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Honor and Transgression: The Poetics and Politics of Shame and Guilt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

April E. Cook

Since its conception in the late fourteenth century, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been lauded not only for its virtually seamless synthesis of Christian doctrine, Celtic myth, and Arthurian romance, but also for the complex and enigmatic poetics that have come to define and establish it as one of the most unique and perplexing texts within the diverse and substantial corpus of late medieval literature. A meticulously crafted, structurally symmetrical, alliterative romance governed by the dynamic interplay of proximate opposites and ostensibly contradictory discourses, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*Sir Gawain*) furnishes a revealing reflection of the ideologically vexed socio-cultural milieu from which it emerged through its interrogation of the changing cultural constructions of honor and the problematic nature of chivalric ideals and their functions within the medieval court. As a literary mirror of the discordant amalgam of cultural discourses being simultaneously circulated and circumvented by chivalric codes, *Sir Gawain* exposes the precarious position of chivalric ideals in court society:

[*Sir Gawain*] contains reminders of all the strands in the delicate fabric of chivalric idealism [. . .]. The contrivance of the story allows the contradictions within the system to emerge, reveals the fragility of the weave, the manner in which a multiplicity of different impulses and ideals, appetites and codes of restraint, are held in precarious orbit. It only needs one break in the circuit for the circuit to fail, for chivalry, like the pentangle, is an ‘endeles knot’.¹

The *Gawain*-poet’s allusive, elusive literary depiction of the conception and distribution of honor in the chivalric culture underlines the illusive pervasion of Christian ideology and practice within the medieval court; however, the immediately evident residual traces of Germanic shame culture, which in *Sir Gawain* consistently surface and resurface in the context of the *Gawain*-poet’s elaborate descriptions of the Arthurian court, appear to suggest that despite the seemingly inextricable union of Christianity and chivalry, the social codes of the late medieval chivalric court were not only influenced by pre-Christian shame culture, but retained ideals that were, in fact, paradoxically in conflict with the broad tenets of Christian dogma, including, most significantly, the emphasis upon the symbolic materiality of social honor, the manifest dichotomy of public and private existence, and the latent possibility of recourse to public shaming as the primary method of social control.

The distinction between societies governed by the implicit threat of public shame and those relying upon induced feelings of personal guilt and a seemingly intrinsic sense of subjective morality as the primary mechanism of social control was initially made by cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead in her 1937 work *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples*, in which she designated these societies “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures,” respectively.² The linguistic origins of the nominals “shame” and “guilt” not only provide valuable insight into the common usage and functions of these terms within the *Gawain*-poet’s late medieval text, but also reveal that Mead’s distinctions between the shame culture and the guilt culture are crucial to the understanding of the social and cultural contexts that inherited and transformed their meanings. The term “shame,” from its Old English etymon *sceamu* or *sceomu*—with its equivalents of the Old Saxon *skama*, Old Norse *skömm*, Swedish *skam*, Old Frisian *scome*, Dutch *schaamte*, Old High German *scama*, and German

scham—is speculated to have been derived from the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root *-kem*, meaning “to cover.”³ The act of covering is especially significant in the context of shame culture, as it alludes at once to the concealing of transgression, with the intent of avoiding the necessarily consequent public shaming, and the dichotomy of public and private existence that this social threat necessitates, both of which are enacted by the poem’s eponymous hero. The etymological derivation of the term “guilt” is equally revealing. From the Anglo-Saxon *gylt* or *gildan*, meaning money or payment, the notion of guilt suggests a transgression for which the transgressor must pay or atone, which can be seen in the Christian provision of confession and penance as a means of paying this transgressionary debt.⁴ The transitional period in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was conceived, therefore, presents a dilemma for courtly society: while the Christian notions of virtue and guilt are clearly embedded in chivalric conceptions of honor, so too are the external symbols and pressures of Germanic shame culture, and it is left to the court society to negotiate the boundaries of these two frequently incongruous systems.

