's as it does to assume that "Chaucer is the Reeve, or the Clerk, or the Pardoner" ("Living Witnesses" 520).

conventions) and a psychologist—that is, the poet as a figure much like the psychoanalytic critic herself. As a psychologist, Chaucer pays close attention to the forms of desire and self-deception operative in the formation of ideals such as purity. Thus, in addition to the thematic links identified by Patterson and the larger theme of sacrifice, it is important here to attend to the complex question of voicing that is central to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the *Pardoner's Prologue* are remarkable in the context of the *Tales* (and medieval literature generally) for the way in which they express the character and consciousness of their fictional tellers. These experiments in narrative as self-disclosure or, perhaps more accurately, narrative as confession, draw on sources such as the representation of the Old Woman and False Seeming from *Romance of the Rose* and, possibly, the confessions of the personified vices in Passus V of *Piers Plowman*. In medieval literature, then, the idea that a poet might allow evil or vice to speak in order to show its true nature is not unique to Chaucer. But what distinguishes Chaucer from Jean and especially Langland is the extent to which Chaucer's use of narrative as dramatic confession has the effect of individuating the speaker rather than clearly identifying him or her as an allegorical figure. Instead of presenting the reader with the obviousness of the speaker's vice and thus dictating a clear moral response, Chaucer's "multivocality" often serves to disorient the reader: —Chaucer makes the incorrigibility of the Wife and the perversity of the Pardoner interesting and compelling rather than repulsive. And, as many critics have argued from many different angles, this has the effect of interrogating the cultural systems (patriarchy, the Church) that have shaped the

confessing subjects rather than obscuring those systems in the representation of abstractions such as sin and vice. But, in the same way, Chaucer consistently refuses to give his readers unalloyed ideals. In the *Knight's Tale*, for example, Chaucer draws ironic parallels between the “verray parfit gentil” Knight and his protagonist: Theseus is the Knight’s counterpart and a projection of his own ideal self-image, but he embodies the contradictions of that ideal, and the “flour of chivalrie”—the best that medieval knighthood has to offer—is ultimately exposed as a rhetorical justification for violent self-aggrandizement.

Similarly, but to a much more disturbing effect, Chaucer draws ironic parallels between the childish Prioress and her protagonist, “a litel clergeon, seven yeer of age” (PrT 503).<sup>27</sup> Although the Prioress’s narrative is not intended by her to be a confession or self-disclosure, it does function like the *Knight's Tale* in the way that it shows shame ethics in action, and also dramatizes the intimate connection between shame and sacrifice—despite the Prioress’s overt intentions. We learn from the *General Prologue* that Madame Eglentine is demure, fastidious, and oddly girlish, with her prim and proper table manners, her

---

<sup>27</sup> That Chaucer’s Prioress is a strangely infantilized figure is almost universally acknowledged: in addition to Patterson and Fradenburg, whom I cite throughout, see also Mary Godfrey (“The Fifteenth-Century *Prioress's Tale* and the Problem of Anti-Semitism”), who compares the Ellesmere *Prioress's Tale* to versions that appear in fifteenth-century manuscripts (Harley 1704, 2251, and 2382). Godfrey observes that the fifteenth-century manuscripts omit the passages from the prologue that express the Prioress’s “humility and inability”—expressions “that link a passive—even masochistic—narrator with suckling children” (97). And, significantly, Godfrey’s study also points out that these versions which efface the Prioress’s childlike personality also downplay the brutality of the Jews who kill the little clergeon: several references to the Jews are omitted, as is the reference to the murder of Hugh of Lincoln. The “lack of reaction” to “Jews as Jews” Godfrey connects to the fading memories of England’s Jewish population and concludes that, at least for the owners and readers of these manuscripts, “anti-Semitism no longer represented . . . a viable reality” (108). For our purposes, the key point is the extent to which the antisemitic excesses of the tale are linked, even for medieval readers, to the Prioress’s particular voice and personality.

schoolgirl French, and her attempt at courtly refinement that comes off as silly affectation:<sup>28</sup>

And sikerly she was of greet desport,  
 And ful plesaunt and amiable of port,  
 And peined hire to countrefete cheere  
 Of court, and been estatlich of manere,  
 And to been holden digne of reverence.  
 But for to speken of hir conscience,  
 She was so charitable, and so pitous,  
 She wolde wepe if that she sawe a mous  
 Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.  
 Of smale houndes hadde she, that she fedde  
 With rosted flesh, or milk and wastel breed;  
 But soore wepte she is oon of hem were deed,  
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte,  
 And al was conscience and tendre herte. (GP 137-50)

Here Geoffrey indicates, with characteristic dry humour, that the Prioress's "gentil herte," like Theseus's, is a performance geared exclusively to producing a particular effect that can be seen and judged by others; it is an externally-oriented mode that assumes the presence of spectators. She takes great pains to imitate courtly behaviour (as she later, in her tale, tries to imitate childlike innocence); we are told not that she *is* "estatlich of manere" and held in high regard, but only that she *desires* to be. For the Prioress, as for the fictional knight who conforms outwardly to the code of honour, form and appearance are everything: her "conscience" is not a truly interiorized sense of self but consists of highly visible, sentimental reactions. She is deemed "charitable" and "pitous," not because of her moral judgments or charitable acts, but because she weeps when she sees a dead

---

<sup>28</sup> Cf. H. L. Frank ("Seeing the Prioress Whole"), who argues that the Prioress's courtly affectation is, in fact, an appropriate professional qualification, in light of the role that nunneries and monasteries played in courtly medieval society. As a prioress, Madame Eglantine would have been required to play hostess to courtiers and ladies using the priory as a kind of luxury hotel. Even if we accept's Frank's point for the sake of argument, however, it merely casts Chaucer's implicit critique of appearance and performance on a broader cultural level, rather than seeing it as a parody of the Prioress herself.

mouse and feeds delicacies to her lapdogs. The Prioress's staged, ersatz charity is thus emblemized in a piece of jewellery, an adornment to be donned and admired but removed whenever convenient: her "brooch of gold ful shene" inscribed with the motto, "*Amor vincit omnia*" (GP 161-62).

In particular, the extended description of the Prioress's dining etiquette lavishes such detail on a seemingly trivial aspect of her personality in order to leave no doubt that, for the Prioress, the manners in which she has been impeccably trained ("wel ytaught"—like an obedient child) take the place of morality:

At mete wel ytaught was she withalle;  
 She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
 Ne wette hir fingers in hir sauce depe.  
 Wel koude she carye a morsel and wel kepe  
 That no drope ne fille upon hir brest;  
 In curteisye was set ful muche hir leSt  
 Hir over-lippe wiped she so clene  
 That in hir coppe ther was no farthing sene  
 Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte;  
 Ful seemly after hir mete she raughte. (GP 127-36)

The Prioress's eating habits are modelled closely on the rules for feminine behaviour provided by the Old Woman in *Romance of the Rose*. The passage in Jean de Meun from which Chaucer borrows here stresses the *performance* of a woman who means to attract—and deceive—men. The overall point is one about the duplicity of women and especially of the female body: any repulsive defect (spots, sagging breasts, ugly feet, sour breath, even unkempt pubic hair) can be disguised or hidden, and the Old Woman instructs women on how—with the strategic placement of gloves, scarves, and stockings, ablutions of various kinds, and taking care about when and what one eats. The irony of the Old Woman's

discourse is that, as she relates the tricks of the trade of the “old game of love” to women on how to excite male desire for female gain, she also makes public the shameful secret of the female body: that it is indeed a body prone to the odours and blemishes that necessarily accompany bodily existence. The physical, potentially disgusting aspects of eating and imbibing are thus considered as another aspect of this shameful secret that requires careful policing and, above all, *staging* to produce the desired effect. Chaucer’s comment that the Prioress is careful to keep her lip clean so that she does not mix the grease from her food with her wine, “whan she dronken hadde hir draughte; / Ful seemly after hir mete she raughte,” echoes part of the passage on drinking decorum in particular, which stresses the importance of continence—control of intake but also output:

Now a lady must be careful not to get drunk, for a drunk, man or woman, cannot keep anything secret; and when a woman gets drunk, she has no defenses at all in her, but blurts out whatever she thinks and abandons herself to anyone when she gives herself over to such bad conduct.  
(*Romance* 231-32)

Excessive drinking is dangerous because it leads to excessive speech and excessive shows of emotion—in the sense of abandoning oneself in shameful exposure. But the Old Woman also gives advice to men—*apropos* the Prioress’s sentimentality—on women’s manipulative weeping: “A woman’s weeping is nothing but a ruse; she will overlook no source of grief. But she must be careful not to reveal, in word or deed, what she is thinking of” (231). Drunken emotionality, therefore—as an exposure of “whatever she thinks,” that is, the “truth” exposed in inebriation—is very different from the strategic performance of weeping, which is a kind of emotionality designed to *conceal* “what she is

thinking of.” The discourse that Chaucer draws from for his portrait of the Prioress is thus heavily imbued with the dynamics of secrecy and exposure, what is seen and unseen—desirability achieved through secrecy and control, by creating the illusion of having transcended the physical—and thus the shamefulness of physicality and exposure.

The close connections between the symbolism of table manners and larger social patterns of power and identity are illuminated by Margaret Visser. According to Visser, the table setting (one’s “place” signified within the boundaries demarcated by eating utensils) embodies the metaphor of the “ideally inviolable area allotted to each person” in the concept of honour, and the rules of etiquette that govern table manners reinforce the lines drawn around each portion. The table and our comportment when we sit at it, therefore, can be thought of as another version of the jigsaw of honour-bound identities:

The table represents the group; its edge is the group’s outline. A table, like a diagram, stresses both togetherness among the insiders, the ones given places and portions, and exclusion of those not asked: distinction and rejection or relegation to outside. People who have been “well brought up” . . . will not help themselves to other’s people’s food; they will not lean into other people’s areas, stick out their elbows, rest their elbows on the table (since that would necessarily mean occupying space outside their previously demarcated areas), or stretch their arms across spaces imagined as an invisible dome over every individual’s place. . . . We had to invent plates; to force people never to touch the food with their hands; to create forks, change the shapes of knives, and insist that people not point with the cutlery. All this artificiality was felt to be worth the effort, in part because it supported the embodiment of that image of ourselves as bounded areas. (*Beyond Fate* 15-16)

The Prioress’s fastidiousness, such that not even a minute particle of food is allowed to occupy a liminal or out-of-bounds space (she drops “no morsel,” spills neither “drope” nor “farthing”), suggests an exquisitely controlled artificiality



and, correspondingly, the Prioress's ideal self-image as an area not merely bounded but hermetically sealed. Moreover, in its radical purity, such an image requires intensive maintenance to defend against the shame of *unboundedness*, of boundaries broken or blurred between inside and outside, and the danger of losing one's portion to another. And, as her tale attests, the Prioress is as concerned with the mechanics of social purity—unity on the inside, exclusion from the outside—as she is with the mechanics of dining etiquette. But the self-image suggested in the *Prologue* also evinces an acute consciousness of the danger of arousing disgust in others—a fear of being seen as physically repulsive, which is, of course, a fear of shame that centres on the fact of embodiment. As Visser notes in *Rituals of Dinner*,

embarrassment [at the table] arises when one is revealed to be incompetent, in the presence of other people. Both factors are necessary: first wanting to look good, and second the audience to whose expectations one fails to measure up. . . . Any kind of falling off—thinking spaghetti may be eaten in one's hands and proceeding to do so, letting custard drip down one's beard, a sudden involuntary noise—reveals incompetence, and gives rise to the possibility of disgust and therefore to embarrassment, not only in the perpetrator but in everyone else as well, for embarrassment is contagious. Embarrassment arises not from wickedness but from *impropriety*, from not “fitting in” or “measuring up,” from letting everyone down and introducing into the company what everyone had hoped to avoid. (*Rituals* 299-300)

The main locus of the fear expressed in extreme propriety is the mouth, and, as Visser points out, the rules and regulations that monitor what goes in and what comes out, and the manner in which these acts are performed, are many and complex. Visser's two points together—table manners as a metaphor for honour relations and as strictures to protect against disgust—are apt in understanding how the Prioress's portrait provides insight into her tale. Both of these dimensions of

table manners centre on the question of ethics as propriety or conventionality, which is another way of saying ethics as a kind of categorization based on external factors: what is and is not seemly behaviour, what does and does not offend those in one's immediate vicinity, what falls within the conceptual and physical boundaries set by polite social interaction (revealing too-intimate details of one's personal life is, in the sense of transgressing the ideally bounded self, the same as spitting out one's food, drooling onto one's shirt—or sticking one's fingers in the sauce), and, ultimately, who does and does not belong. The Prioress's conventional ethics are thus very different in tone but similar in structure to the Knight's chivalric ethics: both understand ethics as a performance dictated by formal codes of behaviour, and selfhood as public, social, and material. As a knight "makes good" his honour through and on his body, so does the Prioress prove her shamefast purity in her cleanly wiped mouth, her gentle tears, her elegant clothing and jewellery. And, as in the *Physician's Tale*, these ethical orientations, precisely because they are rooted in the body, translate into a sacrificial imperative: everything must be paid off—"Ivel shal have that ivel wol deserve" (PrT 632). The Prioress's antisemitism, expressed most clearly and forcefully in the righteous satisfaction with which she reports the punishment of the Jews ("With torment and with shameful deth echon" [628]), is not, therefore, at odds with the gentility she attempts to project in the *General Prologue*: both are manifestations of the same conventional, materialist ethics of honour and shame.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to compare the apparent contradictions of the Prioress, who shows excessive tenderness toward small animals and excessive cruelty in her tale, to an account given by psychoanalyst Martin Wagh of Eichmann's demeanour during the Nazi war trials, in which he was being tried for his part in the Third Reich: "Day after day, in 1960, Eichmann listened to lists

If in the *General Prologue* the Prioress performs feminine courtliness, as narrator of her tale she performs the innocent piety of the clergeon's Mariolatry. The Prioress's adoration of Mary naturally lends itself to ideas associated with purity and maternity, and her prologue is marked by images of infancy and childhood, but also emphasizes the Prioress's self-conscious awareness of herself as telling and performing her love of and association with the Virgin. Praise of God is "parfourned" by "men of dignitee" but also

. . . by the mouth of children thy bountee  
 Parfourned is; for on the brest soukinge  
 Somtime shewen they thin heryinge.  
 Wherefore in laude, as I best kan or may,  
 Of thee, and of the white lilye flour  
 Which that the bar, and is a maide always,  
 To telle a storye I wol do my labour. (PrP 456-59)

The Prioress clearly does not consider herself in league with "men of dignitee," but a few lines later we see that she does associate herself with "soukinge" children:

My konning is so waik, o blissful queene,  
 For to declare thy grete worthinesse,  
 That I may the weighte nat sustene,  
 But as a child of twelf-month old or lesse,  
 That kan unnethes any word expresse,  
 Right so fare I; and therefore I yow preye,  
 Gideth my song that I shal of yow seye. (PrP 481-87)

The Prioress thus construes (and wants her audience to experience) her performance as the kind of praise that children "shewen" nursing at their mother's

---

of the atrocities he committed, without displaying any signs of interest or discomfort. However, when told that he had failed to comply with courtroom etiquette by not standing when the judge entered the room he became visibly distressed, blushed, stammered and was embarrassed to have been seen as breaching codes of deference to authority" (Pajaczkowska and Ward 5). Moreover, Wangh identifies this in terms of the difference between a guilt- and a shame-based ethical orientation; or, in Wangh's psychoanalytic terms, the "absence [in Eichmann] of an active superego or moral sense, which is replaced by an exaggerated ideal ego or sense of propriety, as an indication of a regressed psychopathology" (Pajaczkowska and Ward 6).

breast, singing or speaking as sucking: embodying such innocence and purity that they act instinctively and artlessly, as the little clergeon does when he sings the *Alma redemptoris* without understanding what it means. As Patterson points out, “the tale establishes the clergeon’s song as a model of linguistic innocence, a privileged speech that the Prioress seeks to imitate” (“Living Witnesses” 508). Fradenburg argues that the Prioress’s “nostalgia for the mother and the sentimentalism of childhood” (219) is coextensive with the tale’s phobic response to change and growth: the clergeon’s final entombment achieves the immobility and inviolacy the Prioress is seeking through her regressive imitation of infantile speech.<sup>30</sup>

It is significant, therefore, that Chaucer changes the age of the clergeon from ten, as in other versions of the story, to seven; as Marie Hamilton observes, in doing so, Chaucer suggests that the boy “is not merely a little child, but rather the representative of childhood itself on the threshold of accountability” (“Echoes of Childermas” 1). Hamilton’s paper traces the many parallels between the *Prioress’s Tale* and sermons preached by boy bishops for the Mass of the Innocents in fourteenth-century England. In this tradition, the ceremonies of the feast were conducted by schoolboys and choirboys and led by a boy bishop.<sup>31</sup> Hamilton reports that the custom, in which “the boys usurped the places of the deacons and priests for the whole twenty-four hours from Vespers on the eve of

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Patterson: “At virtually every level the Prioress’s Tale witnesses to a drive toward the pure, the immaculate, and the unalloyed—toward, that is, the ahistorical” (“Living Witnesses” 511); Fradenburg: the Prioress attempts “to leave behind adulthood, urbanity, making, fictionality, and change” (“Criticism” 219-20).

<sup>31</sup> See also Edmund Chambers’s introduction to the subject in *The Mediaeval Stage*: Book 2 on “Folk Drama” considers the the Boy Bishop performances alongside the Feast of Fools, May Games, Sword Dances, and other “dramatic” folk customs.

the feast to Vespers on Innocents' Day, . . . flourished in every country of Western Europe, and especially in England and France" (2). Hamilton argues that it is this custom that is alluded to in the opening lines of the *Prioress's Prologue* ("by men of dignitee; . . . by the mouth of children"); these lines also translate the Introit of the Mass for Holy Innocents, and presage echoes in the *Tale* itself, such as "O grete God, that parfournest thy laude / By mouth of innocentz, lo heere thy might!" (607-08). The Prioress's references to St Nicholas (514), Herod (574), Apocalypse 14:1-5, which describes the Celestial Lamb and the Holy Innocents (579-85), and "this newe Rachel" (627) further identify the *Prologue* and *Tale* not only with the general custom, but suggest the likelihood that the connection between the story of the murdered clergeon and the Mass of the Innocents was suggested to Chaucer by sermons he heard preached by boy bishops at Childermas services (Hamilton 6-8).

This context sheds further light on the tale's representation of child-parent relationships, in the sense of the parallelism between children who pretend to be adults and adults who pretend to be children. In each of the other child-parent relationships analysed by Mann, the distance between the innocence of childhood and the complexities of the ethical dilemmas faced by adults is vast. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, for example, the maternal figure of Custance (rather than the young son she must protect) is the model for which we ought to strive: she is an ideal figure who converts rather than massacres non-Christians in far-away lands. The similarities between the *Prioress's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* have prompted close analysis and comparison from several generations of Chaucer

scholars.<sup>32</sup> St Cecelia, however, provides a model of purity quite different from the clergeon, one who is at the same time authoritative and active in the world: in contrast to the unknowing speech of the clergeon, Cecelia's purity is manifest not only in virginity but in the wisdom that allows her to teach, debate, convert, even command the secular authority in the name of Christ. In the prologue to her tale, the Second Nun includes an invocation to Mary (and to Mary's mother Anne), as does the Prioress. But the Second Nun's appeal to these maternal figures is one of identification or aspiration. That is, while the Prioress invokes Mary because she aspires to be the *child* suckling at her breast, the Second Nun invokes Mary because she aspires to be like the *mother* who nourishes her children. The Second Nun's conception of purity involves the "businessse" of spiritual motherhood and thus emphasizes the evils of idleness and the importance of works—"feith is deed withouten werkis" (SecNP 5, 64). And, in contrast to the Prioress's "waik konning" that "kan unnethes any word expresse" (PrP 481, 485), the Second Nun prays for the "wit and space" to be worthy of her salvation. Indeed, of all of Chaucer's hagiographical tales, only the Prioress collapses the distance between the simple innocence of childhood and the ethical challenges of adulthood by making a child the central protagonist (while the adults are entirely peripheral) of a story that establishes infantile purity as the ideal.

There is thus a circularity in the narrative structure of the *Prioress's Prologue* and *Tale* that is created by the Prioress's identification with the

---

<sup>32</sup> More recent comparisons of the Prioress and Second Nun include Sturges, "The *Canterbury Tales*' Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority"; Holloway, "Convents, Courts, and Colleges: The Prioress and the Second Nun"; and Nolan, "Chaucer's Tales of Transcendence: Rhyme Royal and Christian Prayer in the *Canterbury Tales*."

clergeon, and by the generic expectation that we, too, are supposed to identify with him, that marks it out from the other tales: the *Prioress's Tale* is itself a song of praise “sung” by a “child” to the Virgin Mother; it tells the story of a little boy who sings a song of praise to the Virgin Mother, who is killed and then mourned by his mother, and it is modelled on a tradition in which little boys preach sermons about the killing of little boys and the mothers who mourn for them. It is as if the narrative as a whole is locked into a kind of static tableau—a tableau that closely resembles the *pietà*—and one that is dramatized in the Prioress's attempt to enact and embody in her own person the affective appeal of innocent childhood and tender emotionality. Despite the abundance of grief and tears in this picture, therefore, Fradenburg's point, that phobic language precludes mourning, is well taken, because this circularity and stasis mean that the suffering of mother and son only ever refers back to itself: mourning for the sake of mourning, without real meaning or purpose.

Consequently, unlike the suffering of mother and son in the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the suffering of the martyr in traditional hagiography, this tableau does not mobilize “*pit *” and conversion, but retributive violence only, because the Jews are executed before they can “benefit” from the powerful affective appeal of the Virgin's miracle:

With torment and with shameful deth echon  
 This provost dooth the Jewes for to sterve  
 That of this mordre wiste, and that anon.  
 He nolde no swich cursednesse observe.  
 Ivel shal have that ivel wol deserve;  
 Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,  
 And after that he heng hem by the lawe. (628-34)

Only *after* the punishment is meted out does the clergeon explain the miracle behind his continued singing; the abbot then removes the miraculous “grein” that has caused the singing and the people are able to lay the boy to rest. In this tale that registers only the Prioress’s own “arrested development” (Gaylord 634), there is no narrative progression: evil cancels out evil, but there is no good, no goal accomplished that imbues the suffering with sacrality and meaning. The clergeon’s body remains in a kind of suspended animation until it is buried, which again differs from the miracle of Cecelia, who also remains alive by divine intervention, but specifically in order to continue preaching and converting. Unlike the *Second Nun’s Tale* and the *Legend of Good Women*, therefore, the Prioress gives us a saint’s life which cannot be imitated, for the clergeon’s saintliness depends upon *not* knowing, *not* understanding, and *not* really doing anything: to put it another way, if the clergeon is killed because he is an imitator of Christ, it is an imitation which seems to have missed the part of the story where Jesus preaches and heals the sick, and instead moves straight out of infancy into death.

