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The Original Scarlet Letter: Flyting, Green Girdles, and Medieval Order in England

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Abstract

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

In focusing on the gendered perceptions of shame in “Beowulf” and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” I argue that shame is used as a tool to maintain the social order with male characters, while female characters are used in tandem with feelings of humiliation to maintain this order, often severely limiting their agency. In both texts feelings of humiliation and shame were emotions to be utilized in displays of dominance, primarily through the act of flyting; as one man worked tirelessly to belittle the other, his own social power was increased. Shame-based tactics, like the flyte work when maintaining the social order for male characters. Queen Modthryth of “Beowulf,” however, fails at properly fulfilling her role in Anglo-Saxon society, but is not provided with a flyte to acknowledge her behavior. In contrast Lady Bertilak from “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” is used to test Sir Gawain’s dedication to the chivalric code, while Morgan le Fay inevitably maintains the social order in her orchestration of the Green Knight’s challenge; shame and its literary representations do not operate in the same ways for women as they do for men.

Keywords

Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, medieval English literature, gender and sexuality studies, shame

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In what ways are female characters allowed to explore and reject shame in English literature? The question is a timely one, dramatized in the 2010 film *Easy A*, a cinematic remake of Nathaniel Hawthorne's infamous novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). While the film adopts a short-sighted Feminist stance, it is a useful exploration of the ways in which a young woman can refuse to be shamed for her alleged promiscuity in popular culture—namely that shame is used in these texts to maintain social order. Questions around female resistance and shame-based tactics are not new, however; a similar shame-based anomaly occurs in medieval English epic poetry, providing a useful vantage from which to evaluate the representation of female resistance to shame. In “Beowulf” (c. 975–1010), shame-based tactics are used primarily in vocalized power disputes, allowing the victor to express his dominion while rising in social status. Likewise, in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” (14th c.) the same shame-based tactics are used to enforce chivalric code.

However so much these may sound like conventional narratives of knightly male dominance, their female characters of Queen Modthryth, Lady Bertilak, and Morgan le Fay reflect an inequality in the shame filled system. Queen Modthryth fails at properly fulfilling her role in Anglo-Saxon society, but is not provided with a *flyte* as a means to acknowledge her failure; this is unlike the characters of Unferth and Beowulf's comitatus, who are able to fix their challenging behavior. In contrast, Lady Bertilak is used to test Sir Gawain's dedication to the chivalric code, while Morgan le Fay inevitably maintains the social order in her orchestration of the Green Knight's challenge. In focusing on different perceptions of shame in these very early texts, I argue that shame is used as a tool to maintain the social order with male characters, while female characters are used in tandem with these feelings of humiliation to maintain this order, often severely limiting their agency.

Flyting, funerals, and power dynamics

For medieval English men as represented in the literature of the period, feelings of humiliation and shame were emotions to be utilized in displays of dominance; as one man worked tirelessly to belittle the other, his social power was increased. Hugh Thomas argues that vocal power struggles were far more common than physically violent disputes, and he suggests that the docking of Thomas Beckett's horse is an example of this, as it was “part of a pattern of harassment by the Brocs, designed not just to threaten Beckett, but also to humiliate him” (1050). Similarly, in “Beowulf,” less gruesome humiliation tactics can be seen through instances of flyting, specifically between the characters of Beowulf and Unferth. As the entire mead hall listens, Unferth attempts to express his dominion over Heorot by mocking Beowulf's former narcissistic adventures. Beowulf replies to Unferth's pointed remarks:

The fact is Unferth, if you were truly
as keen or courageous as you claim to be
Grendel never would have got away with
such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king. (Heaney 11.590–94)

This response is meant to humiliate Unferth while addressing his previous affronts to Beowulf's honor. Beowulf mentions “fact” and “truth” which references Unferth's original attacks on his credibility; not only has Beowulf previously justified his actions, but he is continuing to speak the truth while informing the mead hall of Unferth's cowardly ways. Beowulf mocks Unferth's bravery in his reply: as he implies that if Unferth was truly “as keen or courageous” as he claims to be, Grendel never would have been able to wreak havoc on Heorot in the first place. Beowulf's statement also suggests that Unferth has failed at properly fulfilling his position as a member of the King's comitatus. Since the role of the comitatus was so fundamental to Anglo-Saxon culture, this would have been extremely insulting and humiliating to Unferth, as he has failed at his main job. This is also Beowulf's way of

maintaining social order, as his comment serves as a wake-up call to Unferth, forcing him to confront his failure, and reevaluate his role in the King's comitatus. The shame and dishonor that Unferth would have felt as a result of Beowulf's response allows Beowulf to claim metaphorical dominion over the mead hall, as he is the victor of this dispute. This power-play bred from shame was utilized by Anglo-Saxon citizens to maintain order, underscored by Wiglaf following Beowulf's death.