A similar phenomenon is marked by Britton J. Harwood in his essay “Gawain and the Gift,” as he explores the aristocratic-Christian conflict of the medieval court and concludes that nobility in *Sir Gawain* becomes both “the dominant aristocratic value [. . .] and a dangerous possibility within Christianity itself.”⁵ The ideological tensions between the shame culture and the guilt culture that emerge in *Sir Gawain* can essentially be viewed as an inevitable outgrowth of this hybridized chivalric aristo-Christianity, and just as Harwood notes the possibility of Christianity being subordinated to a non-Christian aristocratic purpose, the interplay of Christian guilt and heroic shame ideals in the text may suggest, not surprisingly, that the material wealth of the court societies of the late Middle Ages impelled a resistance to the complete abandonment of the deeply engrained traditions tied to the shame culture ideology and that, in light of this resistance, medieval chivalric Christianity may have been less dogmatically rigid than is oftentimes supposed. The *Gawain*-poet provides a very revealing illustration of this ostensible inconsistency in *Sir Gawain*, as the notion of personal guilt as a symbol of submission to a higher authority is explicitly advocated in the text, with private confession offered as the primary means of alleviating this guilt; however, it is the threat of public disgrace posed by an incessantly watchful medieval court audience, notably the very court that outwardly advocates Christian guilt ideology, that is ultimately presented as the more threatening method of social control. Donald Ward likewise examines the culturally transitional (and often paradoxical) nature of the late medieval period in his “Honor and Shame in the Middle Ages: An Open Letter to Lutz Röhrich:”

European courtly society, which had set up the ideal of chivalry as a replacement of the heroic ideal, offers us a [. . .] complicated picture of shame and guilt. On the one hand we find that courtly life was lived in almost complete public exposure and that, much as in the heroic shame culture, chivalric honor and virtue were under constant scrutiny of others. On the other hand, we also find in the authors’ critical assessment of courtly society a questioning of exaggerated notions of shame.⁶

While there is little disagreement among scholars that Western culture by the time of the *Gawain*-poet had undergone, at least on the surface, a substantial movement toward the guilt culture ideology with the increasingly pervasive presence and influence of Christian doctrine, the residual practice of shaming and the persistent influence of heroic ideals in the medieval court as they are exhibited in the poem would suggest that chivalric codes of the late Middle Ages were not entirely derivative of Christian dogma, despite their close connection, but were rather dichotomously inscribed with both earlier Germanic shame ideals and evolving Judeo-Christian conceptions of guilt, which, in the medieval court, operated simultaneously in conjunction and in conflict with each other. Significantly, *Sir Gawain* is immediately structurally divisible into two distinct, but mutually

contingent sections: the Green Knight's challenge of Gawain and the Arthurian court and Gawain's temptation and transgression at the castle Hautdesert.

Though less clearly delineated, and certainly less neatly extricable, shame and guilt cultures are likewise represented in *Sir Gawain*, with the manifest tensions between these concurrently functioning methods of social control, which are responsible for determining the construction and distribution of honor in the text, lending the narrative a certain air of instability, placing Gawain's struggle to retain his honor in this unstable, transitional setting firmly at the center. Accordingly, two distinct types of honor are present in *Sir Gawain*, which approximately correspond to their separate antitheses, shame and guilt: the first is the performative public honor, which the *Gawain*-poet links with the Arthurian court, and the second is the private, personally subjective honor that seems to have arisen in conjunction with Christian notions of virtue and sin, both of which play crucial roles in determining Gawain's fate in the quest for the Green Knight. What is of particular note in this narrative is that the hero is presented with a situation in which he must emerge with both of types of honor intact, and these two very separate forms are not always easily reconcilable. While Gawain must resist the advances of Bertilak's wife in order to preserve his private, moral honor, he also must avoid the trap of appearing discourteous and causing offence, a certain break with ideal knightly behavior. While Gawain's actions are clearly circumscribed by both guilt and shame ideologies, it is that of the shame culture which seems to exert the strongest influence upon him for the first half of the narrative, and it is only after his departure from the Arthurian shame court that readers are presented with any indication of his possession of a private morality.