Paul Olson’s reading of the tale, in which he argues that the central issue is the failure of justice that denies the Jews a fair trial, has drawn heavy fire from critics of various ideological affiliations (*Good Society* 141-44).<sup>33</sup> Olson argues that, in “late fourteenth-century terms, the Prioress’s main failure in the temporal

---

<sup>33</sup> Fradenburg’s critique (“Criticism” 195-99) of Olson’s position rests on her judgement that the historicist approach “allows him to participate in the legitimation rather than the analysis of authority” (198). Along similar lines, Lee Patterson ravages Olson’s book in a review published in *Comparative Literature*. Patterson considers not only Olson’s reading of the Prioress but his entire book as an exercise in ill-tempered Robertsonian criticism, in which history is oversimplified, even misrepresented, serving “as a norm of interpretive rectitude [that] is monolithic and narrowly reductive” (189).



sphere is not anti-Semitism; it is injustice” (141). In other words, the basis for a historicist reading that sees Chaucer as critiquing the Prioress’s views rests not on positing Chaucer’s abhorrence of antisemitism, but on the notion that medieval readers would have recognized the Prioress’s provost’s violation of due process in his execution of the Jews. To be sure, it is not accurate to say that violation of due process is what is *really* going on in the tale in order to minimize or rationalize the tale’s antisemitism. But neither is it accurate to suggest that antisemitism and injustice are mutually exclusive problems. The question of what is meant by the phrase “by the lawe” is an important one, because it is, indeed, quite clear that, whatever is going in the *Prioress’s Tale*, the drawing and hanging of an entire community (it is unclear in the tale who did and did not “wiste”) without a trial for mere complicity or even plotting of murder does not accord with *official* medieval English law.<sup>34</sup> This problem recalls quite explicitly Prudence’s rebuke of Melibee’s desire for vengeance: “ye shul venge yow after the ordre of right—

---

<sup>34</sup> On the legal, economic, and political status of Jews in medieval England, see Cecil Roth’s study, *A History of the Jews in England*, which remains authoritative (see esp. 96-124). There are surprisingly few full-length historical studies on the topic since Roth’s. See also Vivian Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*. Richard Huscroft’s *Expulsion: England’s Jewish Solution* provides a good but admittedly brief and basic introduction to the subject (12-13). Roth points out the significant discrepancies in attitudes toward and treatment of Jews between secular and Church authorities. The Church tended to be more unequivocally anti-Jewish and did less than the state in trying to quell rumours of ritual murder committed by Jews. On the other hand, Innocent IV and Gregory X both issued canons against Jewish ritual murder stories, but these proscriptions were not enforced by the time of Urban VI and Boniface IX. The legal status of the Jews in England (from the end of the eleventh century to the “expulsion” in 1290), however, as a major source of income for the crown meant complete subjugation to the King’s economic interests on the one hand, but, on the other, considerable economic and legal privileges as well as guaranteed protection against violence or attack (Roth 102-03). Roth cites from the *Laws of Edward the Confessor*:

All Jews, wherever in the realm they are, must be under the King’s liege protection and guardianship, nor can any of them put himself under the protection of any powerful person without the King’s licence, because the Jews themselves and all their chattels are the King’s. If therefore anyone detain them or their money, the King may claim them, if he so desire and if he is able, as his own. (96)

that is to seyn, by the lawe—and nat by excesse ne by outrage” (1529). The usual way of reading the Prioress’s phrase “by the lawe” is in conjunction with the law of Talion, “an eye for an eye,” conveyed in the phrase, “Ivel shal have that ivel wol deserve”: the Jews, according to this reading, are fittingly punished in the world of the tale according to the principle of their own law.<sup>35</sup> But, accepting this reading for the sake of argument, it is unclear how the principle of justice in reciprocity is honoured by executing a whole community in exchange for one seven-year-old boy. The law of Talion is intended not to encourage vengeance but to limit it: literally speaking, if you lose an eye, you are entitled to an eye, but only an eye, in return. To exceed that limit would be to initiate a cycle of escalating retribution. To interpret “an eye for an eye” as justification for a mass execution is an error in logic analogous to Melibee’s belief that the maxim “maladies ben cured by hir contraries” (1017) means meeting violence with violence, when of course the “contrary” of violence is non-violence. Far from suggesting the poetic justice of their punishment, therefore, by alluding to the law of Talion here, Chaucer draws attention to the unlawful excess of the provost’s response. As in the *Knight’s Tale*, the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, and the *Merchant’s Tale*, Chaucer is eminently fond of suggesting the *possibility* of poetic justice, and the simplistic moral conclusion it produces, only to undermine the fittingness of the outcome and thereby complicate the moral we are to draw from it. The Prioress’s delicate sensibility may not permit her to relish the gory details of this

---

<sup>35</sup> This is Mann’s suggestion in her edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (990 n632); it is an inference shared by Patterson in his essay on the Prioress (“Living Witnesses” [513]) and, ironically, by Olson (*Good Society* [139]).

excessive punishment in quite the same way as the Knight describes the shattered bones and pouring blood of Theseus's supposedly civilized tournament. But that it is excessive, and ironically so, is attested by the historical reality of the judicial response to Little Hugh's death. As Langmuir's study shows, the secular authorities knew that the Jews were innocent and, despite intense popular pressure, ended up *pardoning* rather than executing the majority of the accused. What the disjunctions between the various versions show, among other things, is the frequent gulf between popular prejudice—what men say—and the *law* that is supposed to assert “what ech deserved.” That the Prioress is herself prone to precisely the kind of irrational excess that fueled popular hatred for the Jews Chaucer has already established in the *General Prologue*: in short, he suggests, the kind of person who mistakes sentimentality for compassion is precisely the kind of person who is apt to mistake mass hysteria for the voice of justice.

Moreover, it is possible to read the phrase “by the lawe” on another level, for, as we have seen, the crucial legacy of the case of Little St Hugh was a significant *change* in the way that Jews were treated by the law in England. The very fact of the controversy about who was actually executed shows that the legal and cultural status of the Jews in England was not static, but was, in fact, continually questioned and used in service of different goals at different times: when the Prioress quickly and almost casually asserts that, of course, the execution of the Jews was lawful, she begs the question, by what law is such a response considered just? By the standards of English law of Chaucer's time, what the Prioress describes is not lawful retribution but a pogrom. And at this

point it is important to remember that Chaucer's uncharacteristic use of the third-person in a supposedly first-person narration ("quod she") is unique in the *Canterbury Tales* and it purposely distances Chaucer from his narrator. Thus, when the Prioress says "by the lawe," the satire cuts both ways, emphasizing both the lawlessness that governs her tale and the way in which the law itself can be used to sanction grave injustices. That official theory and actual practice, both in the church and in medieval law courts, were often at odds, as Fradenburg points out, does not make the question of justice itself null and void; on the contrary, it adds credence and urgency to the notion that Chaucer is here, once again, examining critically the processes by which social and religious ideals are formed and hallowed. In particular, the question of justice in the *Prioress's Tale* recalls the question of "what ech deserved" first posed in the *House of Fame* and that recurs in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Knight's Tale*, and the *Physician's Tale*. This is a question that, simply by virtue of being raised, undermines the idea of morality as a performance that either fails and garners shame or succeeds and wins honour. The Prioress's aspirations of infantile purity are an attempt to evade the "businessse" and "werkis" championed by the Second Nun; they are an attempt, in other words, to avoid the question of moral agency and justice in the world, just as her exaggerated concern for etiquette and good manners in the *General Prologue* signals the propensity, borne out in her tale, for thinking about morality as matter in its place—regulating boundaries both physical and social—rather than "what ech deserved."

## Conclusion

In the Prioress's world, as in the Physician's and the Knight's, there is neither remedy nor grace to provide alternatives to violent sacrifice. And in none of these tales does Chaucer represent sacrifice in a positive light. In the *Knight's Tale*, the sacrifice of Arcite is represented as both meaningless and as politically expedient; in the *Physician's Tale*, the sacrifice of Virginia is similarly meaningless but also wholly unnecessary; in the *Prioress's Tale*, the sacrifice of the clergeon is unproductive at best and the sacrifice of the Jews is represented as unlawful excess, motivated only by the thirst for vengeance. As examples of hagiography, both the *Physician's Tale* and the *Prioress's Tale* fail spectacularly to provide the key element required of the genre: a model for imitation. Much like the *Legend of Good Women*, although in very different terms, the stories of Virginia and the little clergeon problematize the maintenance of purity through violence and sacrifice; indeed, spiritual purity misconstrued as physical and sexual purity is represented as a dead-end that actually interferes with the fulfillment of justice. Those who want to argue for a socially and religiously conventional, non-ironic Chaucer in these tales might point to the real intensity and emotion they would generate for a medieval audience; but the fact remains that the emotion generated goes nowhere, serves no larger purpose, and takes no clearly identifiable shape. We are then left with the improbable explanation of sheer artistic incompetence, on the one hand, and, on the other, the possibility that Chaucer is doing here with hagiography what he did with chivalric romance in the *Knight's Tale*: exploring the contradictions and pressures created by shame, and

the imperative of sacrifice that asserts itself when the interior space created by guilt is lacking.

Chapter Eight: Speech, Shame, and Penitence in the *Prologues* and *Tales* of the  
Pardoner, Manciple, and Parson

Well, it seems clear in the first place that, although it has excited us (or failed to excite us) in connexion with certain acts which are or are in part acts of *uttering words*, infelicity is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremony, all *conventional* acts: not indeed that *every* ritual is liable to every form of infelicity (but then nor is every performative utterance).

J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (18-19)

The great novelistic conclusions are banal but they are not conventional. Their lack of rhetorical ability, even their clumsiness, constitutes their true beauty and clearly distinguishes them from the deceptive reconciliations which abound in second-rate literature. Conversion in death should not seem to us the easy solution but rather an almost miraculous descent of novelistic grace.

René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (309-10)

In many ways, the *Canterbury Tales* is about speech. It is about the effects that spoken words have on other people and the world itself; it is also about the meaning (or meaninglessness) of spoken words. The collection as a whole is presented to us through the “voice” of Geoffrey, who not only reports what he sees and hears but attempts to perform the task of ventriloquist: he tells us that he will “pleinly speke in this matere, / To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere”; indeed, he will not only describe but will “speke hir wordes proprely” (GP 727-29). The individual tales are themselves represented as speech acts: tales “told” by particular people at a particular place and point in time (setting off from the Tabard Inn on a fine April morning, riding through the long afternoon shadows of Blean Forest), in the “hearing” and for the entertainment of an audience who reacts, with laughter, anger or grave silence, comments upon and often

misunderstands what has been said. And the subject matter of many of the tales is also concerned with speech. Disjunctions between spirit and letter, intent and word, shape Arcite's fate and threaten Dorigen's in narrative worlds governed by strict literalism. In the world of the Friar and the Summoner, on the other hand, intent is all and words are but "eyr y-broken": there is no essential difference between sermons, curses, and farts.<sup>1</sup>

Shame and penitence are also about speech, and are, like Geoffrey's ventriloquism, *performative* utterances: they are utterances that do not (or not only) describe an act but *are* the act.<sup>2</sup> To say "shame on you" or even just

---

<sup>1</sup> Britton J. Harwood has compared the image of the wheel and the use of "speche" in the *House of Fame*, the *Friar's* and *Summoner's Tales*. Taken together, Harwood points out, these three texts correspond to the three essential features of a sentence. Fame's palace is comprised of subjects, the House of Rumour is full of predicates, and the *Friar's* and *Summoner's Tales* convey the importance of "entente" or the "illocutionary force" of an utterance.

<sup>2</sup> On performative utterances and the idea of "illocutionary force," see J. L. Austin's classic analysis, *How to Do Things with Words*. See also Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, especially pages 80-84 and 152-200.

Shoshana Felman brings Austin's insights on the performative to bear on literary discourse in a way that has, along with Butler's work, given the idea of performativity prominence in literary studies and theory: *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*. Derrida offers a deconstructionist response to Austin in his essay "Signature Event Context." John Searle published a scathing response to Derrida's critique, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida"; Derrida replied in turn with "Limited Inc a b c. . . ." The main texts of this debate between Searle and Derrida have also been published, along with an interview between Gerald Graff and Derrida, in a volume entitled *Limited Inc*.

Despite the notorious rancour between Derrida and Searle, Derrida's initial response to Austin was quite favourable. In particular, Derrida appreciates the way in which Austin's "discovery" of the performative limits the applicability of the truth/falsity distinction in linguistics. As Mark Alfino notes, "[according to Derrida], Austin's insight is to conceive of communication more in terms of the transmission of force than the transmission of content (i.e., information), but he is wrong to characterize communicative action in general as the determination of a context by a set of intentions and conventions" (Alfino 145). In place of Austin's insistence on "felicity conditions," or the set of conditions that must be met in order for a performative to be successful, Derrida insists on the "irreducible absence of intention or attendance to the performative utterance, the most 'event-ridden' utterance there is" ("Signature" 18-19). Derrida also introduces the notion of "iterability" to the concept of the performative. In other words, while Austin connects the meaning of a performative with the intention of the speaker and the immediate context in which it is uttered, Derrida argues that it is precisely the "iterability," the possibility that a performative can be repeated or imitated in other contexts, thereby *detached* from the intention of the speaker,



“shame” can perform a powerful act of censure or even humiliation. The act of shaming can be accomplished less overtly through other choice words, too. The Reeve feels shamed and thus enraged by the Miller’s tale of a hapless and humiliated carpenter—he feels the humiliation of the (fictional) Miller’s fictional character as his own humiliation—while the Friar and the Summoner take turns shaming by creating cartoon images of each other through words.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in Chaucer’s time, penitence had become coextensive with auricular confession: shrift of heart was required, but only when it was joined to shrift of mouth could it be institutionally sanctioned and granted absolution.<sup>4</sup> Shaming speech and

---

that gives the performative its meaning: “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’?” (“Signature” 18).

Derrida’s contribution to speech act theory has proven influential for subsequent theorists, but Searle has not been his only critic. Shoshana Felman argues, *contra* Derrida, that Austin places at the forefront of his analysis the idea that “the capacity for misfire is an inherent capacity of the performative” (55). Judith Butler also criticizes Derrida’s reading of Austin, but specifically for the way in which it “[paralyzes] the social analysis of forceful utterance” (*Excitable Speech* 154). With Butler, Felman, and Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling*), I want to apply Austin’s central insight about how the force of a performative operates in a social, political, and embodied context; in this case, the context of the social world of the *Canterbury* pilgrimage. As Butler points out in her response to Derrida, if we approach “the question of the performative from a variety of political scenes, . . . [we compel] a reading of the speech act that does more than universalize its operation on the basis of its putatively formal structure. If the break from context that a performative can, or in Derridean terms, must perform is something that every ‘mark’ performs by virtue of its graphematic structure, then all marks and utterances are equally afflicted by such failure, and it makes no sense to ask how it is that certain utterances break from prior contexts with more ease than others or why certain utterances come to carry the force to wound that they do, whereas others fail to exercise such force at all” (*Excitable Speech* 154). It seems to me that an analysis of shame may shed considerable light on the question of why certain utterances come to carry the force to wound that they do; understanding shaming as a speech act, both in terms of (some of its) felicity conditions, its illocutionary and perlocutionary force, might also point in the direction of “an account of the social iterability of the utterance” that Butler finds lacking in speech act theory.

<sup>3</sup> General discussions of speech act theory in relation to Chaucer include Harry Logan, “Speaking of the *Canterbury Tales*: The Tales as Speech Act”; George Petty, “Power, Deceit, and Misinterpretation: Uncooperative Speech in the *Canterbury Tales*,” both of which I discuss below.

<sup>4</sup> If we follow strictly Austin’s taxonomies, however, some interesting distinctions between shame and confession arise. First of all, the sacrament that is comprised of confession,

penitential speech are, in turn, closely connected in that both are acts of exposure: shaming speech exposes the failure or weakness of someone else, while penitential speech exposes one's own failures and weaknesses. And each has its own set of felicity conditions, "the things which are necessary for the smooth or 'happy' functioning of a performative" (Austin 14). Indeed, Austin suggests that understanding illocution (what exactly a given speech act *does*) is only possible if we can first identify the conventions—the circumstances and intentions of the speaker, for instance—that give the utterance its force, what Austin calls the "total speech situation."

Despite their similarities, shame and penitence as speech acts also differ in significant ways, and these differences have a lot to do with their respective sets of felicity conditions. The felicitous verbal performance of penitence depends above all upon the intentionality of the speaker or, more specifically, on contrition. In this, successful confession seems to involve a kind of performative that has to do with intentionality more than other kinds of performatives do. The condition of intentionality tethers the penitential speech act quite closely to a

---

penance, and absolution is also comprised of several different kinds of performatives as well as constative or descriptive speech. Confession involves the description of past thoughts and actions but is also an example of a commissive utterance, a performative the purpose of which "is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action" (Austin 156). (Other commissives include promise, vow, proposal, and favour.) Penitential speech, in which the penitent expresses contrition and regret for the sins he is confessing, I would take to be an example of behabitive speech, which relates primarily to social behaviours (of self and other) and reactions. This category would also include shame, while Austin lists apologize, thank, deplore, congratulate, sympathize, and welcome as possible behabitives, and notes that in this category "there is a special scope for insincerity" (159). Absolution is an example of speech more clearly distinct from commissives and behabitives, which overlap each other in many ways; it is an example of a verdictive—a kind of judicial act, an act which delivers a verdict or finding. Incidentally, both the act of shaming and of accepting or expressing shame (both "shame on you" and "I am ashamed") are "behabitive." But the two forms of guilt (judicial and affective) correspond to two different aspects of the performative: to assign guilt is verdictive but to admit or accept guilt is "commissive" (see Austin, esp. 147-63). Searle builds on Austin's distinctions here, but offers slightly redefined categories of the performative, in *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*.

particular meaning at a particular place and time: intentionality means that the act must be voluntary, and thus that the speaker has a great deal of control over the meaning and reception of the words he utters. Shame as performative speech, however, is not necessarily tied to the intentionality of the speaker or the listener. Compared to penitential speech, therefore, there are a vast number of conventional circumstances in which shame can be successful or “happy” as a speech act. In other words, it is not particularly difficult to shame someone; indeed, often it is difficult *not* to. Shame operates in speech like a kind of free radical, popping up where it is not intended or expected, eliciting reactions and responses that are unforeseen or unwelcome. This unpredictability or resistance to delimiting conventions is related, as Austin recognizes in the passage at the head of this chapter, to the “conventional” dimension of the performative. Judith Butler explains the difficulty that attends the performative’s conventional aspect this way:

The illocutionary speech act performs its deed at the moment of the utterance, and yet[,] to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment. The “moment” in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of the utterance. Austin’s claim, then, that to know the force of the illocution is only possible once that “total situation” of the speech act can be identified is beset by a constitutive difficulty; . . . it seems that part of what constitutes the “total speech situation” is a failure to achieve a totalized form in any of its given instances. (*Excitable Speech* 3)

Here, Butler elucidates an aspect of Austin’s theory that seems more relevant for shaming speech than for any other: the moment of shame exceeds itself in past and future directions, in the sense that shame is highly context-dependent (performing its deed at the moment of the utterance) and yet so entirely

unpredictable—in many cases, the shame of shame consists in its unexpectedness. Butler is particularly interested in the illocutionary force of hate speech, and so she raises another relevant point specifically in relation to the fact that performatives are capable of inflicting a certain kind of injury:

The speech situation is thus not a simple sort of context, one that might be defined easily by spatial and temporal boundaries. To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. Indeed, it may be that what is *unanticipated* about the injurious speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control. (4)

In the *Canterbury Tales*, the unanticipated jolt of the injurious speech act that puts its addressee out of control, that *shames*, is dramatized repeatedly in the interactions between the pilgrims, and provides the content of nearly all of the tales they tell. Indeed, the whole enterprise can be summed up thus: pilgrims shaming each other by telling stories about shame (the shame of the defeated knight, the cuckolded husband, the fallen woman, the raped woman, or the woman threatened with rape, to name a few).

But if the pilgrimage is one that progresses by means of narrative imagined as speech acts, then, in concluding the journey, the *Parson's Tale* seems to silence all narrative, as we move from the material world of diversity, multi-vocality, art, and agency, to the spiritual world of unity and eternity; from pilgrim tellers vying for “space to speke” in the social parliament “of sondry folk,” to the solemn monologue of divine *auctorite*. In the world of the *Canterbury* pilgrims, telling stories and spreading “tidings” is inextricable from the social and political dynamics of honour and shame. In “quiting” the *Canterbury Tales*, therefore, the Parson affirms the ethical and spiritual primacy of guilt over shame, in the

experience of contrition that leads to the act of confession in sacramental penance, but he simultaneously rejects the “fables” the pilgrims have told in favour of the “sentence” of religious truth. This affirmation thus raises the question of the relationship between guilt and narrative, guilt and art: for all of its unpredictability and violence, the shame of fallen humanity lies at the root of great art, of the “fables” that men and women tell to justify who they are, what they have done and what they have lost, as the shaming speech acts that constitute the pilgrims’ tale demonstrate. As Claire Pajaczkowska writes, shame constitutes a deep resource for artistic expression because “the loss of paradise is a prerequisite for the beginning of narrative, and of self-consciousness, an ego or subject-self that exists only in a world of language, divisions, rules, time and frustration. Loss is what opens up a space that allows narrative to move forward” (130). If we attempt to redeem or mitigate this loss in an ethics of guilt that liberates the individual from the burden of moral perfectionism, at the same time as it posits a burden of infinite responsibility for the other, what room is there for art and narrative? The choice with which we appear to be left at the close of the *Canterbury Tales* is either shame, and the violence it creates, but also life and diversity and all things interesting and delightful, or the guilt that the Parson calls us to remember and confess, and with it the *end* of interest and delight.

