

Shame, Guilt, and Mimetic Theory

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* tells the story of Troilus's "double sorrow"—the loss of his beloved Criseyde when she is sent into exile and then the loss of her fidelity when she "gives her heart" to the Greek Diomede (1.1, 5.1050).¹ The private betrayal of Troilus unfolds against the backdrop of the epic betrayal of Troy's defeat in the Greco-Trojan War. Moreover, Criseyde, the betrayer of Troilus, is also the daughter of a traitor: as the poem opens, she is begging Hector's protection because her father, a seer, has divined the ultimate outcome of the war and has gone to the Greek camp to ensure he ends up on the winning side. Chaucer drew on various sources for his telling of what was, for medieval audiences, a well-known historical episode, but Chaucer's version of the story is remarkable for the extent to which he emphasizes Criseyde's perspective: whereas Chaucer's sources as well as his inheritors (including Henryson and Shakespeare) represent Criseyde in the role of the quintessentially inconstant female, Chaucer imagines and inscribes a compelling and sympathetic interior life for this most infamous of heroines, recording her private thoughts and feelings as she is falling in love with Troilus, when she decides to betray him, and even as she contemplates her own textual fate with sorrow and regret because she knows that she will be forever remembered as she who "falsed Troilus" and brought shame to all of womankind—as indeed she has been (5.1053).

In doing so, Chaucer draws a clear and sharp distinction between the ideas of guilt and shame—between the inner reality of moral responsibility on the one hand and the external image of dishonour on the other, or between what you have done versus who you appear to be. By giving us Criseyde's perspective, he mitigates her guilt, saying, in effect, if we can understand what motivated Criseyde to do what she did, we will see that she is not in fact the archetypal fickle woman—that she

¹ References to Chaucer are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), although I have changed some spellings to modern English.

wanted to remain true but was unable, that circumstances forced her into it. In other words, Chaucer insists, although Criseyde feels ashamed of what she does and has been the object of shame throughout history, she is not actually guilty in any meaningful sense of the word. Her external reputation, her name, has been tainted, but in reality she herself was the *victim* of wrongdoing.

Chaucer's representation of Criseyde as victim rather than culprit culminates when the Trojan parliament decrees that Criseyde is to be exchanged for Antenor, a Trojan military hero captured by the Greeks. Marked as the daughter of a traitor, Criseyde is sent into exile as a substitute victim for Antenor, and thus by extension, for the entire Trojan military cause: Criseyde is banished to purchase victory on the battlefield. Ironically, in Chaucer's source material, it is actually Antenor who ends up betraying Troy by opening the gates to the enemy, and he is repaid when the Greeks spare his house during the siege. Thus, despite the fact that Chaucer claims, at the outset of the poem, to tell the story of Troilus's "double sorrow," his underlying intention seems rather to exonerate the scapegoat Criseyde, and, by doing so, as he says explicitly, to offer solace to all those in this life who have been "falsely injured / through wicked tongues" (1.38-39). The problem of slander or false accusation was a perennial concern of Chaucer's: he devoted an entire earlier work to the subject in *The House of Fame*, and he returns to it here, in Criseyde's frequent expressions of fear that she will be shamed by wicked tongues, and in his narrator's metafictional disclaimers about the possible harmful effects of his narrative, when he scolds any readers who would use his story to accuse women of inconstancy; despite appearances, he insists, it is women who are usually betrayed by men, not the other way around (5.1780).

As readers of Girard, Chaucer's poetics may strike us as noteworthy: he tells the same old story—the story of female frailty and betrayal and the consequent fall of a great man and a great nation—but from the perspective of the one accused, the abject female. This is also the perspective of the one exiled in place of another and it is a perspective used by Chaucer to expose convenient fictions about who is guilty and who is innocent. Indeed, based on my reading of all of Chaucer's major works, I would go so far as to dispute one of Girard's claims in the opening pages of *The Scapegoat*—that people in the fourteenth century were not able to decode persecution texts the way that we are

today.² Chaucer was a contemporary of Guillaume de Machaut and his work was influenced by Machaut's poetry in many ways—and yet his own texts serve to deconstruct sacrificial myths.

But more importantly, I am struck by the way in which shame and substitutionary violence are interwoven in this medieval text—by the way Chaucer insists it is not guilt, not even the mistaken belief in the guilt of the victim, but *shame* that precedes and determines the “sacrifice” of Criseyde. One of Chaucer’s refrains here and elsewhere in his poetry is to complain of the injustice of “guiltless shame” in his depictions of socially useful violence, stressing the fact that violence is often the result of confusion between intentions and acts on the one hand and image and perception on the other. Girard, however, 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: in Girard’s account of sacrifice in *The Scapegoat*, according to the mob, the victim really has committed deity-provoking crimes, and that is the justification for committing violence against him. Two questions, therefore, interest me here: first of all, what difference might it make—if any—for Girardian theory to distinguish between shame and guilt? And secondly, how might Girardian theory shed light on current debates about the differences between, and the relative value of, shame and guilt?