At Beowulf's funeral, Wiglaf exploits his fellow warriors' feelings of shame and guilt regarding their leader's death, allowing him to express dominion over his peers while maintaining order during a time of strife. Wiglaf scolds, "Anyone ready to admit the truth/will surely realize that the lord of men who showered you with gifts . . . Was throwing weapons uselessly away" (Heaney 11.2863–71). Similar to Unferth, the men in Beowulf's comitatus have failed to do their job, which is supported by the notion of Beowulf "throwing weapons uselessly away." Wiglaf reminds the warriors of the generosity of their former leader who "showered [them] with gifts" as a means to make the warriors feel guilt for their failure to properly protect him. This notion is further continued as Wiglaf berates,

Every one of you
with freeholds of land, our whole nation,
will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond
get tidings of how you turned and fled
and disgraced yourselves. (Heaney 11. 2886–90)

The inaction of Beowulf's comitatus results in the loss of their land and status, earning them dishonor. Wiglaf also implies that these warriors will be unable to find solace from their guilt and shame abroad, as "princes from beyond" will know of their failure. In Anglo-Saxon culture, it was understood that followers, the *comitatus* implicitly agreed to a social contract with Beowulf, and were meant to protect him, or die trying. Thus it is shocking that instead this group acted cowardly and "fled." Their failure to protect Beowulf disrupts the social order, as they are now without a leader; thus, they must be shamed and lose their previous comitatus privileges. In this moment, Wiglaf seems to parallel Beowulf in the previous flyting scene, using shame not only in attempts to maintain order, but to express dominion over his peers, which makes him the ideal successor to Beowulf. These shame-based tactics are utilized throughout the text in attempts of maintaining order, and keeping individuals within the margins of the status quo.

Green girdles, chivalric code, and moral failings

"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," opens with a flyte and, in a similar nature to "Beowulf," shame-based tactics are used in the text to maintain social order. Sir Gawain's quest for the Green Knight is a direct response to the Green Knight's verbal challenge, as the Green Knight questions the knights of the Round Table:

Where's the fortitude and fearlessness you're so famous for?
And the breathtaking bravery and the big-mouth bragging?
The towering reputation of the Round Table,
skittled and scuppered by a stranger-what a scandal! (Armitage ll. 311–14)

The Green Knight directly challenges the Round Table's honor, questioning the groups "fearlessness" and implying that he, a "stranger," has the power to destroy the "towering reputation" of the Round Table. The Green Knight's questioning, and consequent lack of immediate response by the members of the Round Table in defense of King Arthur points to a larger problem within this social order. Sir Gawain's response to the Green Knight's challenge is performative; as he rises to the challenge both in an effort to further his own social standing, and in attempts of upholding chivalric code. In responding to the Green Knight, Sir Gawain states, "I am the weakest of your warriors and feeblest

of wit,” his own reputation within the Round Table is clearly poor, and accepting the Green Knight’s challenge will bring him honor, furthering his social position (Armitage l. 354).

While Sir Gawain does respond to the Green Knights flyte in the moment, he chooses to revel in his new reputation until All Saint’s Day, wasting a full ten months before actually upholding his end of the Green Knight’s challenge. Additionally, in attempting to fulfill his end of the bargain, Sir Gawain further complicates his understanding of the chivalric code, as he promises his loyalty to Lord Bertilak. Sir Gawain swears, “within these walls I am servant to your will,” which is problematic as his loyalty had previously been pledged to King Arthur (Armitage 1.1092). This promise suggests that to Sir Gawain, chivalric code is negotiable, which implies that he has no sense of nation. This lack of loyalty and sense of place makes Sir Gawain a threat to the social order, as there is nothing to prevent him from vying for the crown. With this in mind, Lord Bertilak’s game acts a moral test for Sir Gawain, and his failure of this test creates shame, which is used to maintain social order.