In this chapter, however, I want to argue that, according to Chaucer, this choice is apparent but not actual: not only does guilt in the *Canterbury Tales* not interfere with art and narrative, but it is what makes speech and language, or least a certain kind of speech and language, possible in the first place. The conclusion

of the *Canterbury Tales* thus has to do with the *possibility* of speech and art. As Austin observes, every performative utterance is conventional—dependent upon certain conventions for its success—and is therefore prone to infelicity; and even though it is not the case that all speech acts are necessarily doomed to miscommunication, they do seem to fail more often than they succeed. Infelicity is an ill to which all conventional speech acts are heir, and as shadows are falling on the road to Canterbury, we come very near indeed to the end of speech altogether. And yet the telling continues; indeed, despite the descent into several crisis moments along the way, moments that threaten the “pleye” of speaking, the social parliament, Chaucer is so successful in creating the sense of an ongoing conversation that critics have been debating for generations whether or not the *Canterbury Tales* can be considered a finished work. What saves the pilgrims from a final silence? In this chapter I will argue that, first of all, in the *Canterbury Tales*, the end of storytelling is associated with or imagined as violence, and, secondly, that it is the recognition of guilt in penitence that saves the pilgrims—not in the sense of salvation from damnation—but from silence and violent disintegration.

In order to make this argument, I am going to compare the prologues and tales of the Pardoner, the Manciple, and the Parson, a grouping of tales particularly concerned with the relationship between shame, penitence, and speech. Each of these considers the problem of speech in terms of what Paul Taylor has phrased the “moral consequences of a breach of identity between thought, word, and deed” (“Peynted Confessiouns” 117), in conjunction with the

equally problematic relationship between shame and penitence. The Pardoner, the Manciple, and the Parson each fix upon the question of “entente”: the affective, moral, and purposive orientation of the speaker which gives the speech act its illocutionary force, a force which is, as Austin points out, the centrally important feature of a performative utterance.<sup>5</sup> In the Pardoner’s speech, in general as he describes his own speaking and preaching practices, and in particular as he “confesses” his villainy, narrates his tale, and provokes his fellow pilgrims on the road to Canterbury, “the locutions change incessantly, but the ‘entente’ remains the same” (“Speche” 347).<sup>6</sup> As the Pardoner states quite clearly,

. . . min entente is nat but to winne. . . .  
 . . .  
 Thus kan I preche again the same vice  
 Which that I use, and that is avarice.  
 But though myself be gilty in that sinne,  
 Yet kan I maken oother folk to twinne  
 From avarice, and soore to repente.  
 But that is nat my principal entente;  
 I preche nothing but for coveitise. (PardP 403, 427-33)

Taylor points out the radical implications of the Pardoner’s rhetorical practices this way: Augustine argued that the evil of lying consists in the liar’s intent to deceive rather than in the meaning or effect of the words (*On Lying* II.iii; Taylor 118), while both Paul and Augustine affirm the notion that God can turn even evil intent to good ends (Rom. 3:7-8; II Cor. 6:8; Taylor 117-18). The

---

<sup>5</sup> “With the performative utterance, we attend as much as possible to the illocutionary force of the utterance, and abstract from the dimension of correspondence with facts” (Austin 145).

<sup>6</sup> So Harwood describes the corrupt friar in the *Summoner’s Tale*. Note that the Pardoner’s “theme” as well as his intent is always the same (“*Radix malorum est cupiditas*”), but that is not to say that his illocutions are always the same. What Harwood says of the corrupt friar is also true of the corrupt Pardoner: he “uses a series of different performatives or illocutions [e.g., warnings, promises, condemnations, demands, requests] with always the same perlocutionary object in mind,” that is, monetary gain (“Speche” 347).

Pardoner, however, goes further when he suggests “that evil can *do* good, that an evil intent can use sacred truth as its dupe in the ultimate service of God” (Taylor 119). On the one hand, what Harwood observes of speech in the *Friar’s* and *Summoner’s Tales* is also true for the Pardoner: “If every locution moves toward the same end, has the same perlocutionary object, then all sentences in some sense mean the same thing—which is to say that they mean nothing” (348). In the Pardoner’s usage, language itself becomes a “gaude,” and, like Thomas’s generous fart, emptied of any *stable* meaning except to insult its recipients. On the other hand, the Pardoner leaves open the possibility that listeners may derive true spiritual benefit from his performative utterances, and thereby adds a kind of proviso which places the onus of interpretation on his audience: the Pardoner, in other words, reverses Augustine’s emphasis from intent to effects. This reversal shifts the locus of agency in the speech act and thus the locus of meaning from speaker to listener in the sense that the listener becomes responsible for how he or she decides to respond, whether to take the spiritual benefit proffered or to reject it because of speaker’s malign intent.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See also Ann Astell’s reading of the Pardoner (“The *Translatio* of Chaucer’s Pardoner”). Astell similarly explores the Pardoner’s preaching and speaking practices, but particularly in terms of the metaphorical relationships between the Pardoner and the figures in his tale: “the whole of the *Pardoner’s Tale* emphasizes the confluence, the interchange, even the underlying identity of the rioters and the Old Man as *translationes* of each other. At the same time, the confessional frame defines them as *translationes* of the Pardoner who represents himself in the tale in the form of a doubled otherness” (427). According to Astell, the Pardoner’s characteristic mode of speaking exploits the “indeterminacy of *translatio*” (412)—the inherent slipperiness of metaphorical language—and “reflects, at a deeper level, the Pardoner’s fundamental alienation from his own self, a self darkly available to him only in the shifting, protean images of exchange” (426). Astell’s emphasis on the Pardoner’s self-alienation, and her deft analysis of the tale’s ever-shifting symbolism, which she describes as “an imagistic commerce so fraught with unconscious stirrings that no consciously constructed typology (including allegories of avarice) can contain it” (427), are particularly insightful.



For the Manciple, the intent that lies behind speech is at once inaccessible and irrelevant. Because the speech in question is that of a crow who cannot be said to intend anything but is able merely to “countrefete the speche of every man / He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale” (ManT 134-35), whether the crow means to help Phebus or to hurt him is impossible to ascertain. And, for the Manciple, it does not really matter: the moral he derives from his tale does not distinguish between malicious versus well-meaning speech, but counsels near-total silence (as per the Manciple’s “dame”): “spek nocht . . . / Dissimule as thow were deaf” (ManT 346-47). But the Pardoner’s subversion of effect over intent and the Manciple’s injunction against speech are contrasted with the speech taught by the Parson, whose tale offers “the goode wey . . . cleped penitence” (ParsT 694). The Pardoner puts too much distance between perlocution and illocution, divorces effect from intent, which results in a kind of proliferation of empty rhetoric—an extravagant use of words (exhortations, exempla, threats) whose artifice is inversely proportional to the meaning they communicate. The Manciple, on the other hand, does not put enough distance between perlocution and illocution, intent counts for nothing and the effect is always the same: violence and division. The result of this illocutionary collapse is precisely what the Manciple advocates: speechlessness and the lack of narrative. Thus, his tale is a generically confused, humourless fabliau or moral-less fable, whose plot disintegrates into an ironically prolix diatribe against speech; it is, as Mark Allen observes, an “anti-tale” (752).

The Parson offers a response to both extremes, to speech and narrative as deception on the one hand and utter silence on the other: the Parson’s “verray

parfit penitence” is supposed to unite “contricioun of herte” and “confessioun of mouth,” intent and effect, interior meaning and external performance (ParsT 696). In so doing, the *Parson’s Tale* attempts to “knitte up wel a greet matere” (ParsP 28) by proffering a remedy for the ills of illocution. The Parson, therefore, does not so much “dismantle,” “cancel out,” “destroy,” “reject,” or “abandon” what has come before in the other pilgrims’ tales so much as he answers the questions and settles the disputes that they have raised.<sup>8</sup> This remedy hinges upon the proper use of speech: a use which circumscribes shame—sets limits to its power to define identity—in the development of a language through which to express an interior, penitential self, a consciousness-as-penitence, in which the “I” is separate from the act. What the *Parson’s Tale* accomplishes, specifically in response to the problems set out by the Pardoner (the Parson’s alter-ego, as it were) and the Manciple, is a defense of the possibility of speech and narrative without shame: the possibility of non-sacrificial poetic expression.

#### Falling Ill(ocution): Performing Shame in the *Pardoner’s Prologue* and *Tale*

The Pardoner’s fascinating and enigmatic psychology has been analysed in a variety of terms. He has been diagnosed as a *eunuchus non Dei* (Miller), as spiritually “sick” (Trower), as suffering from the medieval malaise of despair (Patterson, “Chaucerian Confession”), and the modern malaise of disenchantment (Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self*). There is also, of course, the host of readings

---

<sup>8</sup> These descriptions (and others like them) of the *Parson’s Tale* give some indication of the tale’s status in much Chaucerian criticism. I borrow these quotations from Siegfried Wenzel’s recent survey of “The Parson’s Tale in Current Literary Studies” (2000). I discuss critical views of the tale in greater detail below.

that focus on the Pardoner's indeterminate gender and/or sexuality, whether he is a "geldyng," a "mare," or a homosexual, and why it matters.<sup>9</sup> Although none makes use of the idea of shame *per se*, I would argue that it is a relevant underlying concept for each of these disparate approaches. Understanding the Pardoner's shame brings together the spiritual and physical dimensions of his condition, sheds light on the poetics of his tale, and connects him and his tale to the concern with penitence that shapes the conclusion of the *Canterbury Tales*. In particular, the Pardoner appears as a figure of thwarted penitence: he is, like Gawain, unable to move beyond his own sense of shame.

The Pardoner and his tale continue to fascinate because, like the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner strikes modern readers as a highly subversive figure, as aware of the limitations of authoritative medieval discourses as modern readers believe themselves to be. This sense of the Pardoner as a modern consciousness derives in part from the fact that Chaucer combines source material from Jean de Meun, drawing on the speech of False Seeming for the *Pardoner's Prologue*, and Innocent III, incorporating many passages from *De miseria condicionis humane* into the Pardoner's sermon. This combination creates a twisted but compelling

---

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Monica McAlpine, "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters," an article which broke ground on the issue in many ways. McAlpine bases her argument that the Pardoner should be understood as a homosexual rather than a eunuch on historical linguistics, in response to the analysis of the Pardoner's physical characteristics by the historian of medieval science Walter Clyde Curry. Carolyn Dinshaw ("Eunuch Hermeneutics") connects the indeterminacy of the Pardoner's gender to the fundamental indeterminacy of language: the Pardoner's lack "embodies a truth about language" that opposes and exposes the idea, central to "orthodox, 'straight' hermeneutics," that the body of the text is a feminine body to be stripped and penetrated by its male readers (108-09). Glenn Burger argues that the tales of the Pardoner and Physician interrogate the idea of the "natural" ("Doing What Comes Naturally"); Stephen Kruger claims the Pardoner as an important figure for gay studies and queer theory ("Claiming the Pardoner"). Jeffrey Myers also studies historical linguistics, but departs from earlier readings by suggesting that the Pardoner be read as a female eunuch or a cross-dressing woman ("Chaucer's Pardoner as Female Eunuch").

juxtaposition of blatant malice and orthodox gloom that seems not only to parody clerical corruption, but the very theological principles underlying medieval penitential and preaching practices. Another reason for the persistent fascination with the Pardoner is the fact that, of all the pilgrims, his voice is the most clearly individuated—even more so than the Wife of Bath’s, I would argue—a voice that, for all of its traditional sources and analogues, seems to speak out of a fully realized, individual consciousness. While the Pardoner shares with False Seeming a kind of perverse honesty about his mendacity (“I preche nothing but for coveitise” [PardP 432]; “I pursue nothing but fraud; . . . I am a hypocrite” [Romance 195, 197]), he differs from his precursor in the remarkable fact that he is *ashamed* of himself for doing so. While False Seeming speaks as vice personified, detached from the social world in which he claims to wreak havoc, the Pardoner speaks as a man who *needs* his audience—their attention and approval—but at the same time holds them in contempt, who wants to be accepted by the community but despairs of ever being so, and thus pretends as if he does not care. It is the complex dynamics of shame, in other words, that create a powerful sense of the Pardoner’s psychological depth.

Both the Pardoner’s psychology of shame and the linguistic conditions which lead to the failure of his speech act are closely connected to the setting of his prologue and tale: the “pestilence” of the late fourteenth century and its effect on penitential literature and practices. In the *Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale*, the plague setting provides in part (along with sources and genre) the felicity conditions of his confession and sermon. That is, the spiritual urgency of penance

in the face of imminent death provides the set of conventions that give the Pardoner's sermon and confession both their illocutionary force and shape their perlocutionary object. But if, as Sedgwick and Parker observe in their play on Austin's remarks about the "ills" of illocution, "a performative utterance is one, as it were, that always may get sick" (*Performativity* 3), the context of plague and decay also serve to undermine the Pardoner's performance; his rhetoric becomes infected, so to speak, by the very forces of moral and spiritual disintegration from which he is attempting to profit and he is ultimately unable to achieve illocutionary happiness.

In general, literary reactions to the Black Death in England were rather understated compared to the "hysterical" responses of Continental writers such as Boccaccio and Guillaume de Machaut (Snell 12). Instead of detailed reporting on the atrocities of the plague, English poets like Gower and Langland tended to transmute the horror into a kind of medico-spiritual critique of the social and political evils that they believed prompted the divine retribution in the first place—the project of diagnosing the ills of the times. In *Piers Plowman* (as in various fourteenth-century sermons), for example, we are told that "thise pestilences were for pure sinne" (B.V.13). But the plague is not only construed as a consequence; it is also frequently a physical manifestation of the spiritual diseases plaguing the hearts of men. In Gower's prologue to his *Confessio Amantis*, for example, the inherent unity of the three estates means that the moral decay of the church spreads like a contagion to the state and the commons, infecting the entire social order. Thus, "holy cherche . . . / That scholde be the

worldes hele / Is now, men sein, the pestilence” (246, 278-79). Siegfried Wenzel has traced what he considers to be traditionally English sentiments in sermon literature of the period, in which calls for sinners’ repentance draw on images of the transience of life and the horror of death for a sense of dramatic urgency. He considers this “tendency to link all phenomena to human actions and behaviour” as the main reason behind the apparently minimal impact of the plague on English art and letters (“Pestilence” 142). In other words, far from constituting a traumatic break with ordinary life, the Black Death was almost a confirmation of a pre-existing morbidity and preoccupation with sin.

And yet, precisely because of the indiscriminate, all-consuming power of death—striking rich and poor, young and old, and presumably, guilty and innocent alike—severe outbreaks of the plague did not fit easily into attempts at explanation or moralization. Perhaps in consequence, the social crises engendered by the plague took a variety of contradictory forms. Indeed, rather than following as an effect from sin, the plague often precipitated periods of moral decay and profligacy. Just as the three rioters in the *Pardoner’s Tale* are found in a tavern indulging in a wide range of vices while “Death” ravages the countryside, contemporary reports attest to the profound moral chaos during and after outbreaks: if death is apt to strike at any moment, it seems that many chose to eat, drink, and be merry while they could.

Others, however, chose to seek a remedy through violence. René Girard opens his seminal work *The Scapegoat* with a discussion of medieval “persecution texts.” In particular, Girard offers a close reading of Guillaume de

Machaut's *Judgment of the King of Navarre*, which describes a massacre of Jews believed responsible for the plague. Girard's emphasis on the ways in which the scapegoat phenomenon depends upon a chaotic breakdown of distinctions and categories, and his careful attention to the peculiar logic behind sacrifice, is instructive. Girard observes that "all the sources" for descriptions of the social effects of the plague "speak endlessly of the absence of difference, the lack of cultural differentiation, and the confusion that results" (13). Moreover, as Guillaume's text shows, this breakdown of distinctions goes hand in hand with a pervasive inability to perceive the actual causal links between disparate events; all aspects of the catastrophe are believed to be manifestations of the divine judgment:

Even in retrospect, all the real and imaginary collective scapegoats, the Jews and the flagellants, the rain of stones and the *epydemie*, continue to play such an effective role in Guillaume's story that he never perceives in them the single entity that we call the "Black Death." The author continues to see a number of more or less independent disasters, linked only by their religious significance, similar in a way to the ten plagues of Egypt. (*Scapegoat* 4)

Girard's discussion suggests that the sacrificial impetus of medieval plague, although it may seem thoroughly irrational from a modern perspective, is governed by a kind of logic. For Guillaume de Machaut, the plague itself is only one aspect of a larger crisis, the bodily manifestation of a deeper, moral and spiritual pollution. While the sickness is a result of the poisoned rivers, the Jews' mere presence in the community provokes God's wrath in the form of signs in the skies, a rain of stones, etc. In other words, Jews are a polluting presence *and* they commit polluting acts; they are "treacherous and contemptible" because they

commit evil acts, and they commit evil acts because they are contemptible (Guillaume qtd. in Girard 2). The sacrifice of the Jews, then, fulfills a dual purpose in that it both punishes wrongdoers *and* appeases an angry God. The essential characteristic of persecution texts is this belief in the guilt of the victims, which constitutes an explanation for the crisis and a justification for the violence. Girard's study also draws attention to the fact that sacrifice has certain structural features that remain constant although the particular identity of the victim varies with the context. And, indeed, although England did not see plague-related violence to the degree recorded on the Continent, and had expelled its own Jewish community in the thirteenth century, marginal groups such as beggars and even pilgrims were frequent scapegoats during "pestilence time."

In his recent study of the persecution of minorities in medieval Europe, David Nirenberg also identifies the Black Death of 1348 as a key moment in the history of violence against Jews in Spain. As Nirenberg points out, although reactions of Christians varied from region to region, in many cases Jews were attacked, not because they were believed to be poisoners, but because their "sins" precipitated the plague. In other words, their very presence was poisoning or polluting to the body social. Nirenberg writes, "Hence the reiteration of distance between Jews and the rest of the society, whether through sacrifice, or less drastically, through stoning, was perceived as a remedy for plague. Here, for the first time in the Crown of Aragon, we can recognize the full brutal power of a fear of pollution centered on the Jews" (240). Nirenberg is critical of Girard's theory of violence, however, precisely because it draws exclusively on the "stereotypical



medieval act of ‘scapegoating’” (243). Nirenberg stresses instead the “double register” of violence against minorities, the fact that persecution may consist of regular, small-scale violence as well as occasional, large-scale massacres.

Nirenberg argues that models such as Girard’s “tell us very little about everyday violence, about the limited and episodic nature of most attacks, or about the role of violence in the maintenance of minority-majority relations” (243). The “double register” of violent persecution, argues Nirenberg, served “as much to reinforce the social order . . . as to shatter it” (243).

Despite Nirenberg’s criticism of Girard, the two accounts have some important points in common. First of all, Girard may focus on cataclysmic violence to the exclusion of lesser forms, but his structural-functionalist view posits violence as a means of maintaining and regulating the social order through the *preservation* of difference, rather than its eradication. Both Girard and Nirenberg, in other words, reject the idea that sacrificial violence constitutes an attempt to destroy the other, and argue that violence serves to reinforce social order by drawing the lines of distinction more clearly. On the other hand, Girard and Nirenberg frequently observe the language of contagion and disease in their analyses of medieval texts that describe persecution, as well as the concomitant belief that social health depends upon the excision through sacrifice of the designated offenders. While the lines demarcating and thereby maintaining the social order depend upon the existence of the other, therefore, the periodic obliteration of Jews or other scapegoats is also necessary to strengthen social ties and group identification. Galenic medicine of the period, too, worked on

principles of purgation, the maintenance of proper balance, and the fear of pollution. Snell observes that plague contagion was believed by Galen and his medieval disciples “to be an airborne disease; thus exposure of the body to contaminated air was considered fatal and, apart from inhalation, it could be absorbed into the body through the pores of the skin” (10). More generally, improper mixing of elements within the body was also believed to cause disorder and disease of various kinds. Stressing the importance of moderation, both in substances ingested as well as those expelled, medieval physicians held that humoural imbalances could be cured only by purging the body of excess blood or fluid, as humoural properties could be removed but not added. The understanding of physical bodies is thus mirrored in late medieval conceptions of social and spiritual health: disease, whether physical or spiritual, requires expiation and the purgation of contaminants.

The range of moral and spiritual responses to the plague thus reveals an appropriately circular and confusing logic, in which the boundaries between soul and body, and between one body and another, seem to dissolve and reconstitute in unpredictable ways. One particularly ironic example is in the very concept of pilgrimage informing the premise and structure of *The Canterbury Tales*. The practice of pilgrimage was, of course, a prime cause of spreading the disease, and pilgrims were frequent targets of prophylactic violence in the same vein as attacks against Jewish communities and other social minorities in Continental Europe. On the other hand, pilgrimage *as* prophylactic—that is, as penance—increased dramatically in the 1350s and 60s after the initial outbreak in 1348. Finally, in the

*General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey tells us that many of the pilgrims are “wending their way” to the shrine of St Thomas in gratitude because he cured them “whan that they were seeke” (18). The same penitential act is thus configured vis-à-vis the plague as preventative, as pollutant, and as payment. We may recall here Douglas’s discussion about danger beliefs as a means of safeguarding the order and health of society. Danger beliefs centering on the plague are indeed “a strong language of mutual exhortation” (*Purity* 3). What we see in Girard’s account of the medieval scapegoat and in the Pardoner’s confession and sermon, however, is the way in which danger beliefs can also unsettle or even destroy the order they are meant to uphold.

That the plague constitutes the backdrop for the Pardoner’s portrait in the *General Prologue* as well as his prologue and tale was first pointed out by Peter G. Beidler (“The Plague and Chaucer’s Pardoner”) and later by William Snell (“Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* and Pestilence in Late Medieval Literature”). Beidler observes that the Pardoner’s association with the hospital of Our Lady of Roncesvalles suggests that he has come into contact with plague victims and could even be himself considered contagious (257). The practice of kissing holy relics was also believed to spread the disease, which may explain in part the vehemence of the Host’s refusal to “kisse the relikes everychon” at the close of the tale (Beidler 268). Beidler and Snell also draw attention to the plague-era moral decline exemplified by the three rioters, the practice of personifying death, the practice of hoarding and burying wealth, and the figure of the Old Man as an allusion to “the commonly held notion that plague struck down those in the prime

of life and saved the very old and young” as elements in the tale that pertain to the plague (Snell 8).