The majority of clinical studies tend to agree that shame is connected with self-image and social status, and that it is generated when we fail to live up to an ideal or expectation.³ Alternately, people feel shame, or are shamed, when they are exposed, either publicly or in their own eyes, as weak or even merely different from what they ought to be: shame is thus, according to Ruth Leys, “the affect of disempowerment, the chief emotional consequence of social injustice and inequality.”⁴ Guilt, on the other hand, is connected with moral responsibility, and is generated when we break a moral law

² Girard writes, “If we [in the contemporary western world] are at the point where we compete in the penetrating and subtle discovery of scapegoats, both individual and collective, where was the fourteenth century? No one decoded the representation of persecution as we do today. ‘Scapegoat’ had not yet taken on the meaning we give it today. The concept that crowds, or even entire societies, can imprison themselves in their own illusions of victimage was inconceivable.” See *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 41.

³ Gerhard Piers and Milton Singer offer the earliest articulation of this definition of shame, which has since become widely accepted in psychology. See Piers and Singer, *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1953), 24-32.

⁴ Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 132.

(as opposed to transgressing a physical boundary or taboo). In other words, shame has to do with who we are in relationship with other people, while guilt has to do with what we do (or do not do) to other people. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that shame is *not* the feeling of having “committed this or that particular fault” but rather the feeling “that I have ‘fallen’ into the world in the midst of things and that / need the mediation of others in order to be what I am.”⁵ At a fundamental level, therefore, the difference between shame and guilt hinges on the question of agency. Because shame involves or creates an experience of dependency, passivity or powerlessness on the level of identity, it diminishes our sense of ourselves as agents. And because guilt is indeed the feeling of having “committed this or that particular fault,” it intensifies our experience of ourselves as agents who act with intent and create effects in the world.

Often, the failures or transgressions which incur shame coincide with those that the anthropologist Mary Douglas has identified as sources of pollution or danger, insofar as the ideal order of society involved in danger-beliefs can be thought of as a structural parallel to the ideal self-image violated in shame.⁶ Functionally, 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 and both 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 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. Of course, the crimes that are considered fatally polluting are those that break archetypal taboos: incest, patricide, sacrilege, the same crimes that signal, for Girard, the scapegoat mechanism. The ethical significance of these crimes, what leads to the breakdown of boundaries and what Girard describes as the crisis of undifferentiation, I would argue, lies in their shameful nature. The person who commits the act of over-reaching or taboo-breaking might also be considered guilty of the act, but the fact of guilt does not bear on the objective, value

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square-Pocket Books, 1992), 384, italics mine.

⁶See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966, 1991).

system or ideal social structure. As Margaret Visser puts it, what is at issue is the way in which transgressions are imagined metaphorically: whether “murdering someone [is] thought of as breaking . . . a written rule,” or as “piercing physical and categorical boundaries so that automatic pollution, in the shape of filthy and spreading disorder and confusion, [ensues].”⁷

Countless studies in psychology and anthropology, from the 1950s to the present, are nearly unanimous about yet another difference between guilt and shame. A person can alleviate his sense of shame by inflicting shame on someone else; shame can also be denied or compensated for; extreme shame, especially in cultural contexts that place a high value on honour and purity, can be escaped through suicide or other forms of expiatory violence. But shame cannot be forgiven. Only guilt can be forgiven. Gabrielle Taylor expresses the 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 a typical reaction when feeling shame. Neither punishment nor forgiveness can here perform a function.⁸

Similarly, Martha Nussbaum writes, “[in] and of itself, guilt recognizes the rights of the other” and thus aims “at a restoration of the wholeness of the separate object or person.”⁹ Guilt, therefore, is not simply a conditioned response to an internalized law and fear of punishment, as Freud argued, but occurs 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. And while shame is typically accompanied by the fight or flight response, guilt evokes the desire to confess—to reveal rather than conceal. Finally, 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.

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—

⁷Margaret Visser, *Beyond Fate* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, in association with CBC Radio, 2002), 54-55.

⁸Gabrielle Taylor, *Shame, Pride, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 90.

⁹Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 207.

while shame produces an economy of 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. On the basis of three decades of working with violent criminals in prison hospitals, Harvard psychiatrist James Gilligan writes,

. . . the capacity to love others appears to be a prerequisite for the capacity 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.¹⁰

And yet, despite the close association between shame and passivity and between shame and violence —both firmly established in clinical studies—shame has become the privileged emotion for literary and cultural studies scholars who are interested in freeing individual identity and social ethics from what one literary scholar has called “the tyranny of the self.”¹¹ For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, shame is an affect that allows us to theorize identity in non-moral and non-essentializing terms: as she writes, 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.”¹² Along similar lines, Elspeth Probyn argues for the ethical urgency of reconsidering shame as a positive force. 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.”¹³ Probyn thus advocates an “ethics of the everyday,” suggesting the underlying opposition between shame and guilt on which her argument rests: while guilt ethics presuppose an objective moral law distinct from the 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

¹⁰ James Gilligan, “Shame, Guilt, and Violence.” *Social Research* 70 (2003): 1154.