One of the most significant features of the shame culture as it pertains to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the consistent, prominent use of external signifiers as not only indicators of a person's relative position in the social hierarchy of the court, but as precise visible measures of one's individual merit, which may be observed throughout the text in the *Gawain*-poet's rendering of the Arthurian court. Because of the close link between personal honor and public image within shame culture ideology, the notion of honor in such societies is typically attached less to a person's inner world, for example, to one's heart or to one's soul, than to a range of symbolic externals such as one's name, face, or, in some cases, one's lineage.⁷ Accordingly, it is not only a man's own public image that can be tarnished, but also that of his progeny, and in some cases, the public shame may even extend backward to "one's ancestors, defiling their external honor for all of eternity."⁸

The importance of lineage as it relates to this public form of honor in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is evident from the first stanza, in which the *Gawain*-poet recounts the siege and fall of Troy, the origins of Rome, and the founding of the kingdom of Britain in a brief, but intricately linked chain of legendary events:

welneſe of al þe wele in þe west iles
 fro riche romulus to rome ricchis hym swyþe
 with gret bobbaunce þat burſe he biges vpon fyrst
 and neuenes hit his aune nome as hit now hat
 ticius to tuskan and teldes bigynnes
 langaberde in lumbarde lyftes vp homes
 and fer ouer þe french flod felix brutus
 on mony bonkkes ful brode bretayn he settez
 wyth wyne⁹

This introductory passage serves the twofold purpose of establishing a link between the Arthurian court and the traditionally idealized Roman civilization, by way of the mythical Felix Brutus, and affirming King Arthur's legitimacy within the noble succession of English kings with the implicit attribution of Roman descent. This emphasis upon blood and ancestry as a measure of personal worth is echoed throughout *Sir Gawain*, always in conjunction with members of Arthur's court.

Perhaps the most salient example, Gawain's familial position as Arthur's nephew is one of privilege, and as several scholars have noted, the "blood tie between [the] uncle and sister's son [. . .] in some Germanic cultures would make Gawain [. . .] Arthur's heir."¹⁰ Although the privileged nature of this tie is little emphasized in the poem, it is important to note that the existence of such a blood connection does not escape mention: Gawain's first speech, in which he emerges from the background of the court to announce his willingness to stand in for his uncle in the Green Knight's beheading challenge, indicates that such a course of action is not only appropriate because he is the self-identified weakest of the knights of the Round Table, but also because the blood bond he shares with Arthur is plainly recognized by both himself and the observing court as being a vital component of his public honor. It is accordingly implied that a failure or even a perceived failure to respond in a manner befitting his status as both a knight of the Arthurian court and a blood relative of Arthur himself will be met with a diminishing of his public honor, as well as a conferral of shame.

The *Gawain*-poet similarly emphasizes the significance of Gawain's blood relationship to Arthur as it pertains to his public honor in Gawain's speech:

I am þe wakkest I wot and of wyt feeblest
and lest lur of my lyf quo laytes þe soþe
bot for as much as Še ar myn em I am only to prayse
no bounte bot your blod I in my bode knowe¹¹

These lines not only denote the profound importance placed upon lineage in the context of the medieval court, but also, in accordance with Germanic shame ideology, allude to the notion of blood as a measure of honor. It is likely no coincidence that the *Gawain*-poet closely juxtaposes this speech and Arthur's speech accepting the Green Knight's challenge, which appears to have been necessitated by the Green Knight's insinuation that the Arthurian court is somehow less than worthy. It is significant that in this scene, both Arthur and Gawain feel compelled to accept the knight's challenge, despite its being an inappropriate undertaking for a king, as a result of the threat he poses not only to their individual honors, but also to the collective honor of the Arthurian court, thus alluding to the fixed presence of the threat of public shame in court life. Notably, the *Gawain*-poet very specifically references a fear of public shaming in Arthur's response to the Green Knight's challenge:

wyth þis he laŠes so loude þat þe lorde greued
þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face
and lere
he wex as wroth as wynde
so did alle þat þer were
þe kyng as kene bi kynde
þen stod þat stif mon nere¹²

Thus, not only is the institution of shame firmly established as an important determiner of action in the social context of the court, but the *Gawain*-poet also syntactically suggests a connection between blood and the threat of shame with his symbolic juxtaposition of these two entities.