While Beidler and Snell emphasize the relevant historical details that furnish *The Pardoner's Tale*, the plague context is also significant in creating a particular moral and spiritual climate: one in which the omnipresence of death and the weakness of the flesh, rather than turning people away from the things of this world, actually impede contrition and penitence. Katherine B. Trower argues that Fragment VI is united around the theme of “spiritual sickness”: “their tales are related thematically by a common focus on the process of dying as a terminal rather than a transcendental event and by an implicit repudiation of the life of the spirit; . . . [the Physician and the Pardoner] are primarily involved with the amassing of wealth by capitalizing on human sickness” (67). In Trower’s reading, the bleak vision of sin and death suggested in the tales is mirrored in figures of the Pardoner and the Physician: both actually promote spiritual sickness rather than seeking to find its cure. The Physician’s “urynals” are “cure-alls for sexual impotence, designed to promote concupiscence of the flesh” (71). Similarly, the Pardoner’s remedies—his fake relics—“actually poison men, make way for . . . the sin of avarice whereby men greedily try to buy from God through the Pardoner that which cannot be bought—that absolution from sin available to man only by paying back in good works, penance, what he owes God” (71).

In the *Pardoner's Tale*, the sacrificial logic that Girard and Nirenberg identify as endemic during the plague is manifest not only in the subject matter of the tale but in the Pardoner’s speech and, in particular, his rhetorical practice of

blurring conceptual boundaries. Just as the very acts of penance intended to appease God's judgment were also the very means of transmission, so does the Pardoner actively seek to obliterate the conceptual differences between cause and effect, and between vice and virtue. It was standard practice in penitential sermons and manuals to enumerate the vices, explain how they are connected to each other, what they consist of, and how they might be remedied—the Parson, of course, does just that when the Host invites him to “knitte up wel” the “greet matere” of the storytelling competition (ParsP 28). Each vice could have many different branches and types, and, ultimately, all sins are reiterations of the same original sin. The Pardoner parodies this kind of schematizing, however, by blurring the distinctions between the different vices. He tells us that his theme is always “*Radix malorum est cupiditas*” (334), but goes on to define *cupiditas* (love of things of this world for their own sakes and love of self) both as “coveitise” (424, 433) and “avarice” (428). The tale, which, in fact, constitutes a demonstration of the Pardoner's preaching techniques as they are laid out in the prologue, focuses as much on gambling, gluttony, and swearing as it does on avarice. But for the Pardoner, all of the sins appear to spring from man's revolting physicality. In *De miseria condicionis humane*, for instance, in a passage used by the Pardoner, Innocent writes on the sin of gluttony: “what goes in vilely comes out vilely, expelling a horrible wind above and below, emitting an abominable sound. Gluttony closed paradise, sold the birthright, hanged the baker, beheaded the Baptist” (SA 282). The Pardoner's words are modeled closely on Innocent's,

but are taken to a slightly more frantic pitch, and suggest that gluttony was, *literally*, the original sin:

O glotonye, ful of cursednesse!  
 O cause first of oure confusioun!  
 O original of our dampnacioun! . . .  
 Corrupt was al this world for glotonye.  
 Adam oure fader, and his wife also,  
 Fro Paradis, to labour and to wo,  
 Were driven for that vice, it is no drede. (498-507)

Leicester observes that “a standard theological point is turned around here by deliberately overliteralizing the spiritual interrelation of all sins to one another, in keeping with the general tendency of the [Pardoner’s] sermon to treat matter rather than spirit as the root of all evil” (*Disenchanted Self* 41). Similarly, in all the known analogues of the story of the three rioters, the youths go off in search of gold but, in their greed, find death instead, a sequence of events that far better suits the Pardoner’s ostensible moral as a warning against the evils of avarice. But, in the Pardoner’s version, the young men overhear reports of “a privee theef men clepeth Deeth”; mistaking the figure of speech for a real, flesh and blood figure, they set off, in a parodic literalisation of Christ’s resurrection, to kill death (675). As Leicester notes, the Pardoner thus “thrusts the spiritual implications of the quest into the situation at the outset, and juxtaposes them sharply to the extreme, childlike literal-mindedness of the three rioters who treat death like a bully from the next town” (38).

Such literal-mindedness renders the rioters blind both in their ability to perceive the true nature and cause of death and in their ability to formulate a moral response to it. In this regard, they evince the sacrificial mentality that

Girard describes during the plague crisis: the inability or refusal to discern differences between cause and effect, between metaphor and literal fact, leads to the attempt to purge violence through violence. Their drunken pledge to “lyve and dyen ech of hem for oother, / As thogh he were his owene ybore brother” (703-04) indicates their mimetic relationship; when they stumble upon the stash of gold, each becomes for the other the monstrous double which must be destroyed. But theirs is a mimetic rivalry in reverse: beginning from a point of unity against a common enemy, they quickly abandon their noble cause in competition for a reward that is truly and frankly material. The Pardoner is not affirming the maintenance of social and moral order, but tracing its breakdown with a kind of black humour. Accordingly, the ironies are many and neatly arranged: the rioters seek Death and they find it; they pledge to die for each other and they do; they ask the Old Man where Death is and he directs them to the stash of gold; two of them plot to kill the third, and when they drink in celebration of their success they are poisoned. The purpose of penitential exempla, to show with clarity the inherent justice of a cosmos in which sins are punished according to kind and gravity, is here taken to comic excess: in the Pardoner’s world, you always get what you deserve because you are, in a direct and literal way, the agent of your own demise. The Pardoner thus renders in consistently bodily, materialist terms the Augustinian notion that, in sin, man dies a spiritual death. The Pardoner’s rhetorical practice parodies and reverses this allegorical mode: rather than considering sin and death in spiritual terms, he presents all spiritual truths as if they were embodied realities.<sup>10</sup> As with the Pardoner’s tirades against gluttony

---

<sup>10</sup> Leicester makes a similar point when he describes the way in which the Pardoner

and drunkenness, everyone deserves and everyone gets the same thing: all vices express the same death wish, everyone is vicious, and, therefore, death comes to all.

For the Pardoner, therefore, distinctions between the guilty and the innocent, the shameful and the pure, melt away in a confusion that recalls the moral chaos of “pestilence time,” the crisis of differentiation observed by Girard. According to the Pardoner, we are all—to borrow Martha Nussbaum’s phrase—“tainted by the dirt of the body” (*Hiding from Humanity* 108). The effect is a kind of repetition caused by the Pardoner’s tendency to see shame wherever he looks. The Pardoner’s parody does not consist in twisting the meaning of texts such as *De miseria*, but in that he focuses on only one particular aspect of human misery. That aspect is the physical, but the physical portrayed as a condition of utter wretchedness, in which, for example, drunkenness and gluttony make a man’s throat his “privee”:

O wombe, O bely, O stinking cod,  
 Fulfilled of donge and of corrupcioun,  
 At either ende of thee foul is the soun!  
 How greet labour and cost is thee to finde! (534-37)

Human nature is here represented as a kind of insatiable appetite, and the body itself almost as living corpse. And in addition to the bodies that emit foul sounds and odours in life, dead bodies, too, are everywhere in the Pardoner’s sermon, from John the Baptist’s (decapitated though “ful giltelees” [491]), to Christ’s, bleeding on the cross to buy our salvation (501), to Attila’s (“Bleding at his nose

---

enacts “a deliberate forcing of mundane and particular matters into a general and spiritual framework while refusing to let go of the literal level, so that we see both significances at the same time and are unsure to which one to assign priority” (*Disenchanted Self* 38).



in dronkenesse" [581]), to "al the peple" killed by the plague (676), to the three rioters, one "riven" with daggers, the others "storven" with rat poison (828, 888). If mortality and desire constitute the double root of shame, the Pardoner is clearly fixated upon the materiality of the always-dying body, the body that grows enfeebled, can be cut, poisoned, infected—castrated. Like the Old Man who knocks on the ground with his staff, pleading to be released from his prison of "flessh and blood and skin," this excessive shame renders the Pardoner incapable of the true penitence that would set him free; shame, too, involves a certain literal-mindedness, translating moral metaphors into physical sensations such as falling, shrinking, or blushing, or into physical states such as diminishment or repugnance.

And if the Pardoner's sermon and exempla serve to blur boundaries between levels of meaning, the Pardoner's own sense of shame is epitomized in the discomfort generated on the pilgrimage by his ambiguous position as a "gelding" or a "mare." In her well-known essay on "Eunuch Hermeneutics," Carolyn Dinshaw links the Pardoner's indeterminate gender with the indeterminacy of language:

The Pardoner generates the desire to know . . . and then plays off it, indeed appearing to satisfy it excessively. But no one really knows what the Pardoner is. . . . In fact, the Pardoner opens out another—unnerving—possible hermeneutic significance of the image of the body swaddled in veils: there is perhaps nothing underneath those cloaks of representation. (*Sexual Poetics* 157)

For Dinshaw, the Pardoner's lack and the "eunuch hermeneutics" to which it gives rise evince an anti-heterosexist critique that arises in turn from Chaucer's attempt "to envision fully the place of the Other in patriarchal society" (10). And

yet it is everywhere apparent that the Pardoner's ironic machismo, claiming to have "a joly wenche in every toun" (453), and his cynical boasting, "I preche nothing but for coveitise" (433), are precarious personas used to mask the genuine anguish of privation.<sup>11</sup> There is little playfulness, and much twisted self-hatred, in the Pardoner's expostulations against sin. It is important to remember, for example, that the Pardoner is *himself* thoroughly inebriated when he rails, "O dronke man, disfigured is thy face, / Sour is thy breeth, foul artow to embrace!" (551-52). In his own self-representation, therefore, the Pardoner does not give the sense that there "is perhaps nothing" beneath his "cloaks." Rather, the picture presented is one of decaying but highly *determinate* physicality, and it is a picture that is emphasized and made explicit at every possible juncture. The kernel of truth made accessible by language is not evasive but stark and unavoidable: it is the fact of mortality that renders the soul "a resteles caitif" in life, and the body a plague-ridden corpse in death (728).<sup>12</sup>

The Pardoner concludes his sermon and exempla with a call to "ware yow fro the sinne of avarice!" which echoes the Physician's parting advice to "Forsaketh sinne, er sinne yow forsake" (PardT 905; PhysT 286). Both morals are hopelessly self-defeating in light of the preceding tales they are meant to distil.

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Alastair Minnis, who has recently argued that the Pardoner is not necessarily being ironic when he makes these boasts. In his detailed analysis of medieval ideas about eunuchry and male anatomy, Minnis concludes, "even if he is a 'eunuch' he would be capable of contracting marriage, according to a substantial body of contemporary opinion. Hence there is no reason to dismiss either his lust for a wench in every town or his professed desire to marry as screens for physical and legal impossibilities" (*Fallible Authors* 154).

<sup>12</sup> Minnis points out in response to Dinshaw's reading that "it may be said that the Pardoner's problem is not secrecy but the lack of it; we are dealing with an abundance of information, not a deficit. He publishes his greed, pride, and vainglory openly, indeed reveling in their revelation—these are not 'screen sins' but blatant, offensive moral deviancies" (*Fallible Authors* 164).

The sacrifice of Virginia and the pardon of Claudius prove only that sin often condemns the innocent rather than the guilty. The Pardoner's own conduct puts the lie to the notion that the avaricious need fear punishment, while his main exemplum demonstrates that those who foolishly seek death will indeed find it. But while the Physician seems remarkably unaware of the irony, the Pardoner is perversely so, and it is this self-awareness that produces, not more unrepentant malice, but shame. The angry exchange between the Pardoner and the Host that concludes Fragment VI is prompted by the Pardoner's invitation to "kisse the relikes everychon," an oddly arrogant request in light of his admission that they are fake, conveying as it does a firm belief in his own powers of persuasion as well in his audience's stupidity (945). Further, more than one critic has detected in the Pardoner's offhand remark, "paraventure ther may falle oon or two / Doun of his hors, and breke his nekke atwo," a distinctly wistful note (935-36).<sup>13</sup> That it is an insult, and indeed that the Pardoner's entire speech has intended to insult the gullibility of his listeners at the same time as it has confessed his own self-loathing, is not lost on Harry Bailly, whose vehement response is worth quoting in full:

"Nay, nay," quod he, "thanne have I Cristes curs!  
 Lat be!" quod he, "It shal nat be, so thee'ch!  
 Thow woldest make me kisse thin olde breech,  
 And swere it were a relik of a seint,  
 Thogh it were with thy fundement depeint.  
 But, by the crois which that Seint Eleine fond,  
 I wolde I hadde thy coilons in my hond  
 In stede of relikes or of seintuarie!  
 Lat kutte hem of; I wol thee helpe hem carye.

---

<sup>13</sup> For example, Leicester notes, "when these notes are read in context, it is hard to match them anywhere in Chaucer for sheer venom. . . . 'Paraventure ther may fallen oon or two' sounds like a wish" (*Disenchanted Self* 56).

They shul be shrined in an hogges toord!” (946-55)

At this moment, the Host deflates the Pardoner’s pretensions on several different levels. If the Pardoner reveled in his ability to trick and exploit his audiences, the Host here suggests that the Pardoner’s much-flouted tricks are ineffective, his fake relics tawdry rather than ingenious. Similarly, if the Pardoner attempted to conceal his sexual inadequacy with a show of evil, the Host’s disgust, which is a kind of visceral contempt rather than moral indignation, reveals that the Pardoner is not truly evil but merely impotent and thus laughable. Finally, in focusing on the Pardoner’s “coilons,” the Host draws attention to the physical manifestations of the Pardoner’s inadequacy: his ambiguity is no longer a source of mystery but a grotesque bodily deformity. The Pardoner had sought to present himself as a monster with the power to victimize, but the Host responds to him instead as a freak who victimizes only inadvertently through contamination. More than that, the Host’s reaction actually subverts the entire balance of power held precariously through the Pardoner’s self-vaunting: in one sudden and swift moment, the Pardoner turns from victimizer to shamed victim, the despised outsider.

The Pardoner’s invitation to kiss his relics provokes the Host to recoil in contempt not only, or even primarily, out of a sense of disgust with the Pardoner’s moral corruption, but with the Pardoner’s physical self: his deformity, the sexually suggestive nature of his invitation (“Unbokele anon thy purs” [945]), and, possibly, his literal contagion. The Pardoner’s reaction, then, is appropriately that of shamed silence: “This Pardoner answered nat a word; / So wrooth he was,

no word ne wolde he seye” (956-57). Of course, as Mann and others have pointed out, the Pardoner is here an “angry man,” thereby adding the sin of wrath or ire to the lengthening list of his vices. But this anger is a response to his humiliation by the Host; the two emotions or states are not mutually exclusive, but are in fact closely linked.<sup>14</sup> And the Pardoner remains silent, locked in this defeated, impotent rage, for the rest of the Canterbury pilgrimage. Far from providing an “emotional release” from the problems raised by the tale, the forced reconciliation between the Host and the Pardoner—“Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye”—barely contains the seething tensions in an uneasy truce (968). One can imagine the Host practically holding his nose as he obeys the Knight’s good-natured command to “kisse the Pardoner” (965). As Snell points out, their exchange is “eerily reminiscent” of the one which takes place at the end of the fifteenth-century plague poem “Disputacioun betwixt the body and wormes”: ‘Let vs kys and dwell to gedyr euermore’” (Snell 11). If we understand the Host’s attitude towards the Pardoner here as parallel to that of the body’s horror of the worms, the uneasy truce that concludes *The Pardoner’s Tale* serves to emphasize the Pardoner’s association throughout with the way in which the plague, as a cultural phenomenon, has the effect of reducing all human reality to a level of brutish physicality. The Pardoner’s tendency to “force” the spiritual into the physical mirrors the way in which the plague undercuts human ideals and the

---

<sup>14</sup> We may recall here Helen Block Lewis’s apt discussion of the connection between shame and anger, that shame often involves a jolt of recognition, a sudden awareness of one’s appearance in the eyes of another, that provokes hostility and even rage towards the witness—which is subsequently re-directed towards the self. “In this characteristic pattern,” Lewis writes, “hostility evoked in shame is trapped against the self both by the passivity of the self and by the person’s value for the ‘other’” (198).

hope for transcendence, not only through the horror of death, but also by making the physical weakness and suffering of the body an all-consuming condition. At the outset, the Pardoner colludes with the “privee thief men clepeth Deeth” by profiting materially from the plague. By the end, it is clear that this collusion has contaminated him, perhaps literally as well as figuratively, and the pilgrims, through the Host’s violent rejection, the laughter of “the peple,” and the Knight’s smooth dismissal, effectively close ranks in order to keep the contamination at bay (961).

The powerful, mock-penitential speech act that constitutes the *Pardoner’s Prologue*, in which he confesses his avarice and deception, culminates not in the relief of absolution, but in sacrificial violence: in the tale, the one-for-all brotherhood of the three rioters turns into an all-against-all mimetic rivalry; on the pilgrimage, the Pardoner’s attempt to fleece his fellow penitents is turned against him and he finds himself even more excluded from the fellowship than he was at the outset. The question (and the many variants of it) that has so pre-occupied Chaucerian scholarship about the Pardoner and his gender has to do with how we are to understand Chaucer’s attitude towards his character, in the sense that what has been at issue is the “true nature” of the Pardoner’s sexuality, or whether we are to understand the dark parody as Chaucer’s critique of the church, Chaucer’s representation of the Pardoner’s cupidity, or the Pardoner’s critique of the church. But what seems crucially at issue at the close of the Pardoner’s performance is not the relationship between Chaucer and the Pardoner, but the one between the Pardoner and his “listening” audience. In this relationship, the Pardoner’s

confession is a failed confession, while his sermon also fails to convince the pilgrims to pay for his relics. In his prologue, the Pardoner sets out a kind of challenge to his audience, whereby he says something like this: “even though I’m telling you all of these things in order to manipulate you into giving me money, it is up to you to separate the truth of what I’m saying about the dangers of sin and vice from my own corrupt intentions; if you disbelieve me as you ought (because I am a liar) you will place your own salvation in jeopardy, but if you believe me even though you shouldn’t, you can find forgiveness and redemption.” The problem for the Pardoner is that, ultimately, the pilgrims neither believe nor disbelieve; they do not respond with naïve good faith or with moral indignation. Instead, they return contempt with contempt, and, worst of all, indifference and exclusion: “I wol ne lenger pleye / With thee” (958-59). The most striking thing about this conclusion is its anti-climactic feel: all of the Pardoner’s clever irony and half-mocking bombast, the richly symbolic texture of his tale, and his own self-revelations dissolve in silence, in moral and spiritual nothingness, as the Knight simply changes the subject and the pilgrims “riden forth hir weye” (968).

We began with the observation that both shame and penitence are, in one way at least, performative speech acts. George Petty identifies the violation of the cooperative principle as the central linguistic mode of aggression in the *Canterbury Tales*. That is, he suggests that deliberate misinterpretation for the purposes of some kind of social or political gain in the context of the pilgrimage is the key to understanding performative speech in the tales. The Pardoner, in Petty’s reading, exemplifies this kind of performative misinterpretation. And,

indeed, the Pardoner's main perlocutionary object is his own gain at others' expense, and he often appears to misunderstand the religious message he is preaching. But the Pardoner seeks to empower himself and demean his audience not by deliberate misinterpretation of others' words, but by sheer contempt, by purposely flouting the rules for cooperative speech in order to insult his audience.<sup>15</sup> And, interestingly, his audience, embodied in the figure of Harry Bailly, far from misinterpreting the Pardoner, actually understands the main thrust of Pardoner's speech with a great deal of accuracy. Nor is it quite true to say that the Pardoner tries but fails to pull the wool over their eyes when, in fact, he seems to be knowingly sabotaging his own con operation. What we see in the Pardoner is not so much deliberate misinterpretation for his own gain (despite his overt claims), but an act of linguistic self-destruction whereby he places himself beyond the pale of the storytelling competition altogether. What the Pardoner accomplishes in his parody of penitence, therefore—for he satirizes both the penitent's speech in his confession and clerical speech in his sermon—is a demonstration of how shame impedes and even subverts contrition, the central condition for the performance of penitence. The Pardoner's confession fails as an act of penitence not because he does not tell the truth (because he does), but because his shame-driven tactics of bravado, evasion, and contempt set up a power struggle between speaker and listener, and it is a power struggle that the

---

<sup>15</sup> On the concept of "flouting," "the only kind of intentional nonfulfillment possible in the literary speech situation," see Pratt 159-75. Pratt builds on the idea of the "cooperative principle" (and the "maxims of conversation") described by H. P. Grice in his 1967 Williams James lectures, *Logic and Conversation*.



Pardoner ultimately loses.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, his performance does succeed as an act of shaming, but at his own expense: he intends to shame his audience but shame, as we have noted, defies intentions, and, in this case, the shamer ends up as the shamed.

“Shamed Gilteles” Revisited: Redemptive Speech at the Close of the *Canterbury Tales*

The *Manciple’s Prologue and Tale* parallels the Pardoner in several key ways. While the Pardoner cannot begin his “honeste thing” without a drink (PardP 328) and he must first loosen his tongue with alcohol, the Cook’s drunken stupor renders him unable to speak and prompts the Manciple’s abusive tirade. But if this aligns the Pardoner with the Cook, the Manciple’s attack on the Cook also recalls the Pardoner’s zealous if ironic condemnation of gluttony and drunkenness:

Se how he ganeth, lo, this dronken wight  
 As thogh he wolde swolwe us anon-right.  
 Hoold cloos thy mouth, man, by thy fader kin!  
 The devel of helle sette his foot therin!  
 Thy cursed breeth infecte wol us alle.  
 Fy, stinking swin, fy! Foule moot thee falle!  
 A, taketh hede, sires, of this lusty man!  
 Now, swete sire, wol ye justen atte fan?  
 Therto me thinketh ye been wel yshape!  
 I trowe that ye dronken han win-ape,  
 And that is whan men pleyen with a straw. (ManP 35-45)

The Manciple’s contemptuous admonition to the Cook to “Hoold cloos thy mouth,” of course, prefigures his concluding moral, which rehearses his mother’s

---

<sup>16</sup> As Austin points out, the test of a performative is not its truth or falsity; indeed, it is nonsensical even to inquire whether a performative is true or false. The test of a performative is whether it is “happy” or “unhappy,” whether it has successfully carried out its action or if “something goes wrong and the act is . . . a failure” (14).

advice to “keep wel thy tonge,” and the image of the tongue safely “walled” behind “teeth and lippes eke” (319, 323). But the intent behind this rebuke and its effect, its perlocutionary object and its illocutionary force, is not merely to chastise but to humiliate. Humiliation differs from harsh criticism, condemnation, or other extreme forms of negative response in that, in attempting to induce shame in the other, its goal is to silence, even nullify the other person, rather than to elicit a counter-response or to exhort another course of action or behaviour. The act of humiliating is an exercise in sheer aggression and self-aggrandizement. And just as the Pardoner’s practice of confession and preaching as aggression invites only counter-aggression, the only possible response to humiliation other than shamed silence is to reciprocate the contempt, displacing one’s own shame onto someone else.