Sir Gawain is inherently unable to be loyal to both King Arthur and Lord Bertilak, causing him to fail in his role as a knight. Sir Gawain falters in the final test, and this moment of crisis reflects Sir Gawain’s fundamental failure to fully embody chivalric code; he is unable to place either the lord or king above himself, which earns him shame because it reflects his larger inability to meet the societies definition of a knight. Richard Godden suggests that this moment of failure is particularly important as “Gawain acts as a coward, a trait unbecoming a knight of his stature. He is neither the lauded Gawain of courtly romance, nor is he the virtuous Pentangle knight that the poem puts forth” (152). Because of this momentary identity crisis, Sir Gawain’s credence to the chivalric code is called into question, as well as his place in society. Rather than hide his shame, Sir Gawain articulates his failure to the Round Table upon his return. He confesses,

The symbol of sin for which my neck bears the scar;
a sign of my fault and offense and failure,
of the cowardice and covetousness I came to commit . . .
For man’s crimes can be covered but never made clean;
once sin is entwined it is attached for all time. (Armitage 11. 2506–12)

Sir Gawain admits to his own “cowardice,” and “failure,” humbling himself in front of the knights he was originally desperate to impress. His willingness to admit his failure, while speaking openly about his shame allows the Knights of the Round Table to avoid making the same mistakes, which helps maintain the order to which Sir Gawain was previously a threat. Sir Gawain’s confession also suggests an evolution in his character; his sense of nation and understanding of chivalric code was once seriously questionable, but, returning to King Arthur’s court and openly wearing his shameful failure implies that Sir Gawain has newfound loyalty for the King, and will willingly maintain and participate in this social system. The green girdle evolves beyond its shameful connotations, as the Knights of the Round Table use this as their symbol, “So the slanting green stripe was adopted as their sign, and each knight who held it honored ever after” (Armitage ll. 2519–20). The knights who wear the girdle are “honored,” the original shame inspired by the girdle represents Sir Gawain’s chivalric defeat, and this symbol maintains order by reminding the knights of their duties to the court.

Shame sisters: maintaining the status quo

Sir Gawain’s gradual willingness to admit his chivalric defeat is admirable, but it does little to erase his original response to his failure; Sir Gawain initially chooses to blame Lady Bertilak. Michelle Sweeney suggests that Lady Bertilak falls into a “temptation tradition” when she tests Sir Gawain’s dedication to his faith and chivalric code (168). Her temptation acts as an easy out for Sir Gawain, explaining his shame-inspired lament:

But no wonder if a fool finds his way into folly
and be wiped of his wits by womanly guile-
it's the way of the world. Adam fell because of a woman . . .

If only we could love our ladies without believing their lies. (Armitage 11. 2414–21)

The notion of Sir Gawain being “wiped of his wits by womanly guile,” suggests that he was a mindless participant in his failure, and he later compares Lady Bertilak to Eve, Delilah and Bathsheba, all of whom are women that can be read as severely lacking agency. Lady Bertilak’s direct role in Sir Gawain’s failure is questionable as Lord Bertilak explains, “I sent her to test you,” so it is unclear if she was a willing participant in this game (Armitage 1.2362). Lady Bertilak’s position in the game is made more complex when the role of Morgan le Fay is considered, since Morgan le Fay orchestrated Sir Gawain’s test. While the Green Knight’s initial challenge stems from Morgan le Fay’s efforts to upset Guinevere while confusing the Knights of the Round Table, her cruel plan ultimately backfires, as Sir Gawain inevitably ends up using his failure to maintain the social order. Lady Bertilak then, does fall directly into temptation tradition, as she is being used not by Lord Bertilak, but by Morgan le Fay, as a pawn in her revenge filled plot. But, Lady Bertilak’s actions, whether willing or not, results in Sir Gawain’s admittance of his chivalric defeat, and the Round Tables renewed efforts to fulfill their role as King Arthur’s knights.

In “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” the female characters of Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay maintain the social order, and are used to bring shame to their male counterparts to guarantee that this order is kept. In contrast, Queen Modthryth of “Beowulf,” is not used to maintain the social system, but rather, to challenge it; the societal response to her challenge reiterates the notion that for Medieval men and women, shame had gendered contexts.