The residual presence of shame culture ideals in what seems an aspiring and evolving Christian guilt culture is perhaps even more clearly suggested by the status of material objects as displays of worth and relative status within the Arthurian court hierarchy in *Sir Gawain*. The ostentatious displays of nobility and affluence within the Arthurian court, evident from its first descriptions, clearly point to the shame culture's emphasis upon symbolic externals, and while little is revealed about the court's constituents as individuals, the collective wealth and beauty of the court are proffered instead as sufficient evidence of the court's established honor:

alle þis mirþe þay maden to þe mete tyme
 when þay had waschen worþyly þay wenten to sete
 þe best burne ay abof as hit best semed
 whene guenore ful gay grayþed in þe myddes
 dressed on þe dere des dubbed al aboute
 smal sendal bisides a selure hir ouer
 of tryed tolouse and tars tapites innoghe
 þat were enbrawdred and beten wyth þe best gemmes
 þat myȝt be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye¹³

In addition to his detailed account of the appearance and conspicuous wealth of the Arthurian court, in which each object may be described as carrying with it a specific measure of honor and clearly reflects upon the character of its possessors, the *Gawain*-poet assiduously devotes over a hundred lines to the description of Gawain's armor. The armor is an especially significant symbol of the dynamic interplay of Christian guilt culture and Germanic shame culture in the poem, as it is both adorned with decidedly Christian emblems and clearly linked to both Gawain's public image and individual merit. As Derek Pearsall notes in his essay "Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment,"

"Magic swords, shields, armour, clothing, rings, amulets, gloves, keepsakes, are the common currency of medieval romance, and no-one ever accuses the bearers of a betrayal of faith, or of putting magic before Mary. Such things are accessories to the systems of protective agency offered by the Christian religion and not, or not necessarily, in conflict with them."¹⁴

However, in *Sir Gawain*, these objects do not merely serve as symbols and accessories of protection and virtue, but rather seem to constitute virtue and honor in themselves: the symbol of the pentangle provides one such example, as Gawain acquires with the symbol the honor and esteem that it commands, though he is ultimately shown as failing to live up to its representational meaning, suggesting that this possession is not a symbolic indicator of the honor Gawain already possesses, but rather an object that carries honor with it, which is transferred to Gawain as merely a result of his being its possessor.

The emphasis on the external world seen throughout *Sir Gawain* conveys the essence of the Germanic shame culture, and the prominent, ornate objects described by the *Gawain*-poet are more than merely accessories of the nobility or the symbols of position and honor; they essentially become position, rank, and honor in a world in which appearances constitute reality and where their absence suggests dishonor.¹⁵ It is especially significant that Gawain is stripped of his armor almost immediately upon his arrival in a foreign court, which not only foreshadows the ensuing stripping of honor, but also notably coincides with his induction into a company more closely governed by Christian notions of virtue and guilt than the Arthurian shame court from which he came. It is in this environment that Gawain's private honor as a Christian knight is tested; however, it is noteworthy that the ultimate cause of his shame (and ultimately, his guilt) is a failure to honorably participate in a ritualized exchange of gifts and not in his acceptance of the gift in the first place. Gawain's transgression, therefore, is at its core not only a moral one, but also a very public, social one, and Gawain's failure, then, lies not only in his acceptance of the green girdle, but also in his failure to properly return it. Because of its double role as both an artifact of shame and a symbolic reminder of what appears, superficially at least, to have been a moral transgression, the green girdle is one of the most fascinating symbols in *Sir Gawain*, alluding to the competition between shame and guilt discourses with a curious confusing of the internal and external. The green girdle stands as a symbol of Gawain's externalization of his internal guilt, ultimately serving as both a personal and

public reminder of his own failure to adhere to the social ideals of *cortaysye* and *cheualtry* ascribed to him throughout the narrative.