But while the Pardoner’s inebriated pontificating and the Cook’s incapacitation threaten to end the “pleye” of the storytelling competition altogether, the Host praises Bacchus, the god of wine, “That so kanst turnen earnest into game!” because the good spirits brought on by drink allow the game to continue: they “turne rancour and disese / T’acord and love” (ManP 100, 97-8). The Host’s jovial comments, however, constitute another uneasy truce that allows the game to continue only by silencing another potentially disruptive pilgrim, this time the Cook. Like the Pardoner’s silencing, this truce does not reflect true reconciliation, but merely a temporary and fragile cessation of the conflict. We have seen how the sacrificial ethos of pestilence time pervades the *Pardoner’s Prologue* and *Tale*, ultimately undermines the success of his performance, and

thus undermines the play of storytelling altogether. Similarly, Ann W. Astell has argued that the *Manciple's Prologue* and *Tale* reflect a sacrificial aesthetic, and that, in silencing the Cook, the pilgrims place him in the role of the scapegoat; as Astell writes, in the *Prologue*, the Cook is “a means and an expression of the mythic reunification of the pilgrim group,” and he is paralleled in the *Tale* by the sacrifice of the crow (326). As in the *Pardoner's Prologue* and *Tale*, therefore, for the *Manciple*, the failure to achieve a felicitous speech act is concomitant with a narrative structured by shame and sacrifice: the shame of Phebus in his cuckoldry, the shame of the blackened, banished crow, and the many sacrifices paid in service of Phebus's attempt to regain his honour.

In her essay “Nietzsche, Chaucer, and the Sacrifice of Art,” Astell compares Nietzschean aesthetics with Chaucerian poetics on the basis of the fact that both Nietzsche and Chaucer focus on the role of the Apollonian and Dionysian forces of art. Astell reflects on Nietzsche's “The Birth of Tragedy Out of Music,” in which the philosopher celebrates the “Apollonian-Dionysiac duality” and the art that is created by virtue of this duality, “their constant conflicts, and periodic acts of reconciliation” (“Nietzsche” 323). Chaucer, as Astell points out, similarly juxtaposes the Dionysian with the Apollonian. In the *Manciple's Prologue*, the intoxicated Cook personifies the god of wine and excess, while the Host explicitly invokes Bacchus in his praise of drink. In the *Tale*, Chaucer casts Apollo, the god of poetry, music, and dreams, as a kind of courtly knight who is cuckolded by his lady. Astell observes that the “juxtaposition of Apollo and Dionysos in this tale and its prologue is a striking,

obviously intended, mytho- and metapoetic moment in the *Canterbury Tales*, a pairing of pagan artistic deities that would have caught the eye of Nietzsche, as it does ours” (323). Picking up on the long-held sense that with the Manciple and towards the end of the *Canterbury Tales* in general, Chaucer becomes increasingly introspective, reflecting on his poetics and his authorial identity, Astell suggests that Chaucer “speaks not only as an artist, but also as critical theorist, a profound commentator on his own art, its mythic origins, and its end” (323). And, as Astell points out, Chaucer’s critical theory is directly opposed to Nietzsche’s:

Proceeding anachronistically, I would like to go further, to see Chaucerian literature itself as a kind of critical theory that offers in its antimythic, antisacrificial stance a sophisticated rejoinder, as it were, to Nietzsche’s mythic, sacrificial aesthetics. (“Nietzsche” 324)

For Astell, the Nietzschean sacrificial aesthetic is one in which the pursuit of truth, especially moral truth, stands at odds with the creation of art, in which “ethics is incompatible with aesthetics” (329). In contrast to the violent exclusion of one in favour of the other, Astell argues, Chaucerian poetics attempt to unite art and truth-telling. And, as in the *Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale*, Chaucer’s representation of sacrifice here operates on multiple narrative levels. As we have seen, the mimetic rivalry of the storytelling competition, in which “the pilgrims are alike because they are all at odds with each other” (“Nietzsche” 326), is balanced and even maintained by the periodic humiliation, interruption or expulsion of one member of the group: the Reeve, the Pardoner, the Monk, the Canon, even Geoffrey himself are, at various points, figuratively “sacrificed,” silenced, shamed, expelled, or excluded in some way. In the *Manciple’s Prologue*,

the Cook is, as Astell notes, silenced through drink: fearing that the Cook will perhaps return shame with shame by telling a story about a contemptuous Manciple, the Manciple supplies him with another draught in order to silence him in drunkenness even “up peine of deeth” (ManP 86). The Host utters his comments about the communal value of wine immediately following the Cook’s final descent into oblivion. Chaucer thus suggests that social harmony formed through sacrifice, whether literal or figurative, provides, like the reluctant kiss between the Host and the Pardoner, a momentary peace but one that in turn requires continual violence in order to be maintained.

The *Manciple’s Tale* proceeds to re-enact this kind of sacrifice through silencing in the story of Apollo and his truth-telling crow. Astell points out that the Manciple’s Phebus parallels Nietzsche’s theoretical understanding of the Apollonian type (“Nietzsche” 328). As the god of art and poetry but also of dreams and illusions, Phebus teaches his crow, not language as a system of meaning, but how to “countrefete the speche of every man” (ManT 134). This *appearance* of sense and language is, moreover, matched by the purely sensory beauty of both Phebus and his song, and by the crow’s own loveliness:

Therto [Phebus] was the semelieste man  
That is, or was, sith the world bigan.  
...  
Therwith in al this world no nightingale  
Ne koude by an hundred thousand deel  
Singen so wonder mirily and weel. (ManT 119-20, 136-38)

The preference of the Apollonian type for the sweetness of illusion over the ugly truth is further illustrated in Phebus’s response to his wife’s infidelity. Although he initially gives himself over to violent excess, killing his wife in a fit of “ire,”

Phebus then looks to blame someone else for the loss of both his wife and his good opinion of her. He fixes upon the crow, whom he blames as a traitor and a liar for telling a “false tale” about his wife, who was, he now believes, “ful giltelees” (ManT 277). As Astell comments, “protecting his wife’s memory and his own egotistical power to dream, Apollo shifts blame from his wife (as an adulteress) and from himself (as her murderer) to the traitorous crow” (328), who was, we might opine, simply acting out of loyalty to his lord. Moreover, Phebus’s destructive violence is self-defeating: he scapegoats the crow in order to perpetuate his own self-deception, but in doing so he also destroys the symbols and the very means of the Apollonian arts of illusion. In his rage, Phebus

. . . brak his minstralcye,  
Both harpe and lute and giterne and sawtrye;  
And eek he brak hise arwes and his bowe. (ManT 267-69)

He then turns to the crow and destroys the beauty and song of his once-prized possession:

And to the crowe he stirte, and that anon,  
And pulled hise white fetheres everychon,  
And made him blak, and refte him al his song,  
And eek his speche, and out at dore him slong  
Unto the devel, which I him betake.  
And for this cas ben alle crowes blake. (303-08)

Like Virginius, Phebus must sacrifice what he loves in order to protect his honour. But unlike in the *Physician’s Tale*, here there is no attempt at justification. Virginius, we are told, acts out of love and not hate, whereas the Manciple tells us quite unapologetically that Phebus is subject “to gret shame and to gret vileinye,” and that he kills his wife “in his ire” (260, 265). In the *Manciple’s Prologue and Tale*, therefore, Chaucer is distilling and making

explicit some of the motifs and ideas rehearsed with varying degrees of irony or awareness by earlier pilgrims. The Manciple tells a tale about yet another mimetic triangle between rival, cuckold, and desirable woman, which results in the great shame of the cuckold and the violent destruction of the female object. In his initial rebuke to the crow, Phebus echoes many of the pilgrims' angry responses to tales intended to shame them: "I wol thee quite anon thy false tale" (293). And we hear again the phrase "Ful giltelees" in reference to a fallen woman punished by male violence (277). But here the problem of discerning between shame and guilt is further complicated by the fact that it is the violent male himself who utters the woman's exoneration—by placing the blame on another innocent victim instead of claiming responsibility for his own actions (277).

The sense in which the pilgrims' mimetic crisis reaches a fever pitch in the *Manciple's Prologue* is thus mirrored on the level of the *Tale*. The conflict in the tale is conveyed through the accumulation of references to earlier tales and reaches a kind of pinnacle in the confrontation between Phebus and the crow, followed by the purging of violence through violence. And just as the mimetic competition among pilgrim rivals ends in the silence of the Cook's failure to tell his tale—his failure to confess on the pilgrimage—so does the Manciple's tale of the humiliated god and the scapegoat-crow end in an injunction against all speech. But first the Manciple revisits Geoffrey's opening disclaimer about the relationship between words, deeds, and "entente." Geoffrey, we may recall, by way of excusing himself from the moral responsibility of telling tales, insists upon the need for accuracy in language, for calling things by their true names, and thus insists upon

referential language and the idea of a necessary correspondence between signifier and signified: “wordes mote be cosin to the dede” (GP 742). The Manciple similarly affirms what “wise Plato seyth,” but he does so only in order to deny the stability of fixed meaning in language: the only difference between an adulterous lady and an adulterous “povre wench,” the Manciple argues, is the word used to describe each (219). Similarly, a “titlelees tyraunt” and a “theef erraunt” are the same in essence, one simply has “gretter might,” more power and better means, than the other (223-24). The distinctions we make between things in language are thus deceptive; they are, in other words, ideologically driven rather than representative of real distinctions. For Geoffrey, what determines the relation between word and deed, signifier and signified, is precisely “entente”: I do not mean to be crude or sensationalist, he insists, but accurate, so please take my words in the spirit in which they are meant. But in the Manciple’s world, as in the Pardoner’s, “entente” can only ever be the intent to deceive and to win (money, honour) at another’s expense. In the *General Prologue*, we are invited to accept the given set of linguistic conventions—to cooperate in a way that will make Geoffrey’s speech act felicitous. But the Manciple’s denial of the essential difference between things renders the speech act null and void, just as the Pardoner’s refusal of transcendent meaning causes his performance to fall ill. And yet what is inaccessible or irrelevant here is not the realm of the signified, not the thing in itself, but intent, the force of human will that seeks to communicate meaning in a social reality. Words become weapons not only when they are



intended to shame but also when they are divorced from intent, from the intending will of the self that makes illocution possible in the first place:

But he that hath misseid, I dar wel sayn,  
He may by no wey clepe his word again.  
Thing that is seid, is seid, and forth it gooth,  
Thogh him repente, or be him leef or looth. (353-56)

What is lacking here is a kind of linguistic grace. What matters is the physical act of utterance, and once the words are spoken they carry out their various effects as ineluctably as a magic spell. There is thus no room for interpretation, for re-statement or clarification, or forgiveness, “thogh him repente.” This is a variation on the idea that the Manciple fails to distinguish between perlocution and illocution, between the effect that words can have on the one hand, and the act constituted by certain words uttered in particular circumstances with a particular intent. As Stanley Cavell points out in his introduction to Felman’s *Scandal of the Speaking Body*, if perlocution and illocution were in fact the same, language would have a frightening, supernatural ability to alter reality. If to say “I surprise you,” “I prevent you,” or “I convince you” were not only to have certain possible effects but could, by virtue of the utterance itself, call into being the state of affairs being announced, speech would have a power greater and more coercive than any form of physical force. In such a world, silence is the only safe course of action indeed: “Kepe wel thy tonge, and think upon the crowe” (362).

This is what makes shame such a fascinating and dangerous force. Shame is “an action we do”—illocution—but it is *at the same time* “its consequence” (perlocution) (Austin 110). And unlike other performatives (such as “I thee

wed”), the set of conventions that must be met for felicity to be achieved are potentially endless in terms of variation: “If I wish to hear your voice but you will not speak to me, I can feel shame. If I wish to speak but you will not listen, I am ashamed. If I would like us to have a conversation but you do not wish to converse, I can be shamed . . .” (Tomkins, *AIC* 2.192). The *Manciple’s Tale* presents the world of speech and language as one in which to speak, and to speak the truth in particular, is to shame, and thus to necessitate violent sacrifice. And, as Astell points out, to the extent that we (and the pilgrims) believe the crow to be guilty, we also affirm implicitly the sacrifice as one which “separates art from truth, aesthetics from ethics, and represents the crow’s truth-telling as the destroyer of the Apollonian art” (“Nietzsche” 332). This is the tension that we have been tracing from the *House of Fame* onwards: the tension between the impulse to express the truth—the truth of history, of women’s nature, or simply of human nature—and the awareness that to enshrine one’s words in the form of the literary text, sanctioned by the whims of *auctorite*, is to take on the moral burden of constructing the identity of the Other through honour and shame. Accordingly, the *Manciple* again reflects critically on Geoffrey’s authorial voice, but this time in a clear allusion to the *House of Fame*: “My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe / Of tidings, wheither they been false or trewe” (359-60). Thus we have moved from the danger of spreading tidings, or telling of the “actes” of history, to the danger of being the originator of tidings, from being a mere translator to an auctor in one’s own right. While Geoffrey in the *House of Fame* registers an awareness of the finitude of his own powers of discernment, and the pilgrim

Geffrey affirms the importance of telling the truth for its own sake despite these limitations, the Manciple issues an outright condemnation of the poetic craft in any form. If we oppose truth and art, Apollo and Dionysos, Chaucer suggests, we are left with nothing but self-defeating sacrifice; truth and art destroy each other. Similarly, if we understand language as performance only, that fails or succeeds, that shames or honours, we are refusing to attend to the possibility that intention can shape meaning, that mistakes can be repaired or re-interpreted, injuries forgiven. And in the absence of such linguistic grace, we are ultimately doomed to silence.

And yet, if we are called to eschew the sacrificial reading modeled for us by the Manciple at the close of the *Canterbury Tales*, and to affirm instead the unity of truth and beauty, what of the Parson, whose apparently authoritative voice sounds much like the Manciple's in its insistence that art and truth are mutually exclusive? If shame leads to silence, how is it that guilt liberates us from that silence? The Parson seems not too far from the Manciple's sacrifice of art when he rejects the possibility that "fables" could play any role in instructing the pilgrims in the "good wey":

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me.  
 For Paul, that writeth unto Thimothe,  
 Repreveth hem that weiven soothfastnesse  
 And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse. (ParsP 31-34)

Katherine Little points out that the Parson's position here is much closer to Wycliffite polemics than it is to orthodoxy and the tradition of penitential literature that Chaucer is drawing from in the tale itself (*Confession and Resistance* 91). As we have seen, penitential manuals, which were intended for

lay instruction and on which the *Parson's Tale* is modeled, were in fact replete with colourful narrative exempla. Thus, the Parson's denunciation of fable is more radical than either orthodoxy or Chaucer's own sources demand, and seems to identify the Parson, perhaps not quite as the "lollere" the Host accuses him of being, but as wary of the possible effects of artfulness in language in a way that goes beyond mere convention.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, however, it is the Manciple, and, insofar as the *Manciple's Prologue* and *Tale* constitute a kind of culmination of all of the *Canterbury Tales*, the entire pilgrim group, who reach the point of silence—the conclusion that, for

---

<sup>17</sup> The Parson's orthodoxy, or lack thereof, his relationship to Wycliffite ideas, and thus Chaucer's own position vis-à-vis orthodoxy and Wycliffism, have been the subject of fairly intense debate in recent years. On the question of orthodoxy, see, for example, Charles Muscatine ("Chaucer's Religion and the Chaucer Religion"), who launches a strong critique of what he calls the "revisionist" movement, a growing trend in Chaucer scholarship which assumes the poet's religious conservatism.

Many more scholars have pointed out the contradictions between the Parson's appearances in the *General Prologue* and the frame, which mark him as representative of Lollardy, versus the affirmation of church authority in his tale. Of the many different attempts to make sense of this apparent contradiction, or to settle it in favour of either Chaucer's orthodoxy or his Wycliffite sympathies, I find Katherine Little's insight on the Parson's religion to be highly sensible: "One could argue that this contradiction is far more indicative of the religious climate in the 1380s and 1390s than the label orthodoxy. After all, as scholars of religious practices have demonstrated, the orthodoxy of late medieval England was a fluid and changing set of practices and not a static set of propositions. To say, therefore, that the Parson [or Chaucer, for that matter] is orthodox means relatively little, since orthodoxy was in the process of defining itself in relation to a heterodoxy that had only recently appeared" (*Confession and Resistance* 81-82).

It is interesting, however, to consider Chaucer's choice of sources in light of the fact that so many possible models existed for a poet who wanted to translate a penitential manual into English. Richard Neuhauser points out that these choices, Raymond of Pennaforte's *Summa de paenitentia* for the section of penance, and Guillelmus Peraldus's *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus* (through the intermediaries of the Primo, Quoniam, and Postquam, redactions of the *summae* composed shortly after the publication of Peraldus's original) for the section of vices and their remedial virtues, were texts that were shaped by the specifically Dominican, post-Lateran IV didactic concerns of their authors: "The Parson's manual, that is to say, is in effect highly indebted to early Dominican documents, and one should keep in mind that the basis for Chaucer's penitential theology is thus a conservative one, founded on sources which were roughly 150 years old by the time he adopted them for *The Parson's Tale*" ("Generic Affiliations" 51). If it is the case, as Little argues, that Chaucer, through the Parson, is attempting to articulate a response to the tensions generated by the conflict between orthodoxy and Wycliffism that characterized late fourteenth-century ideas about penance, then it would seem that Chaucer's opposition to Wycliffism, at least on the issue of auricular confession, is unambiguous.

the sake of avoiding the war of all against all, it is better simply not to tell tales, “wheither they been false or trewe” (360). The silence enjoined by the Manciple recalls and threatens to make permanent earlier silences on the pilgrimage, such as the angry silence of the Pardoner’s shame. Far from ending the fun and games with his dour sermonizing, it is, in fact, the Parson who breaks this silence and who allows the storytelling game to continue, albeit in a very different form. Towards the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, therefore, Chaucer moves from the problem of will and intent in human speech to glimpse the possibility of redemptive speech. John Fyler has argued that Fragments IX and X transcend

words and a delight in poetic artifice by moving beyond them—first by ironic disintegration, then with utter seriousness—to the absolute simplicity of supernatural truth, where no words are necessary and human language cannot follow. (*Chaucer and Ovid* 155)

I think it is indeed true that we are meant to experience some kind of transcendence at the close of the *Canterbury Tales*, but the kind of transcendence where “human language cannot follow” is something that is gestured towards only in the final lines of the retraction; the *Parson’s Tale* itself, on the other hand, is very much concerned with words and with human language in the here and now. For the Parson, precisely because we do not transcend language—yet—we must learn how to use it properly, and in order to learn this, we must model ourselves on the penitential self-expression he gives us.

Despite the relatively few scholars who have studied the structure and language of the *Parson’s Prologue* and *Tale* in great depth, after the groundbreaking contributions of Lee Patterson (“Quitting the *Canterbury Tales*”) and Siegfried Wenzel (“The Source of Chaucer’s Seven Deadly Sins”), as well as

more recent studies, such as the 2000 collection edited by David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley (*Closure in the Canterbury Tales*), it no longer seems necessary to defend the *Parson's Tale* against the charges of textual invalidity or artistic failure.<sup>18</sup> But it does seem worthwhile to reflect and expand upon this newfound consensus that the *Parson's Tale* does, indeed, belong at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, and that it does “knitte up wel a greet matere” begun at the Tabard Inn in some logical or “appropriate” way (Benson 38).

Chaucer's interest in structures of honour and shame and his deconstruction of sacrificial forms has, to this point in the *Canterbury Tales*, been largely negative, in the sense that the tales spend far more time representing shame and the conflicts and tensions it generates than they do with guilt as a positive ethical force. The clearest expression of the ethical value of guilt thus far is offered in the *Melibee*, when Prudence advocates penitential self-reflection as an alternative to honour-bound vengeance. In many ways, the Parson reiterates Prudence's argument, and he does so in terms which are similarly apparently “un-Chaucerian” despite being clearly intended as serious moral instruction on the part of Chaucer the author—terms which constitute a sharp departure in tone and

---

<sup>18</sup> A fair amount of ink has been shed by Chaucerian scholars describing their disappointment with the *Parson's Tale*, denying its validity as the work of Chaucer's own hand or as the intended conclusion for the collection. Two particularly colourful (albeit much-cited) examples will suffice: Muscatine writes that the tale is an “endless, narrow, small-minded, inveterately enumerative, circumstantially punitive list of sinful acts” and a text that “found its way into the *Canterbury Tales* under unusual circumstances . . . unrelated to the literary and artistic making of the rest of the work” (“Chaucer's Religion” 256-58). According to Donaldson, “in literary terms it is ill-tempered, bad-mannered, pedantic, joyless, and when it is used as a gloss to the other tales it distempers them, fills them with ill-humour, coats them with dust, and deprives them of joy” (*Speaking of Chaucer* 173). Conversely, Wenzel argues, “there is little room for questioning that the text now called ‘The Parson's Tale’ was written by Chaucer; and since it appears in the surviving manuscripts from the very beginning on, any attempt to deny that Chaucer intended it for his *Canterbury Tales* and for the final position it occupies there will have to rest on arguments that are not strictly textual” (“Current Literary Studies” 1). Wenzel's position, it seems to me, represents the current consensus in Chaucer criticism.

genre from the majority of Chaucer's works and which are the product of faithful (that is to say, non-parodic) translation of authoritative material. The Parson also reiterates Prudence's lesson in the sense that the discourse he offers orients readers (and listeners) in a kind of praxis rather than merely discursive and theoretical knowledge: in order to escape the bonds of fate, or the constraints of honour and shame, one does not learn a lesson so much as imitate the kind of desire, self-reflection, and discipline being modeled. If Prudence's remedy demonstrates the way for powerful men like Melibee to quell conflict and avoid violence, the *Parson's Tale* similarly shows the "wey . . . cleped penitence" that will free the pilgrims (and, ultimately, Chaucer's readers) from their mimetic rivalries, their tactics of self-defense and self-promotion.