The two competing narratives surrounding Queen Modthryth paradoxically both challenge, and uphold the use of shame-based tactics in maintaining social order. In both tales, Queen Modthryth is notorious for, “perpetat[ing] terrible wrongs,” and the gruesome nature of her torturing methods dominate the beginning of her story. (Heaney 1. 1932). Similar to the previous failings of Unferth, Beowulf’s comitatus, and Sir Gawain, it is implied in both stories that Queen Modthryth has failed at properly fulfilling her role in Anglo-Saxon society as a peace-weaver. Unlike the men, however, Queen Modthryth is not confronted with a flyte, and is not given a chance to respond to the shame she is supposed to feel for failing in her role. The omniscient narrator observes that:

Even a queen
outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that.
A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent
with loss of life for imagined insults. (Heaney 11.1940–44)

It’s clear that instead of “punish[ing] the innocent,” Queen Modthryth should conform to what is expected of her by Anglo-Saxon society. Both of Queen Modthryth’s narratives are told as drinking stories, however, and neither narrative provides further information on whether or not Queen Modthryth was able to respond to her apparent failure in the same way as Unferth, Beowulf’s comitatus, or Sir Gawain who, by rising to the challenge, operate within the confines of this social system. Instead, Queen Modthryth’s first story ends with an ambiguous and grizzly, “But Hemming’s kinsman put a halt to her ways,” implying that she is killed for her failure to fulfill her proper role as queen (Heaney 11. 1944). The alternate ending to Queen Modthryth’s story provides societal resolution with the marriage of the queen. The narrator explains, “drinkers around the table had another tale: / she was less of a bane to people’s lives, / less cruel minded after she was married” (Heaney ll. 1945–47). Rather than “halting” Queen Modthryth’s behavior, she is sent to marry Offa, who manages to control her behavior, making her “less cruel minded.” The second ending is just as

troublesome as the first, consumed as it is by the wondrous ways of Offa to imply that once in the control of a man, she was able to fulfill her societal role.

Shame is not doing the same form of policing for the male characters of “Beowulf” and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” as it does for the female characters. Unferth, Beowulf’s comitatus, and Sir Gawain are all granted multiple chances to correct their challenging behavior through the use of flyting, while Queen Modthryth is not given the same chance, and her behavior is amended by the social order through either death or marriage. Medieval men in these texts are granted multiple opportunities to fulfill their social duties, while acting as a guiding force for female characters who step outside of societal constraints; Queen Modthryth is “halted” by kinsmen in one narrative, and tamed by Offa in the other. Shame-based tactics, like the flyte, excel at maintaining the social order for medieval men, but these tactics are represented as not doing so for women in the same ways.

Some conclusions

In “Beowulf,” flyting is used between male characters as a means of maintaining social order, while expressing dominion. The flyting scene between Beowulf and Unferth shows the importance of both flyting and the role of the comitatus in Anglo-Saxon society, as Beowulf’s suggestion in this scene that Unferth has failed to protect the King is deeply shameful, and causes Unferth to recognize his failure. Wiglaf uses the same shame and guilt-based tactics when addressing Beowulf’s comitatus after their leader has fallen. Wiglaf’s shame inspired scolding reiterates the comitatus failure, and allows him to maintain order during a time of internal chaos. Sir Gawain proves unable to properly fulfill his role as a knight and abide by chivalric code, which results in his shaming and his permanent donning of the green girdle, which serves as a reminder of his chivalric failure.

These same shame-based tactics are inadvertently utilized by Morgan le Fay in her effort to sabotage the Round Table; Lady Bertilak is consequently used to orchestrate Sir Gawain’s test, both characters ultimately help maintain the social order. Queen Modthryth in “Beowulf,” fails to properly fulfill her role in Anglo-Saxon society by weaving peace, but she is not given a chance to amend her behavior; shame operates differently on the basis of gender in these texts. For medieval characters operating within these texts, it is apparent that feelings of shame were used to maintain social order; yet perceptions of shame and the maintenance of this order differed on the basis of gender. For medieval men, feelings of shame were primarily used in vocal power disputes, or in enforcing chivalric code; both uses were extremely important in maintaining social order. In contrast, medieval women were often used to maintain the shame filled system, which severely limited their options within the constraints of the social order. Like Hester Prynne, shame and its literary representations do not operate in the same ways for women as they do for men.

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