The conditions under which Gawain initially accepts this gift, specifically, an acute awareness of his impending death and a desire to uphold his standing as an honorable knight in the eyes of his host and his company, despite his personal misgivings, undermine the notion of intrinsic morality embedded in Christian-chivalric social codes, and the idea of a moral Gawain is further called into question in the confession scene that ensues: while Gawain is presented with the opportunity for confession and absolution, some defining provisions of the traditional Christian guilt culture, he does not demonstrate any awareness of his own transgression until what he presumes to have been a private act is revealed as a public one. As Pearsall observes, “in chivalric culture and literature, what exists only in private does not exist, and it only begins to exist, and to be a cause of shame, if it is made public.”¹⁶ It is in this scene, and in this sense, that the irreconcilable divide between the public and private self becomes not only immediately apparent to the reader, but also problematic for the tale’s hero. Gawain’s wearing of the green girdle, the very object that he blames for his loss of honor, clearly serves as a means of externalizing his guilt, essentially converting his personal guilt into the public shame to which he seems more accustomed; yet, while Gawain’s adoption of the girdle clearly points to the influence of shaming practice, his changed character upon his return to the Arthurian court suggests that it is not only public disgrace that Gawain must contend with, but also ultimately his own guilt. The ideological ambiguity of the ending is only further complicated by the adoption of the green girdle by the Arthurian court, and thus, the conclusion of *Sir Gawain*, perhaps more than any other section, illustrates the text’s simultaneous embodiment of two discordant social systems.

Sir Gawain masterfully engages and embodies two diverse, often competing social discourses, with the tensions between the shame culture and guilt culture during the transitional period in which it was written plainly manifested in the text. Presenting medieval court life as complex, dynamic, and ultimately unstable, the *Gawain*-poet conveys the problematic nature of the pursuit of honor in the late medieval chivalric court through his unique renderings of his hero, Gawain, and the public and private trials he undergoes over the course of the narrative. As a late medieval text, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a challenge to modern readers, as it is difficult for contemporary audiences to entirely grasp the complex dynamics and ideological ambiguity of medieval court life; however, this text is not only an artifact of a bygone era, but also a valuable narrative that may certainly assist contemporary readers in their quest to achieve a better understanding of the myriad social discourses circulating in both medieval and modern societies, as well as the means by which their circulation and transformations are completed.

Notes

¹ Derek Pearsall, "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. D. S. Brewer and Jonathon Gibson, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 351.

¹ Margaret Mead, *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples*, (London: McGraw Hill Publishing Co., 1937) 493.

¹ Douglas Harper, "Shame," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Douglas Harper, 2001, 3 May 2007, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=shame>.

¹ Equivalents include the Swiss *gült*; the Danish *gjeld* and *gilde*; the Old Norse *gjalld*, (debt); the Danish *skyld*, (debt, guilt, or offence); the German *gelten*; and the German *schuld*, (a crime or debt); see Charles Mackay, *The Gaelic Etymology of the Languages of Western Europe and More Especially of the English and Lowland Scotch, and of Their Slang, Cant, and Colloquial Dialects*, (London: N. Trübner and Co., 1877) Page #?.

¹ Britton J. Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift," *PMLA* 106, (1991), 483.

¹ Donald Ward, "Honor and Shame in the Middle Ages: An Open Letter to Lutz Röhrich," *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung*, 27. Jahrg., Festschrift für Lutz Röhrich zum 60. Geburtstag. (1982 - 1983), 10.

¹ Ward, 3.

¹ Ibid.

¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) ll. 7-15.

¹ Clare R. Kinney, "The (Dis)embodied Hero and the Signs of Manhood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis : U of Minnesota P, 1994) 39.

¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 354-357.

¹ Ibid., ll. 316-322.

¹ Ibid., ll. 71-79.

¹ Pearsall, 356.

¹ Ward, 11.

¹ Pearsall, 358.