That the *Parson's Tale* attempts to establish, not a new theoretical paradigm that would negate the "diversity, festivity, and art" (Gross 177) in the world of the tales, but a *model* for non-violent imitation, is emphasized, first, in the Parson's insistence that what he offers is a "wey." The phrase is repeated eight times in the first nine lines of the text: quoting from Jeremiah, "Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes" (79), "a ful noble wey" (80), "this wey . . . cleped penitence" (81), and so on. What we are being offered or invited to, in the other words, is somewhat analogous to the difference between the knight's two trials in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*: he first learns what women desire theoretically, but he does not really get it until he experiences the reality of submission vis-à-vis the loathly lady. Similarly, the Parson gives some doctrinal instruction, but his ultimate focus is on invoking the kind of experience that will

actually reform the self (Roper 164). The emphasis on praxis but also on affective experience which figures the tale as a model for imitation is also conveyed in Chaucer's choice to translate a penitential manual in the first place, a choice which addresses the truth of the interior self as opposed to the ways in which individuals represent themselves or are represented in story, as roles defined from the outside in, and as combatants in the struggle for *maistrie* and honour. As Gregory Roper writes,

Rather than telling stories *of* someone else . . . *to* others in order to affect them and aggrandize a falsely constructed self in language, the *Parson's Tale* teaches its readers how to use language to change themselves, to confess their own stories, and thus to discover the humility of self that cancels itself in order to re-form it. . . . Language, in the sacrament, is turned from an exterior power play into an inner, reforming and redemptive force—from rhetoric to meditation and psychological restructuring. (169-70)

What the *Parson's Tale* effects, therefore, is not the defeat or negation of storytelling, but the establishment of a model for a new kind of storytelling: one that is rooted primarily in the individual consciousness of a self defined by penitential language. And the tale understands penitential language as that which is shaped by and reflective of an interior reality—language which attempts to be “psychological” in its referents and its illocutionary force—but also, crucially, language which configures the relation between self and other in terms of the moral agency of the self rather than the specular, measuring gaze of the other. In very broad terms, of course, penitential manuals *per se* participated in what is essentially a late medieval cultivation of interiority through language (Little 3). But I think it is important to recognize that, while penitential manuals often contained illustrative stories, the *Parson's Tale* is the *only* penitential manual that



is itself contained *within* a collection of stories, a collection that explicitly dramatizes the act of storytelling as a competition of rivals engaged in reciprocal “quiting.” In light of Chaucer’s persistent concern with poetics and his own poetic identity, the question that the *Parson’s Tale* raises most acutely concerns not merely the self (penitential, reformed, or otherwise) but specifically the self as it is mediated by literary representation: that is, not only, what kind of self is formed in guilt ethics, but also, what kind of literary representations of selfhood are formed in guilt ethics?

Before disgruntled readers of the *Parson’s Tale* feel compelled to assert, “very dull ones indeed,” I want to clarify that, in suggesting the *Parson’s Tale* offers a “model for imitation” for literary representations of selfhood, I do not mean to suggest that Chaucer intends for all literary activity henceforward to produce nothing but penitential manuals. What the Parson offers is a particular way of using language, in contrast to the ways offered most pointedly by the Pardoner and the Manciple, one that depends upon self-sacrifice in guilt, but imitating penitential interiority does not mean reproducing exactly this particular text. Rather, the *Parson’s Tale* represents Chaucer’s attempt to imagine or gesture towards the kind of language that reflects the idea of the *particularity* of individual consciousness and expression in a way that goes beyond the epic of the Knight, the fabliau of the Miller, the *vita* of the Second Nun, even beyond the prologue of the incomparable Wife of Bath: literature as the product of a fully individualized voice speaking out of an individual consciousness rather than literature as the product of the poet’s submission to *auctorite*; that is, literature as

confession, but more particularly, felicitous confession intended to reveal the truth about oneself and to engage response, rather than to conceal weakness and provoke violence.<sup>19</sup> The model of penitential speech with which the *Canterbury Tales* conclude and with which Chaucer responds to the Manciple's imperative of silence—the literary and artistic dead-end of sacrificial violence—is one which the poet imagines as a language of the private individual rather than the language of honour, “fame” and auctoritee: it is a language that turns from “what men say” in order to affirm what *I* have experienced and the acts *I* have committed.

That the *Parson's Tale* inscribes a literary language of guilt is evidenced not merely by the fact that it is a penitential manual concluding a story collection, but, more pointedly, by the particular ways in which Chaucer shapes his translation. As Patterson has pointed out, the *Parson's Tale* is unusual, if not entirely unique, among its analogues in that Chaucer chooses to omit any material that does not bear directly on the sacrament of penance.<sup>20</sup> The vast majority of manuals located the compendium of sins in the larger context of the *forma confitendi*, the comprehensive list of topics on which the priest was supposed to both examine and instruct the penitent, and that also included the Decalogue and the Five Wits (Patterson, “Quitting” 336-39; Roper 156-57). The *Parson's Tale*,

---

<sup>19</sup> The notion that literary expression might be understood as the expression of an individual voice, rooted in personal, affective experience, was a radical idea in Chaucer's time, as A. C. Spearing has convincingly argued. I would not go as far as Spearing, however, who claims that the notion that “every tale has its own teller,” and thus that narrative is “the expression of a discrete consciousness in a distinctive voice” (*Textual Subjectivity* 2), is a thoroughly modern one, alien even to Chaucer himself—despite the narrative frame the poet constructs in the *Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>20</sup> In his survey of penitential manuals, Patterson reports that “all but four are concerned with larger didactic concerns. The four exceptions, which constitute in effect a genre of their own, are *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle*, *The Weye to Paradys*, *The Boke of Penance*, and the *Parson's Tale*, . . . [but the] the severity with which Chaucer's text restricts itself to this purpose is unusual even among its structural analogues” (“Quitting” 338-39).

however, excludes not only illustrative exempla but all didactic material other than the discourse on contrition and its causes, confession and the seven deadly sins, and a brief explanation of satisfaction. As the Parson says in his prologue, he is “nat textuel” and therefore will leave all but “the sentence” to the clerks (ParsP 57). Patterson observes that this singularity of purpose results in a “simple overall structure that enforces the clarity of its focus and function” (339), but it also suggests a more specific intention vis-à-vis the conclusion to the *Canterbury Tales*: the Parson does not simply oppose the worldliness of the pilgrims with serious religious instruction *per se*; rather, he responds to them with an unambiguous call to repentance in particular and, as we will see, repentance understood as an intensely private, internal experience.

If Chaucer’s choices for structure and content are unusual in the context of other penitential manuals, he also develops a style and voice for the Parson which distinguishes his tale even further from its sources and analogues. Thomas Bestul has argued that the *Parson’s Tale* bears several points in common with the late medieval tradition of *meditatio* (“Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale* and Religious Meditation”). In Bestul’s comparison of the tale with other meditations, he begins by pointing out the little noticed fact that the Parson himself announces that he will present, not a sermon or a manual, but a “meditacioun” (ParsP 55), a term repeated by the Host a few lines later when he instructs the Parson to be both economical and “fructuous” in his speech:

“Telleth,” quod he, “youre meditacioun,  
 But hasteth yow, the sonne wole adoun.  
 Beth fructuous, and that in litel space,  
 And to do wel God sende yow his grace.” (ParsP 69-72)

Bestul observes that word “fructuous” is a kind of key or watchword in medieval Latin devotional prose, “where the phrase ‘meditationes fructuosae’ and its variants are commonplaces” (Bestul 605). He also points out other, more substantial resonances with meditation literature. The first is Chaucer’s addition to Pennaforte’s *summa* (in the section on contrition) of an extract from Anselm’s *Meditation on the Last Judgment* (Bestul 306). In this, Chaucer adds to Pennaforte’s list of the causes of contrition by including “dredde of the day of dome and of the horrible peines of helle” (158). This description of the terrors that await unrepentant sinners, as Bestul notes, uses “affective language” in a way that evokes private reflection rather than doctrinal instruction (Bestul 606): “Whider shal thanne the wrecched sinful man flee to hide him? Certes, he may not hide him; he moste come forth and shewe him” (173). The Parson’s sixth cause of contrition similarly diverges from Pennaforte, namely in identifying “remembraunce of the passioun that oure Lord Jhesu Crist suffred for oure synnes” (255). The Parson begins this divergence with a passage from St Bernard:

Whil that I live I shal have remembrance of the travailes that oure lord Jesu Crist suffred in preching, his werinesse in travailing, hise temptacions whan he fasted, hise longe wakinges whan he preyed, hise teeres whan that he weep for pitee of good peple, the wo, and the shame, and the filthe that men seiden to him, of the foule spitting that men spitte in his face, of the buffettes that men yave him, of the foule mowes and of the repreves that men to him seiden, of the nailes with which he was nailed to the crois, and of al the remenant of his passioun that he suffred for my sinnes, and nothing for his gilt. (256-59)

Contemplation of Christ’s suffering as preparation for penance was an important aspect of meditation literature, and was concomitant with the emphasis in fourteenth-century spirituality generally on the humanity of Christ (Bestul 607).

But the appearance of such material in a penitential manual, especially when Chaucer's translation of Pennaforte is so close in other respects, serves to emphasize the affective, interior experience of contrition in a way that other manuals, designed for practical use rather than as "meditaciouns" did not.

The affective emphasis of the *Parson's Tale* is also apparent in Chaucer's discussion of the causes of contrition. Three of the six causes that Chaucer identifies are rooted in private memory (of sin, of the good we have yet to accomplish and the good we have lost, and of Christ's suffering), which amounts to a cognitive awareness of guilt; two denote purely affective states of moral shame and guilt (specifically, shame about one's sin and fear of punishment); and one is a form of positive or forward-looking contemplation (hope for forgiveness, the gift of grace, and the glory of heaven). The process of contrition thus, above all, locates the sinner in time in a particular way: the past is remembered with regret, the present is experienced as a moment of shame and guilt, and the future is imagined in hope. In this way, the penitent's life is inscribed as a particular kind of narrative unfolding in time and one that is shaped by three basic affective states: guilt, shame, and hope.

Katherine Little similarly observes that "the Parson is particularly concerned with providing a language of interiority," and that, in the tale, "Chaucer far surpasses the language of contrition circulating the vernacular" (95). Little aptly sums up the differences between the Parson on contrition and, for example, Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*: the one tells you what you need to know about contrition while the other "also responds to the question 'What does it mean

to feel contrite?’” (Little 96). Indeed, the *Parson’s Tale* emphasizes the experience of contrition almost to the exclusion of the performative aspects of penance. The profoundly non-performative nature of the *Parson’s Tale* is also evident in the section on confession, although in very different terms. In contrast to the discussion of contrition, here the text becomes much more theoretical and, in Patterson’s terms, “metaphysical” (“Quitting” 346); here, the Parson explains “whennes that sinnes springen, and how they encessen, and whiche they ben” (321), the intellectual rather than the affective dimension of penance. The difference between the two sections has been the source of much complaint in Chaucerian scholarship, as one of the supposed artistic failings of the tale, a sign of Chaucer’s inattention or incompetence: “a clumsy combination of two religious treatises” (Liddell 256). The significance of this shift in tone, however, has to do with the difference between the kinds of experience being described: one is affective and psychological, the other is *ostensibly* performative. Confession is the act of “shewing” one’s sins in speech to the priest, the aspect of penance that depends upon performative speech; and it is precisely here that the tale pulls away from the immediacy and the existential approach of the discourse on contrition and becomes abruptly objective and taxonomical. Consequently, the Parson ends up talking *about* the *idea* of confession, but compared to his emotive descriptions of the pain of hell and the sufferings of Christ, dispassionately, and without giving much insight into how confession should be executed: the practice that the Parson models here is thus, somewhat paradoxically, a cognitive practice. He presents us with ideas to be considered rather than words to be uttered. This significant and

apparently purposeful disinterest in the performative aspects of penitence continues in the section on satisfaction, which is disproportionately brief; indeed, by the time the Parson comes to the “almesse” and “bodily peine” of satisfaction, his treatment is positively perfunctory (1029). David Raybin has commented that “Chaucer’s interest in the pilgrimage journey rather than the destination shrine is reflected in the *The Parson’s Tale* in his focus on the stalk and branches of sin and remedies at the expense of the flower of satisfaction” (“Manye Been the Weyes” 33). As Raybin points out, sections IV and V (on satisfaction and the obstacles to contrition) combined are the same length as the introduction in section I. In all three discussions of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, the movement in the *Parson’s Tale* is away from the performance of penance and towards its interior reality. The call to understand confession theoretically is different from the call to perform it properly, and it is this difference that marks the Parson’s discussion of confession as more interiorized than other vernacular manuals.

On this point I differ from Little, who similarly points out the shift in tone from contrition to confession as one from affect to theory, but argues that this shift registers a failure “to connect the language of sin and contrition with the language of confession” (99). She perceives the difference as one of “relating sin as a theoretical concept to the person sinning” (98). In the section on “whennes that synnes spryngen, and how they encreessen,” the Parson’s tone is more personal and colloquial, and he emphasizes the existential reality of sin. In order to convey the concupiscence of the flesh, for example, the Parson describes the

inescapability of temptation: “It may wel wexe feble and faile by vertu of baptesme, and by the grace of God thurgh penitence, but fully ne shal it nevere quenche, that he ne shal som time be moeved in himself, but if he were refreided by siknesse, or by malifice of sorcerye” (340-41). The subject here is “man,” what he feels and what motivates him. But when he comes to the catalogue of sins, the tone becomes more general and distant, and seems to abandon the project of relating the sin to the penitent’s own experience. Little argues that, in this section, “the interest has shifted from making listeners aware of how they might understand their sin to the overwhelming presence of their sin” (98). But the change from the affective to the theoretical is *precisely* a shift from experiencing to “understanding,” on achieving a theoretical grasp of what it is that one does in confession, rather than instruction in the logistics of the actual encounter between priest and penitent. The effect of the distanced, objective tone, moreover, is less to emphasize sin as “overwhelming” in any way, and more to move the scene of confession from the dynamic between priest and penitent (although the Parson unequivocally affirms the necessity of “shewing” one’s sins to a priest [318]) to the penitent’s own intellectual contemplation. In this, the *Parson’s Tale* represents the “next step” in the interiorization of penance that had, by the fourteenth century, already shifted from canonical to tariffed to contritionist. Similarly, Bestul observes that “the *Parson’s Tale* marks a transition in the *Canterbury Tales* from the public, oral, fictional mode of the tales to the private realm of the treatise” (614). The *Parson’s Tale’s* status vis-à-vis its generic affiliations is analogous: in particular, the meditative nature of the *Parson’s Tale* takes the



content of the penitential manual but leaves its oral, “public” (in the sense that the confessional is more public than solitary reading) orientation, in favour of creating a text to be read in private reflection.

Understanding the *Parson’s Tale* as a meditation also clarifies the significance of the subtle shift, in the closing lines of the *Canterbury Tales*, from the Parson’s voice to Chaucer’s own in his Retraction in the sense that the *Parson’s Tale*, designed to draw our attention from the representation of other characters to the contemplation of our own spiritual standing, forms a kind of bridge between the fictional world of the pilgrims and the real world of Chaucer the poet.<sup>21</sup> As serious as Chaucer is about the penitential material he presents as the Parson’s “tretys,” I agree with Judith Ferster that the speaker of the tale should not be equated with Chaucer himself: the Parson is an ideal figure, but the truth he speaks is yet “truth-according-to-the-Parson” (“Idiosyncrasies of Fiction” 117). To read the Parson as having any other status would be to give him more ontological reality than Chaucer attributes even to Geoffrey. And, as for equating Geoffrey with Chaucer, as the Parson responds to the Host’s invitation, we certainly have no reason to “locate” Geoffrey the pilgrim anywhere else than on the road to Canterbury with the other pilgrims. But it is as if, over the course of

---

<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, Chaucerians have been divided on the status of the Retraction. There is no longer much credible doubt that Chaucer wrote it and that it was intended, by Chaucer’s earliest scribes, to immediately follow the *Parson’s Tale*. Textual certainties aside, there is little consensus on how we are to understand the piece. Peter Travis provides a succinct, if somewhat caricatured, summary of the varieties of response:

At one extreme have been the humanists—neo-romantic aesthetes distrustful of any hermeneutics that lead away from an ultimate appreciation of the ‘poetry’ of the poetic text. At the other extreme have been the exegetes, neo-Catholics in a state of prevenient grace, whose habit of mind is to spurn the carnal ‘poetry’ of the literal text for the saving spirit of *allegoresis*. These two schools have interpreted the Retraction in radically different ways—one marginalizing the Retraction as far as possible, the other moving it as far as possible into the central framework of the Tales. (137)

Geffrey's "listening" to the *Parson's Tale* and Chaucer's writing of it, the fictional persona and the man finally converge into one voice, equally moved by the call to remember guilt and to experience shame by "the travailes that oure lord Jesu Crist suffred."<sup>22</sup> And, crucially, this shift from fictional world to real confession is also a shift from the putative orality of the competition to the textuality of the penitential manual.

What is especially interesting about the Retraction is that Chaucer here returns again to the question of "entente," the same question raised by the Pardoner regarding his own speech performance. For Chaucer's Retraction is not simply a refutation of his poetic craft; rather, he restates again the "good intentions" defense of speech with which he began the pilgrimage:

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretis or rede, that if ther be anything in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure lord Jesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. / And if ther be anything that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of min unkonninge, and nat to my wil, that wolde ful fain have seid better if I hadde had konninge. / For oure book seyth, "Al that is writen, is writen for oure doctrine," and that is min entente. (Retr 1080-83)

---

<sup>22</sup> How, precisely, we are to make sense of this apparent convergence is ambiguous, but it depends, in part, on how we understand the textual relationship between the *Parson's Tale* and the Retraction. Manuscripts and modern editions regularly insert a rubric between the two announcing that "here the maker of the book taketh his leave," making the Retraction into a work separate from the *Parson's Tale*. But the fact is that the "Qui cum patre" at the end of the Retraction is the appropriate end to the *Parson's Tale*—they are the words of a preacher concluding a sermon (or "meditation"). I would argue that the *Tale* does not end until the "Amen" at the end of the Retraction, and the Retraction is merely the structural and logical conclusion of the *Parson's Tale*. Thus the "I" of the *Parson's Prologue* and *Tale* becomes, before he is finished, an "I" who claims to have written *Troilus* etc. (and, indeed, this is not Geoffrey the Pilgrim, but Chaucer the poet). The rubric in manuscripts and editions is convenient for scholars who want to separate the Retraction from the *Tale*, but there is no strong evidence of a *structural* discontinuity. Even if the rubric is authorial, it is unlikely that Chaucer would have made any use of it in oral performance: if we imagine listening to "I" in a performance of the *Tale*, we will hear the Parson declare that he regrets writing "vanities" like *Troilus and Criseyde*. Accepting the rubric for the sake of argument, the question remains, how are we to deal with the "voices" in an imagined performance? And if the *Parson's Tale* ends at the "Amen," we are left with the puzzle of a Parson who wrote *Troilus* and who offers to accept credit or blame for the "treyse" of which this is the conclusion.

This echoes Geoffrey's appeal to the evangelists' use of common speech and, even more directly, the moral with which the Nun's Priest concludes his beast fable:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,  
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,  
Taketh the moralitee, goode men.  
For Seint Paul seyth that al that written is,  
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, iwys.  
Taketh the fruit, and lat the chaf be stille. (3440-44)

One common question is to wonder at the apparent discrepancy between the notion that, on the one hand, "al that is writen, is writen for oure doctrine" and, on the other, the Parson's denunciation of fable and the fact that Chaucer goes on to "revoke" his "translacions and enditinges of worldly vanities" (1085), including the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Canterbury Tales* itself. If it is possible to find the "fruit" of divine truth in any text, either because its moral content is sound or because it demands that we exercise discernment and avoid imitating its negative example, then why does Chaucer feel it necessary to revoke his secular poetry? And what, exactly, does he mean by "revoke"? Rosemarie McGerr has argued that Chaucer's Retractions should be understood in terms similar to Augustine's *Retractationes*: not as a withdrawal or recantation, but as an exercise in clarification for posterity. McGerr contends,

It is clear in the prologue to the *Retractationes* that Augustine's concern is his responsibility, before God, to ensure that his readers come away from his works with the right ideas. . . . In reviewing his career as a writer, therefore, Augustine focuses on his intent to lead readers to the truth. When Augustine retracted his works, then, he reviewed them in light of his later understanding, recalled them from the past to assess their contributions to his goal. (McGerr 99)

The echoes of Augustine in Chaucer's Retraction are evident in Chaucer's explicit reference to his "entente" but also in the way in which he phrases his revocation: he lists his principle works, but after "Tales of Caunterbury" he adds a qualification, "thilke that sownen into sinne" (1086). Whether this phrase refers to all of the listed works that precede it or just to the *Tales* is unclear, but nonetheless the ambiguity created imposes responsibility onto the reader to decide which texts "sownen into sinne" and which do not. McGerr takes it to refer only to the *Tales*, but observes that this comment, combined with Chaucer's "entente" caveat, indicate the active role of the reader in creating the meaning of a text: "as the conclusion of the poem, he explicitly requests the reader to analyze the material that has gone before and gives him a set of criteria for judgment" (McGerr 102). In McGerr's reading, the Retractions provide, retrospectively, a hermeneutical key (similar to the kind of key I identify in the *Melibee*) with which to understand and evaluate, not the tales *per se*, but Chaucer's authorial responsibility for them: if a tale induces a reader to sin, then Chaucer revokes it, but if a tale leads the reader to the truth, then Chaucer thanks "oure lord Jesu Crist and his blisful moder, and alle the seintes in hevne" for it (1089).<sup>23</sup> Like Augustine, therefore, Chaucer issues his revocation not so much as a blanket condemnation of artful language or persuasive rhetoric, but as a self-conscious acknowledgement of the author's responsibility for the words he writes. Once the poet has sent his "litel bok" (*Troilus* 1786) into the world, it is taken up into the

---

<sup>23</sup> This is a disclaimer that resembles the Pardoner's, but differs in a key respect: the Pardoner does not revoke anything he says but insists that the effects of his tale, whether good or ill, are irrelevant to his purpose. Chaucer is here not only revoking but also asking *forgiveness* for those tales that had the effect of inducing sin.

whirling chaos of tidings and he has no control over whether it is sanctioned or derided by Fame; neither has he any control over how it is read and understood. There may be as many different interpretations and misinterpretations as there are pilgrims on this “thurghfare of wo,” and so all the poet can do is explain what he intended and hope for the best.

If the pilgrim-tellers and their tales have entertained and instructed each other and Chaucer’s readers, they have also demonstrated the many different ways in which people evade responsibility for their words and actions: the many ways in which people defend themselves against shame by refusing to acknowledge weakness and culpability and by shaming others instead. But Chaucer himself has enacted this same evasion on the level of poetic responsibility. In the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has insisted that he is not himself an “auctour” but is rather a reader (“Whoso shal telle a tale after a man . . .” [GP 731]), and this posture has allowed him to say a great many things without actually committing himself to the consequences of his speech. As the Parson calls the pilgrims to repent, to stop telling stories about each other and to tell their own stories—to recall their past, to be aware of themselves in the present, and to look forward to a future in eternity—he is also calling Chaucer to repent of his own shaming speech acts. In response to the question begged in the *General Prologue*—who, then, is responsible for the tales that are told?—Chaucer concludes the pilgrimage by acknowledging, finally, that he is responsible. It is not an undoing or a negating of what he has said; it is rather a claiming of ownership and thus a willingness to be on the hook for the effects of his words on

others. It is also an affirmation of the necessity of linguistic grace—that ongoing process of interpretation, of re-consideration and negotiation—that is threatened by the silence enjoined by the performances of the Pardoner and the Manciple. Without such grace, there is no possibility for reconciliation and understanding, in the recognition that our words, like our selves, are necessarily imperfect.

### Conclusion

In my reading of Chaucer's engagement with medieval hagiography, I argued that shame—the shame of the female body, the fear of shame and the desire for purity—underlies and drives the violent sacrifices inscribed and tacitly approved by the Physician and the Prioress. Both of these tales provide us with a parodic reworking of hagiography that interrogates the idea of purity that conflates material and spiritual value. Chaucer's concern to assert the possibility of moral and spiritual value even in the reality of physical "impurity" is made clear in the *Legend of Good Women*, which substitutes for the ideal of virginity the ideal of selfless, earthly love—a kind of love most typically exemplified by women. Chaucer's good women, both in the *Legend* and the *Tales*, are (with the sole exception of St Cecelia) those who are willing to "leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside" (MnLT 713) in matters of sexuality and purity; in Chaucer's ethical vision, the ethics of love or "pité," the virtues of fidelity, trouthe, and constancy and the metaphysical reality of freedom—all of these trump the ideal of purity imagined as impenetrable boundaries and unmixed categories.

The literally violent sacrifices in Chaucerian hagiography are paralleled by the substitutionary violence in the tales of the Pardoner and the Manciple but also by the figurative sacrifices of silencing and exclusion enacted between the pilgrims. The violence of virginity and purity is healed through the acceptance and re-evaluation of pollution—in the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, and the Melibee, for example. Similarly, the violence of shaming speech is healed through the acceptance and re-evaluation of weakness and guilt on the level of language, through confession and penitence. These become, at the close of the *Canterbury Tales*, the linguistic and poetic equivalent to Arveragus's submission, his self-sacrifice of male honour in place of Dorigen's shame and violent death, and to Melibee's acceptance of meekness in place of vengeance. On both levels, the violence that would otherwise be inflicted on the other is dissolved and whatever is lacking is forgiven through an acceptance of one's own imperfection and need of grace.

## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have tried to show, first of all, that many of Chaucer's poems, but especially the *Canterbury Tales*, are united thematically around a concern with the ethics of shame and guilt, and the problems to which these different ethical orientations give rise: sacrifice, vengeance, and the question of purity. In doing so, I have tried to add depth and weight to our understanding of Chaucer's "creative adoptions of ethical ideas" (*Chaucer, Ethics* 19) by considering the larger ethical patterns that shape his poetry. In his highly self-reflexive engagements with the literary traditions of romance (both classical and chivalric) and hagiography, Chaucer consistently emphasizes the ethical dilemmas created by shame—shame understood as an affective experience but also as the cultural and political currency in social economies of honour and sacrifice. Indeed, with a remarkable degree of consistency, from the *House of Fame* to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer represents his role as medieval poet as largely constituted by the task of deconstructing the dynamics of honour and shame—in the epic histories of Thebes and Troy, in the enchanted realm of medieval romance, in the radical piety of medieval hagiography, and in the performance of auricular confession and penance.

Chaucerian scholarship, especially in the past fifty years, is notable for the particularly polarized nature of its disputes. Not only is there little consensus about how we are to understand, in broad strokes, Chaucer's religious, political, and social positions, but, often, the opposing critical views advanced are mutually



exclusive in a way that we do not see in the critical scholarship on any other major English poet. Many of these disagreements come out of the attempt to align Chaucer with one of the political or religious factions we know to have been available to him. Thus, scholars of the highest caliber see Chaucer as an essentially conservative but politically savvy courtier, untroubled by social inequalities, as someone who always knew which way the wind was blowing and eschewed particular moral and ideological commitments in favour of ironic subterfuge. Other scholars of the same caliber, reading the same texts, consider Chaucer's a voice of dissent and find in his poetry a progressive or even radical humanism; still others see in his anti-clericalism and championing of the individual intimations of the Reformation. For some, Chaucer is a veritable postmodern; for others he is a bastion of medieval misogyny and reactionism. This dissertation does not try to tackle these disagreements head on or attempt to resolve them, although I have positioned myself between them implicitly; nor does it suggest a hitherto unacknowledged historical context, textual source or analogue with which to identify the author or his work. What I have tried to do, instead, is suggest a new theoretical approach to interpreting Chaucer's poetry that may, in future applications (or implications), serve to mediate between diametrically opposed readings. The critical, interpretive value of this approach is its ability to identify new thematic links between seemingly disparate texts: what the epic grandiosity of the world-travelling Knight and the strange religious fervour of the provincial Prioress have in common is an idea of ethics as purely performative, and an idea of justice that depends upon the sacrifice of a scapegoat

to preserve the precarious “jigsaw puzzle” of a materially conceived social order. What the anti-clericalism of the *Pardoner’s Tale* and the orthodoxy of the *Second Nun’s Tale* have in common is their concern with the difference between physical and spiritual purity, and the underlying psychological motivation that drives the desire for purity. Similarly, from Dido of the *House of Fame*, to Cupid’s martyrs in the *Legend of Good Women*, to Criseyde, Dorigen, and Virginia, Chaucer exposes the fatal conflation of spiritual and material that gives shame its remarkable power to shape identity and to inflict violence against the innocent: “Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame . . .” (PhysT 215). And, perhaps most significantly, what unites four of Chaucer’s major works is the idea that the moral task of the poet is to discern and pronounce the innocence of those who have been “shamed guiltless.”

As I hope to show in future projects, this same approach elucidates similar connections among the tales I have not analysed here. The dynamics between Alisoun, Nicholas, and Absolon of the *Miller’s Tale*, for example, as well as the love triangles in Chaucer’s other fabliaux, are clarified in light of Girard’s mimetic theory, and their relevance to the collection as a whole can be understood in terms of the ideas of shame and defilement inherent in the spectacle of cuckoldry. Similarly, much remains to be said about Chaucer’s response to and use of the conventions of hagiography: here, I have focused on the “problem cases” of the *Legend*, the Prioress, and the Physician, but it will prove instructive also to compare these with the representations of saintliness in *The Man of Law’s Tale* and the *Clerk’s Tale* in terms of shame, guilt, and purity. To date, no other

theoretical approach or set of interrelated concepts has been able to identify such thematic coherence and consistency in Chaucer's principal texts, and thus no other theoretical approach has been able to make such a strong case for articulating a unified Chaucerian vision: Chaucer's ethical poetics.

As remarkably apt as I have found shame and guilt to be in reading Chaucer's poetry, I have found Chaucer's representations of the moral affects (and those of his contemporaries) to be equally apt in terms of how they constitute a rejoinder of sorts to current theoretical discourse. It seems undeniable that shame in theory and shame ethics in practice are entering a period of ascendancy. In theory, there is growing enthusiasm about the fact that "shame purifies our bad consciousness, offering salvation from the tyranny and prison of the self. It opens a door, pointing the way to spiritual health and realization of the world beyond egoism" (Ferne 8). In practice, for a host of reasons that I could not begin to explore here, shame as a fundamental aspect of interpersonal and social relationships thrives in a context where images are the primary cultural medium, but especially where the mechanisms of commodification have successfully infiltrated every aspect of public and private life. Understanding shame in terms of the objectifying gaze of the other and as the currency in the economy of sacrificial exchange—if ever there was a "shame culture," we are living in it now.

The deeply problematic and even disturbing reality of shame as a basis for ethical theorizing is, evidently, not always immediately apparent to contemporary theorists, embedded as we are in a world that "was not made for us" and in a history that "tells no purposive story" (Williams 164). Fortunately for us,

however, that history also provides us with perspectives against which we may weigh our own: in particular, Chaucer's representations of shame ethics in action issue a much-needed word of caution about the power of shame to transform our ethical selves or to provide a foundation for theorizing identity. Shame indeed has the potential to bring down the powerful in the cause of justice, and it certainly lies at the heart of human identity, however we want to understand it. But, as a socio-political dynamic, shame is almost always a tool of the power-brokers; as a moral affect, it is, more often than not, a destructive force that impels the impossible desire for purity and the propensity for sacrificial violence. Guilt, on the other hand, has the potential to instill humility (the "world beyond egoism") without at the same time provoking the need to defend against total psychological annihilation. And, more importantly, guilt places the self—and all selves—in a position of empathy and service vis-à-vis the other, in perpetually posing the question, what do I owe? Which is another way of asking the question, what does each deserve (from me)? Or again, what is the demand that the other makes of me, and how do I respond to it? Chaucer's poetic response to the reality of guilt is the representation of grace—the gracious, spontaneous forgiveness of the other's debt to me. But although it is a question less prominent in Chaucer's poetry (until we come to the Retraction, perhaps), guilt also raises the question of responsibility—my debt to the other. From this perspective, it is not within my power to cancel the debt, and so I am in a position of perpetual responsibility. In this way, it is not the case that there is no escape from *the* sacrificial economy, as though there is only one kind of sacrifice—a monolithic "sacrificial logic"—but

rather that there is a choice between the type of sacrifice in which I can participate. And ultimately, it seems to be a rather stark choice: acquisitive mimesis or non-violent mimesis, sacrifice of the other or self-sacrifice. There may be grace, that letting go of what I feel the other owes to me, but grace does not mean that I can also let go of what I owe to the other. Grace means only that my payment is understood as something that must be freely given.

## Works Cited

## Primary Works

- Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. *Concerning the City of God, Against the Pagans*. Trans. Henry Bettenson. Ed. David Knowles. London: Penguin-Pelican, 1972.
- . *An Augustine Reader*. Ed. John J. O'Meara. New York: Image Books-Doubleday, 1973.
- . *The Retractions*. Trans. Mary Inez Bogan. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 1968.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiæ*. Vol. 39. Trans. and annot. Kevin D. O'Rourke O.P. London: Blackfriars, Eyre and Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Il Filocolo*. Trans. Donald Cheney and Thomas C. Bergin. Garland Library of Medieval Literature 43. London and New York: Garland, 1985.
- Bokenham, Osbern. *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. Ed. Mary Serjeantson. Early English Text Society, OS 206. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1938.
- Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Jill Mann. London, New York, and Toronto: Penguin, 2005.
- . *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Chrétien de Troyes. *Arthurian Romances*. Ed. and trans. William W. Kibler. New York and London: Penguin, 1991.
- Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis*. Ed. Russell A. Peck. Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 9. 1968; Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980.
- Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. *The Romance of the Rose*. Trans. Frances Horgan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

Hilton, Walter. *The Scale of Perfection*. Ed. Thomas H. Bestul. Middle English Texts. Kalamazoo, MI: Published for TEAMS in association with the U of Rochester by Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan U, 2000.

Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend : Readings on the Saints*. Trans. Granger Ryan 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.

- Jerome. *Against Jovinian*. 1.41-6. Ed. Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler; annot. Robert E. Edwards. *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. 2 vols. Cambridge, and Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2002-2005. 1: 257-265.
- Langland, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. A. V. C. Schmidt. Everyman's Library. London: Dent; Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1995.
- Laurent d'Orléans. *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth-Century English Translation of the "Somme le Roi" of Lorens d'Orléans*. Ed. W. Nelson Francis. Early English Text Society, OS 217. London: Oxford UP, 1942.
- Livius, Titus. From *The History of Rome*. Vol. 3. 44-58. Ed and trans. B.O. Foster; annot. Kenneth Bleeth. *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. 2 vols. Cambridge, and Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2002-2005. 2: 541-547.
- Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Eugène Vinaver. Oxford Standard Authors. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1971.
- Mannyng, Robert, of Brunne. *Handlyng Synne*. Ed. Idelle Sullens. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 14. Binghamton, NY: Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, SUNY, 1983.
- [Pearl-poet.] *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*. 4th ed. Ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron. Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies. Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2002.
- Raymond of Capua. *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*. Trans. George Lamb. London : Harvill Press, 1960.
- Raymond of Pennaforte. *Summa on Penitence*. 3.34. Ed. Xaverio Ochoa and Aloisio Diez. Trans. and annot. Richard Neuhauser. *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. 2 vols. Cambridge, and Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2002-2005. 1: 543-567.
- Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida*. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. David Bevington. New York: Longman, 1997.
- South English Legendary*. Ed. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill. 3 vols. Early English Text Society, OS 235, 236, 244. London: Oxford UP, 1956-1959.



Thomas of Monmouth. *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*. Trans. Augustus Jessopp. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1896.

## Secondary Works

- Aers, David. *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Alfino, Mark. "Another Look at the Derrida-Searle Debate." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 24 (1991): 143-152.
- Amtower, Laurel. "Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's *House of Fame*." *Philological Quarterly* 79 (2000): 273-291.
- . "Mimetic Desire and the Misappropriation of the Ideal in the *Knight's Tale*." *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 125-144.
- An, Sonjae. "Echoes of Boethius and Dante in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Medieval and Early Modern English Studies* 12 (2004): 393-418.
- Anderson, David. "Theban Genealogy in the *Knight's Tale*." *Chaucer Review* 21 (1986-1987): 311-320.
- Anderson, J. J. "The Three Judgments and the Ethos of Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Chaucer Review* 24 (1989-1990): 337-355.
- Astell, Ann W. "Nietzsche, Chaucer, and the Sacrifice of Art." *Chaucer Review* 39 (2004-2005): 323-340.
- . "Saintly Mimesis, Contagion, and Empathy in the Thought of René Girard, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil." *Shofar* 22 (2004): 116-131.
- . "The *Translatio* of Chaucer's Pardoner." *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 411-428.
- Ashton, Gail. *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*. Routledge Research in Medieval Studies 1. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*. CBC Massey Lectures Series. Toronto: House of Anansi P, in association with CBC Radio, 2008.
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. William James Lecture Series. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1962.
- Barron, William R. J. *English Medieval Romance*. Longman Literature in English Series. London and New York: Longman, 1987.

- Baswell, Christopher. "Dido's Purse." *Multilingua* 18 (1999): 159-172.
- Bedford, Olwen A. "The Individual Experiences of Guilt and Shame in Chinese Culture." *Culture & Psychology* 10 (2004): 29-52.
- Bedford, Olwen A., and Kwang-Kuo Hwang. "Guilt and Shame in Chinese Culture: A Cross-Cultural Framework from the Perspective of Morality and Identity." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 33 (2003): 127-144.
- Beidler Peter G. "The Plague and Chaucer's Pardoner." *Chaucer Review* 16 (1981-1982): 257-269.
- Benedict, Ruth. "The Dilemma of Virtue." *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946. 195-227.
- Benjamin, Edwin B. "The Concept of Order in the *Franklin's Tale*." *Philological Quarterly* 38 (1959): 119-124.
- Benson, C. David. "The Lost Honor of Sir Gawain." *De gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*. Ed. John Miles Foley, J. Chris Womack, and Whitney A. Womack. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1482; Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition 11. New York: Garland, 1992. 30-39.
- Bernau, Anke, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans, eds. *Medieval Virginites*. Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages Series. Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 2003.
- Bernstein, Michael. *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.
- Bestul, Thomas. "Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* and the Late-Medieval Tradition of Religious Meditation." *Speculum* 64 (1989): 600-619.
- Biebel, Elizabeth M. "A Wife, A Batterer, A Rapist: Representations of Masculinity in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*." *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Cambridge: Brewer, 1998. 63-75.
- Biller, Peter, and Alastair Minnis, eds. *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*. York Studies in Medieval Theology 2. Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, NY: York Medieval P / Boydell, 1998.
- Blake, Kathleen, A. "Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 34 (1973): 3-19.

- Blamires, Alcuin. *Chaucer, Ethics and Gender*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Blanch, Robert J., and Julian N. Wasserman. "The White and the Red: Chaucer's Manipulation of a Convention in the *Knight's Tale*." *Chaucer in the Eighties*. Ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986. 175-191.
- Bloch, R. Howard. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991.
- . "Chaucer's Maiden's Head: The *Physician's Tale* and the Poetics of Virginity." *Chaucer: Contemporary Critical Essays*. New Casebooks Series. Ed. Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis. New York: St. Martin's P, 1996. 145-156.
- Bloomfield, Morton W. "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*." *PMLA* 72 (1957): 14-26.
- Boitani, Piero. *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1984.
- Bowers, John M. "'Dronkenesse is ful of stryvyng': Alcoholism and Ritual Violence in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*." *ELH* 57 (1990): 757-784.
- Braswell, Mary. *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP; London: Associated UP, 1983.
- Brewer, Derek. Introduction. *Morte d'Arthur, Parts Seven and Eight*. By Sir Thomas Malory. London: Edward Arnold, 1968.
- . "The History of a Shady Character: The Narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Modes of Narrative: Approaches to American, Canadian and British Fiction*. Ed. Reingard M. Nischik and Barbara Korte. Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1990. 166-178.
- Broucek, Francis. *Shame and the Self*. New York: Guilford, 1991.
- . "Shame and its Relationship to Early Narcissistic Developments." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 63 (1982): 369-378.
- Broughton, Laurel. "The Prioress's Prologue and Tale." *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. 2 vols. Cambridge, and Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2002-2005. 2: 583-647.

- Brown, Carleton. *Study of the Miracle of Our Lady Told by Chaucer's Prioress*. Chaucer Society 2<sup>nd</sup> Series 45.1906; London: Oxford UP, 1910.
- Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
- Brownlee, Kevin. "Vernacular Literary Consciousness c.1100-c.1500: French, German, and English Evidence." *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson. 9 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 2: 422-471.
- Burger, Glenn. "Doing What Comes Naturally: *The Physician's Tale* and the *Pardoner*." *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Cambridge: Brewer: 1998. 117-130.
- Burlin, Robert B. "The Art of Chaucer's Franklin." *Neophilologus* 51 (1967): 55-73.
- Burrow, John A. *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Langland, Gower, and the "Gawain" Poet*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- . "Honour and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Essays on Medieval Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984. 117-131.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone, 1991.
- . "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages." *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*. Ed. Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi. Zone Series 3-5. New York: Urzone; Harvard UP, 1989. 160-219.
- . *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. New Historicism Series. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1987.
- . *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies 16. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1982.

- Cairns, Douglas. *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon P; New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Camarda, Peter. "Imperfect Heroes and the Consolations of Boethius: The Double Meaning of Suffering in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*." *Medieval Forum* 1 (2002): n.p.
- Calabrese, Michael. "Performing the Prioress: 'Conscience' and Responsibility in Studies of Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44 (2002): 66-91.
- Carton, Evan. "Complicity and Responsibility in Pandarus' Bed and Chaucer's Art." *PMLA* 94 (1979): 47-61.
- Carruthers, Mary. "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions." *PMLA* 94 (1979): 209-222.
- Chambers, Edmund K. *The Mediaeval Stage*. 1903; London: Oxford UP, 1967.
- Cole, Andrew. "Chaucer's English Lesson." *Speculum* 77 (2002): 128-167.
- Coleman, William E. "The Knight's Tale." *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. 2 vols. Cambridge and Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2002-2005. 2: 87-247.
- Collette, Carolyn. "Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the *Melibee*." *Chaucer Review* 29 (1994-1995): 416-433.
- Constable, Liz. "States of Shame / La Honte." *L'Esprit Createur* 39 (1999): 3-12.
- Cooper, Helen. "The Frame." *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. 2 vols. Cambridge, and Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2002-2005. 1: 1-22.
- Cox, Catherine S. "Genesis and Gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Chaucer Review* 35 (2000-2001): 378-390.
- . *Gender and Language in Chaucer*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997.
- Crachiolo, Beth. "Seeing the Gendering of Violence: Female and Male Martyrs in the South English Legendary." "A Great Effusion of Blood?": *Interpreting Medieval Violence*. Ed. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery, and Oren Falk. Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 2004. 147-163.

- Crane, Susan. *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.
- Creighton, Millie R. "Revisiting Shame and Guilt Cultures: A Forty-Year Pilgrimage." *Ethos* 18 (1990): 279-307.
- Daileader, Celia R. "The Thopas-Melibee Sequence and the Defeat of Antifeminism." *Chaucer Review* 29 (1994-1995): 26-39.
- David, Alfred. "Literary Satire in the *House of Fame*." *PMLA* 75 (1960): 333-339.
- Delany, Sheila. "Chaucer's Prioress, The Jews, and the Muslims." *Medieval Encounters* 5 (1999): 199-213.
- . *The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U of California P, 1994.
- . "Politics and the Paralysis of Poetic Imagination in *The Physician's Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 47-60.
- . "Notes on Experience, Authority and Desire in the Wife of Bath's Recital." *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 15 (1987): 27-43.
- . *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972.
- Delumeau, Jean. *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries*. Trans. Eric Nicholson. New York: St. Martin's P, 1990.
- Demos, E. Virginia. "Facial Expressions of Infants and Toddlers." *Emotion and Early Interaction*. Ed. Tiffany Field and Alan Fogel. Hillsdale, NJ : L. Erlbaum, 1982.
- De Roo, Harvey. "Undressing Lady Bertilak: Guilt and Denial in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Chaucer Review* 27 (1992-1993): 305-323.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*. Religion and Postmodernism Series. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.
- . *Limited Inc*. Ed. Gerald Graff. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber. Evanston, IL : Northwestern UP, 1988.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. "A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Diacritics* 24 (1994): 205-206.

- . *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1989.
- . *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Series Q. Durham, NC: Duke UP 1999.
- Dodds, E. R. "From Shame-Culture to Guilt-Culture." *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1951. 28-63.
- Doi, Takeo. *The Anatomy of Dependence*. Trans. John Bester. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture*. London: Penguin, 1998.
- Donaldson, E. Talbot. *Speaking of Chaucer*. London: Athlone P, 1970.
- Doob, Penelope. *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1974.
- Douglas, Mary. *Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2004.
- . *Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- . *Into the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 158. Sheffield: JSOT P, 1993.
- . *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- . *Purity and Danger*. 1966. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Ekman, Paul. *Emotions Revealed: Understanding Faces and Feelings*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003.
- Everhart, Deborah. "The 'Kynge of Hap' and Haphazardness: The Meanings of 'hap' in the Works of Chaucer, Malory and the 'Patience'-Poet." Diss. U of California at Irvine, 1992.
- Felman, Shoshana. *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*. Meridian Series. Trans. Catherine Porter. New Foreword by Stanley Cavell. Afterword by Judith Butler. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.



- . "To Open the Question." *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading, Otherwise*. Ed. Shoshana Felman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982. 1-18.
- Ferguson, Tamara J. "Mapping Shame and its Functions in Relationships." *Child Maltreatment* 10 (2005): 377-386.
- Fernie, Ewan. *Shame in Shakespeare*. Accents on Shakespeare Series. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Ferster, Judith. *Chaucer on Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.
- . "Chaucer's Parson and the 'Idiosyncrasies of Fiction.'" *Closure in the Canterbury Tales: The Role of the Parson's Tale*. Ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley. Studies in Medieval Culture 41. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 2000. 115-150.
- Fisher, Sheila. "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*. Ed. Thelma S. Fenster. Arthurian Characters and Themes 3; Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1499. New York: Garland, 1996. 77-95.
- . "Taken Men, Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*. Ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989. 71-105.
- Fontaine, John R. J., Patrick Luyten, Paul de Boeck, Jozef Corveleyn, Manuel Fernandez, Dora Herrera, Andras Itzész, and Theodora Tomcsányi. "Untying the Gordian Knot of Guilt and Shame." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 37 (2006): 273-292.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage - Random House, 1995.
- Fradenburg, Louise. "Sacrificial Desire in the *Knight's Tale*." *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 27 (1997): 47-75.
- . "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*." *Chaucer: Contemporary Critical Essays*. New Casebooks Series. Ed. Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis. New York: St. Martin's P, 1996. 193-231.
- . "Analytical Survey, II: We Are Not Alone: Psychoanalytic Medievalism." *New Medieval Literatures II*. Ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Wendy Scase. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998. 249-276.

- Frank, H. L. "Seeing the Prioress Whole." *Chaucer Review* 25 (1990-1991): 229-237.
- Freedman, Paul, and Gabrielle M. Spiegel. "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies." *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 677-704.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. New York and London: Norton, 1961.
- . "On Narcissism: An Introduction." *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 4. Trans. James Strachey. 1<sup>st</sup> American ed. New York: Basic, 1959. 30-59.
- . "Family Romances." *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 5. Trans. James Strachey. 1<sup>st</sup> American ed. New York: Basic, 1959. 74-78.
- . "Female Sexuality." *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 5. Trans. James Strachey. 1<sup>st</sup> American ed. New York: Basic, 1959. 252-272.
- . "The Ego and the Id." *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and trans. John Rickman. New York: Doubleday, 1957. 210-235.
- . "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 7. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth P and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953. 69-143.
- . "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 22. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth P and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953. 5-182.
- Frost, William. "An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*." *Review of English Studies* 25 (1949): 289-304.
- Fyler, John M. *Chaucer and Ovid*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Gaylord, Alan T. "The Unconquered Tale of the Prioress." *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters* 47 (1962): 613-636.
- Giancarlo, Matthew. "The Structure of Fate and the Devising of History in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 227-266.

- Girard, René. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Trans. and fwd. by James G. Williams. New York: Orbis, 2001.
- . *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987.
- . *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.
- . *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977.
- . *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1966.
- Gilligan, James. "Shame, Guilt, and Violence." *Social Research* 70 (2003): 1149-1180.
- Godfrey, Mary F.. "The Fifteenth-Century *Prioress's Tale* and the Problem of Anti-Semitism." *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400-1602*. Ed. Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1999. 93-115.
- Gravdal, Kathryn. *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*. New Cultural Studies Series. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991.
- Griswold, Charles. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Gruenler, Curtis. "Desire, Violence and the Passion in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: A Girardian Reading." *Renascence* 52 (1999): 35-56.
- Guynn, Noah D. "Historicizing Shame, Shaming History: Origination and Negativity in the *Eneas*." *L'Esprit Créateur* 39 (1999): 112-125.
- Halberstam, Judith. "Shame and White Gay Masculinity." *Social Text* 23.3-4 [84-85] (2005): 219-233.
- Hamel, Mary. "The Pardoner's Tale." *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. 2 vols. Cambridge, and Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2002-2005. 1: 265-319.
- Hamilton, Marie. "Echoes of Childermas in the Tale of the Prioress." *Modern Language Review* 34 (1939): 1-8.

- Hanning, Robert W. "The Struggle Between Noble Designs and Chaos': The Literary Tradition of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*." *Literary Review* 23 (1980): 519-541.
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: U of California P, 1992.
- . "'Of his love dangerous to me': Liberation, Subversion, and Domestic Violence in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*." *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series. Boston: St. Martin's P, 1996. 273-289.
- . "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 82 (1983): 11-31.
- Harwood, Britton J. "Gawain and the Gift." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 483-499.
- . "Chaucer on 'Speche': *House of Fame*, the *Friar's Tale*, and the *Summoner's Tale*." *Chaucer Review* 26 (1991-1992): 343-349.
- Heffernan, Thomas J. *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Heng, Geraldine. "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 500-514.
- Holloway, Julia Bolton. "Convents, Courts, and Colleges: The Prioress and the Second Nun." *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance S. Wright, and Joan Bechtold. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. 195-215.
- Homer, Sean. *Jacques Lacan*. Routledge Critical Thinkers Series. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Hooker, J. T. "Homeric Society: A Shame Culture?" *Greece and Rome* 34 (1987): 121-125.
- Hawkins, Anne Hunsaker. "Yvain's Madness." *Philological Quarterly* 71 (1992): 377-397.
- Huscroft, Richard. *Expulsion: England's Jewish Solution*. Revealing History Series. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2006.
- Hwang, Joon Ho. "Vernacular Poetry, Text and Fame in the *House of Fame*." *Medieval and Early Modern English Studies* 12 (2004): 371-392.

- Izard, Carroll E. *The Psychology of Emotions*. Emotions, Personality, and Psychotherapy Series. New York: Plenum, 1991.
- Jacquart, Danielle, and Claude Thomasset. *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*. Trans. Matthew Adamson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988.
- Jankowski, "Reception of Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*: Osbern Bokenham's *Lyf of S. Cycyle*." *Chaucer Review* 30 (1995-1996): 306-318.
- Jones, Terry. *Chaucer's Knight's Tale: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*. Rev ed. London: Methuen, 1994.
- Johnson, Lynn Staley. "Inverse Counsel: Contexts for the *Melibee*." *Studies in Philology* 87 (1990): 137-155.
- Joseph, Gerhard. "The *Franklin's Tale*: Chaucer's Theodicy." *Chaucer Review* 1 (1966): 20-32.
- Kallendorf, Craig. "Boccaccio's Dido and the Rhetorical Criticism of Virgil's *Aeneid*." *Studies in Philology* 82.4 (1985): 401-415.
- Kaufman, Gershen. *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-based Syndromes*. 1989; London: Routledge, 1993.
- Kaylor, Harold. "Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*." *To Make His English Sweete upon His Tonge*. Middle English Mirror Series 3. Ed. Marcin Krygier and Liliana Sikorska. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007. 111-119.
- Keen, William P. "Chaucer's Imaginable Audience and the Oaths of the *Shipman's Tale*." *Topic* 50 (2000): 91-103.
- Kennedy, Beverly. "Northrop Frye's Theory of Genres and Sir Thomas Malory's 'Hoole Book.'" *The Spirit of the Court*. Ed. Glyn S Burgess, Robert A Taylor, Alan Deyermond, Dennis Green, and Beryl Rowland. Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society (Toronto 1983). Cambridge, and Dover, NH: Brewer; 1985. 224-233.
- Kilbourne, Benjamin. *Disappearing Persons: Shame and Appearance*. SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture. Albany: State U of New York P, 2002.
- Klawans, Jonathan. *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2006.

- . *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Knapp, Peggy A. "Alisoun of Bathe and the Reappropriation of Tradition." *Chaucer Review* 24 (1989-1990): 45-52.
- Konstan, David. "Shame in Ancient Greece." *Social Research* 70 (2003): 1031-1060.
- Koff, Leonard Michael. "Ending a Poem before Beginning It; or, The 'Cas' of Troilus." *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: "Subgit to alle Poesye": Essays in Criticism*. Ed. R. A. Shoaf and Catherine S. Cox. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 104. Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, SUNY, 1992. 161-178.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- Kruger, Steven F. "Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*." *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 115-139.
- Kurtz, Leonard Paul. *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature*. 1934; Geneva: Slatkine, 1975.
- Labbie, Erin Felicia. *Lacan's Medievalism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2001.
- . *Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 1998.
- . *Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Trans. Dennis Porter. New York: Norton, 1992.
- . *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. and commentary by Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981.
- Lambert, Mark. *Malory: Style and Vision in "Le Morte Darthur"*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1975.
- . "Telling the Story in *Troilus and Criseyde*." *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*. Ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 78-92.

- Langmuir, Gavin. "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln." *Speculum* 47 (1972): 459-482.
- Lebra, Takie Sugiyama. *Japanese Patterns of Behaviour*. Honolulu: UP of Hawaii, 1976.
- . "Shame and Guilt: A Psychocultural View of the Japanese Self." *Ethos* 11 (1983): 129-209.
- Leicester, H. M. "'My bed was ful of verray blood': Subject, Dream, and Rape in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*." *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series. Boston: St. Martin's P, 1996. 234-254.
- . *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in The Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.
- . "Of a Fire in the Dark: Private and Public Feminism in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 157-178.
- Lewis, Helen Block. *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*. New York: International UP, 1971.
- Leys, Ruth. *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*. 20/21 Series. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- Lipman, Vivian D. *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*. London: Jewish Historical Society, 1967.
- Little, Katherine C. *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2006.
- Lochrie, Karma. *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999.
- Logan, Harry M. "Speaking of the *Canterbury Tales*: The Tales as Speech Act." *Language and Style* 20 (1987): 207-213.
- Lowe, Ben. *Imagining Peace: A History of Early English Pacifist Ideas*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997.
- Lowes, John Livingston. "The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* Considered in its Chronological Relations." *PMLA* 20 (1905): 749-864.
- . "The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* as Related to the French Marguerite Poems and to the *Filostrato*." *PMLA* 19 (1904): 593-683.

- Lynd, Helen Merrell. *On Shame and the Search for Identity*. London: Routledge, 1958.
- Maccoby, Hyam. *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Mann, Jill. *Feminizing Chaucer*. Rev ed. Chaucer Studies 30. Cambridge: Brewer, 2002.
- . "Chance and Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*." *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*. Ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. 75-92.
- . "Parents and Children in the *Canterbury Tales*." *Literature in Fourteenth-Century England*. Ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti. Tübingen: G. Narr Verlag, 1983. 165-183.
- . "Satisfaction and Payment in Middle English Literature." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 5 (1983): 17-48.
- . "Troilus's Swoon." *Chaucer Review* 14 (1979-1980): 319-335.
- . *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.
- McAlpine, "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters." *Chaucer: Contemporary Critical Essays*. New Casebooks Series. Ed. Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis. New York: St. Martin's P, 1996. 36-50.
- McGerr, Rosemarie Potz. "Retraction and Memory: Retrospective Structure in the *Canterbury Tales*." *Comparative Literature* 37 (1985): 97-113.
- McInerney, Maud Burnett. "'Is this a mannes herte?': Unmanning Troilus through Ovidian Allusion." *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Cambridge: Brewer, 1998. 221-235.
- McKinley, Kathryn L. "The Clerk's Tale: Hagiography and the Problem of Lay Sanctity." *Chaucer Review* 33 (1998-1999): 90-111.
- Milgrom, Jacob. *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*. Continental Commentary Series. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004.
- Miller, William Ian. *Eye for an Eye*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2006.



- . *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort and Violence*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993.
- . *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990.
- Miller, Robert P. "Chaucer's Pardoner, The Spiritual Eunuch, and the *Pardoner's Tale*." *Speculum* 30 (1955): 180-199.
- Mills, Robert. "Can the Virgin Martyr Speak?" *Medieval Virginites*. Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages Series. Ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih. Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P. 187-213.
- Minnis, Alastair. *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2008.
- . *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1982.
- Mitchell, J. Allan. "Romancing Ethics in Boethius, Chaucer, and Levinas: Fortune, Moral Luck, and Erotic Adventure." *Comparative Literature* 57 (2005): 101-116.
- Mogan, Joseph J. *Chaucer and the Theme of Mutability*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1969.
- Morrison, Andrew. *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic, 1989.
- . *The Culture of Shame*. London, and Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1986.
- Murray, Alexander. "Confession Before 1215." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 3 (1993): 51-81.
- Muscatine, Charles. "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*." *PMLA* 65 (1950): 911-929.
- . "Chaucer's Religion and the Chaucer Religion." *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*. Ed. Ruth Morse, Barry Windeatt, and Toshiyuki Takamiya. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. 249-262.
- Myers, Jeffrey Rayner. "Chaucer's Pardoner as Female Eunuch." *Studia Neophilologica* 72 (2000): 54-62.
- Nathanson, Donald, ed. *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*. New York: Norton, 1992.

- . *The Many Faces of Shame*. New York: Guilford, 1987.
- Neuhauser, Richard. "The Parson's Tale." *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. 2 vols. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. Cambridge, UK: Brewer, 2005. 1: 529-611.
- . "The *Parson's Tale* and its Generic Affiliations." *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson's Tale*. Ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley. *Studies in Medieval Culture* 41. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 2000. 45-76.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. 1887. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage - Random House, 1989.
- Nirenberg, David. *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996.
- Nolan, Barbara. "Chaucer's Tales of Transcendence: Rhyme Royal and Christian Prayer in the *Canterbury Tales*." *Chaucer's Religious Tales*. Chaucer Studies Series 15. Ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson. Cambridge: Brewer, 1990. 21-38.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.
- . *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001
- Olson, Paul A. *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986.
- Ortiz, Judith Miller. "The Two Faces of Dido: Classical Images and Medieval Reinterpretation." *Romance Quarterly* 33 (1986): 421-430.
- Pajaczkowska, Claire, and Ivan Ward, eds. *Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Passmore, S. Elizabeth and Susan Carter, eds. *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*. *Studies in Medieval Culture* 48. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2007.
- Paster, Gail Kern. *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Patch, Howard R. "Troilus on Determinism." *Speculum* 6 (1931): 225-243.

- Patterson, Lee. "The living witnesses of our redemption': Martyrdom and Imitation in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 507-560.
- . *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991.
- . "'What man artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117-175.
- . "Chaucerian Confession: Penitential Literature and the Pardoner." *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976): 153-173.
- . "The *Parson's Tale* and the Quitting of the *Canterbury Tales*." *Traditio* 34 (1978): 331-380.
- Pearsall, Derek. "Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment." *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. Arthurian Studies 38. Cambridge: Brewer, 1997. 351-362.
- . "Signs of Life in Lydgate's *Danse Macabre*." *Zeit, Tod und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance Literatur, III*. Ed. James Hogg. Analecta Cartusiana 117. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1987. 58-71.
- Pelen, Marc M. "Madness in Yvain Reconsidered." *Neophilologus* 87 (2003): 361-369.
- Petty, George R. "Power, Deceit, and Misinterpretation: Uncooperative Speech in the *Canterbury Tales*." *Chaucer Review* 27 (1992-1993): 413-423.
- Pickering, James D. "Choice and Circumstance in Chaucer and Malory." *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 14 (1988): 151-159.
- Piers, Gerhard and Milton B. Singer. *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1953.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. "Honour and Social Status." *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*. Ed. J. G. Peristiany. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1966. 19-77.
- Plummer, John. "Signifying the Self: Language and Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*. Ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian Wasserman. Troy, NY: Whitson, 1991. 195-212.

- Poschmann, Bernard. *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*. Trans. Francis Courtney. Montreal, Freiburg, and Herder: Palm, 1964.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977.
- Prior, Sandra Pierson. "The Love that Dares Not Speak its Name: Displacing and Silencing the Shame of Adultery in *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*." *Romanic Review* 97 (2006): 127-152.
- . "Virginity and Sacrifice in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*." *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl. New York: St. Martin's P, 1999. 165-180.
- Probyn, Elspeth. *Blush: Faces of Shame*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- . "Everyday Shame." *Cultural Studies* 18 (2004): 328-349.
- Raybin, David. "'Manye been the weyes': The Flower, its Roots, and the Ending of the *Canterbury Tales*." *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson's Tale*. Ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley. *Studies in Medieval Culture* 41. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 2000. 11-43.
- Raybin, David, and Linda Tarte Holley, eds. *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson's Tale*. *Studies in Medieval Culture* 41. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 2000.
- Riddy, Felicity. "Engendering Pity in *The Franklin's Tale*." *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. Ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. 54-71.
- Root, Jerry. *Space to Speke: The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature*. American University Series II: Romance Languages and Literature. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.
- Roper, Gregory "Dropping the Personae and Reforming the Self: *The Parson's Tale* and the End of *The Canterbury Tales*." *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson's Tale*. Ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley. *Studies in Medieval Culture* 41. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 2000. 151-175.
- Roth, Cecil. *A History of the Jews in England*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1964.

- Sanok, Catherine. "Reading Hagiographically: *The Legend of Good Women* and its Feminine Audience." *Exemplaria* 31 (2001): 323-354.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. 1966; New York: Washington Square-Pocket Books, 1992.
- Saunders, Corinne. *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2001.
- Schweitzer, Edward C. "Fate and Freedom in *The Knight's Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 13-45.
- Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. London: Cambridge UP, 1969.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (2007): 625-642.
- . *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Series Q. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003.
- . "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*." *GLQ* 1 (1993): 1-16.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins." *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 496-522.
- Sharma, Manish. "Hiding the Harm: Revisionism and Marvel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Papers on Language and Literature* 44 (2008): 168-193.
- Sherman, Gail Berkeley. "Saints, Nuns, and Speech in the *Canterbury Tales*." *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*. Ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Timea Szell, and Brigitte Cazelles. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991. 136-160.
- Sklar, Elizabeth S. "The Undoing of Romance in Malory's *Morte Darthur*." *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1993): 309-327.
- Snell, William. "Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* and Pestilence in Late Medieval Literature." *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature* 10 (1995): 1-16.
- Spearing, A. C. *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

- . "Rewriting Romance: Chaucer's and Dryden's *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*. Ed. Ruth Morse, Barry Windeatt, and Toshiyuki Takamiya. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. 234-248.
- Stipek, D. "Differences Between Americans and Chinese in the Circumstances Evoking Pride, Shame and Guilt." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 29 (1998): 616-680.
- Sturges, Robert S. "*The Canterbury Tales*' Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority." *Modern Language Studies* 13 (1983): 41-51.
- Sullens, Idelle. Introduction. *Handlyng Synne*. By Robert Mannyng of Brunne. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 14. Binghamton: Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, SUNY, 1983. xii-xlvi.
- Sylvester, Louise. "Reading Narratives of Rape: The Story of Lucretia in Chaucer, Gower, and Christine de Pizan." *Leeds Studies in English* 31 (2000): 115-144.
- Tangney, June Price, and Ronda L. Dearing. *Shame and Guilt*. Emotions and Social Behaviour Series. New York: Guilford, 2004.
- Taylor, Gabrielle. *Shame, Pride, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1985.
- Taylor, Paul Beekman. "Peynted Confessiouns: Boccaccio and Chaucer." *Comparative Literature* 34 (1982): 116-129.
- Thomas, Susanne Sara. "The Problem of Defining Sovereignty in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *Chaucer Review* 41 (2007-2008): 87-97.
- Tomkins, Silvan S. *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*. Ed. E. Virginia Demos. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- . *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*. Vol. 2. London: Tavistock; New York: Springer, 1963.
- Travis, Peter W. "Deconstructing Chaucer's Retraction." *Exemplaria* 3 (1991): 135-158.
- Trigg, Stephanie. "'Shamed be . . .': Historicizing Shame in Medieval and Early Modern Courtly Ritual." *Exemplaria* 19 (2007): 67-89.

- Trower, Katherine B. "Spiritual Sickness in the *Physician's* and *Pardoner's Tales*: Thematic Unity in Fragment VI of the *Canterbury Tales*." *American Benedictine Review* 29 (1978): 67-86.
- Visser, Margaret. *Beyond Fate*. CBC Massey Lectures Series. Toronto: House of Anansi P, in association with CBC Radio, 2002.
- . *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Wallace, David. "Chaucer's Continental Inheritance: The Early Poems and *Troilus and Criseyde*." *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*. Ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1986. 19-37.
- Warner, Marina. *All Alone of Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976.
- Wasserman, Julian N. "Both Fixed and Free: Language and Destiny in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*. Ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1989. 194-222.
- Wasserman, Loretta. "Honor and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Chivalric Literature: Essays on Relations Between Literature and Life in the Later Middle Ages*. Collected Papers of the 1976 Conference on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University. Ed. Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle. Studies in Medieval Culture 14. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1980. 77-90, 164-169.
- Weidman, Amanda. "Beyond Honor and Shame: Performing Gender in the Mediterranean." *Anthropological Quarterly* 76 (2003): 519-530.
- Weisl, Angela Jane. "'Quiting' Eve: Violence against Women in the *Canterbury Tales*." *Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer's Romance*. Chaucer Studies Series 22. Cambridge: Brewer, 1995. 115-136.
- Weiss, Victoria L. "Gawain's First Failure: The Beheading Scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Chaucer Review* 10 (1976): 361-366.
- Wenzel, Siegfried. "The *Parson's Tale* in Current Literary Studies." *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson's Tale*. Ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley. Studies in Medieval Culture 41. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 2000. 1-10.

- . "Pestilence and Middle English Literature: Friar John Grimestone's Poems on Death. *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague*. Ed. Daniel Williman. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 13. Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, SUNY, 1982. 131-159.
- . "The Source of Chaucer's Seven Deadly Sins." *Traditio* 30 (1974): 351-378.
- Williams, Bernard. *Shame and Necessity*. Sather Classical Lectures 57. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: U of California P, 1993.
- Wilson, John P, Boris Droždek, and Silvana Turkovic. "Posttraumatic Shame and Guilt." *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 7 (2006): 122-141.
- Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn. "Saints' Lives and the Female Reader." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 27 (1991): 314-332.
- Woods, William F. "'My sweete foo': Emelye's Role in the *Knight's Tale*." *Studies in Philology* 88 (1991): 276-306.
- Wurmser, Leon. *The Mask of Shame*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981.
- Yeager, R. F. "Pax Poetica: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 9 (1987): 97-121.