¹¹ Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2002), 225.

¹² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*.” *GLQ* 1 (1993): 12.

¹³ Elspeth Probyn, “Everyday Shame.” *Cultural Studies* 18 (2004): 328.

social life.¹⁴ For this reason, guilt has fallen out of favor in recent theoretical discussions. According to the philosopher Bernard Williams, the idea of guilt rests on a “characterless moral self” that remains distinct from the rest of our desires, needs, and self-image; guilt also implies a reductive either/or: the rational, criticizing self apprehends the moral law and can choose obedience or disobedience.¹⁵ But shame, for Williams as for Sedgwick and Probyn, embeds the individual in the complex field of human, social relations, and implies a more nuanced ethical situation—one that requires ongoing negotiation rather than an absolute law. In literary studies and the humanities generally, therefore, 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 traditionally considered “shameful”—have become normative in all areas of literary and cultural 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.

But the privileging of shame in recent literary and cultural studies is, I argue, ethically problematic. In her recent book, Ruth Leys 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.¹⁶

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. In shame 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? What is missing from the picture in

¹⁴ Ibid., 328-329.

¹⁵ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 95, 159.

¹⁶ Leys, 131.

literary theory's appropriation of the idea of biologically-based shame is any sustained consideration of the 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 shame and structures of political power.

It seems to me that Girard's "Interindividual Psychology" offers a corrective to what I consider to be an unrealistic view of the social value of shame, even though Girard does not name shame as such. In his response to Freud, Girard argues that the obstacle that frustrates desire is not the law but the rival:

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 by desiring it himself.¹⁷

If we recall the fact that guilt is defined by clinicians and ethicists as the breaking of a law while shame is caused by failure or offense vis-à-vis other people, we can see the parallel here. With the mimetic theory of desire, Girard shifts 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. For shame theorists as for Girard, the subject yearns for self-sufficiency, for the sense of completeness and wholeness betrayed by the desire for what one is not. In Girard's analysis,

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 the self-sufficiency of the model and the imitator's lack of sufficiency, the model's fullness of being and the imitator's nothingness.¹⁸

¹⁷ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 295.
¹⁸ Ibid., 296.

What Girard describes here without naming it as such is shame: the awareness of one's "relative smallness, weakness, and lack of competence."¹⁹ Shame can thus be understood as the frustration of mimetic desire, a frustration of the desire for wholeness and omnipotence, in contrast to breaking the "law" that does not discriminate between individuals and that instils guilt. Shame, therefore, unlike guilt, can be considered mimetic, both in the sense of specular self-reflection—the capacity to imagine how others see you—and in a Girardian sense, in its relation to imitative desire.

However, while Girard distinguishes between the law and the rival, he does not, as far as I am aware, take into account the difference between breaking a written rule and the piercing of physical and categorical boundaries, which creates contagious shame—for the transgressor, for the victims of the act, for any bystander close enough to the shame to be tainted by association. Rather, Girard considers the modern judicial system to be a version of the codes of prohibitions and taboos that structure "primitive" societies. For Girard, the two forms share the aim of keeping the peace by placing limits on mimetic desire; both seek to replace non-legal prohibitions brought about through rivalry with legal prohibitions.²⁰ But the idea of guilt that lies at the centre of the modern concept of law does not depend upon an ideal social order and the need for purity. It offers a secular parallel, not to pollution and taboo beliefs that reinforce the boundaries of the social order, but to the Judeo-Christian understanding of guilt, which assumes that the individual alone, endowed with God-given reason and conscience, is responsible for his or her sins—that the transgression of one cannot pollute the whole. Arguably, therefore, we should 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. Making this distinction, I think, gets us closer to the affective or experienced reality of rivalry and the impulse to scapegoat; it also allows us to deepen our understanding of the difference between bad and good sacrifices: sacrifice of the other, as rooted in the self-protective response to

¹⁹ Francis Broucek, *Shame and the Self* (New York: Guilford, 1991), 41-42.

²⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 73-83, 284-28.

shame, versus the self-sacrifice involved in embracing moral responsibility *for* the other, as rooted in the reparative response to guilt, a kind of sacrifice that is both ethically and theologically sound.

Moreover, if we can bring Girard's theory to bear on current debates about shame and guilt, we can ground discussions about the relationship between identity, agency, and the affects in an anthropology that accounts for the social and historical reality of shame as an unavoidable aspect of selfhood but also as a tool of disempowerment, and therefore an aspect of selfhood to be kept in check rather than celebrated. Indeed, we can affirm shame as the "key to ethics and the problem of happiness"—to use the phrase of Shakespearean scholar Ewan Fernie—only if we ignore shame's psychological roots in the frustration of mimetic desire, frustration that leads, not to liberated identities but, invariably, to violence.²¹ Similarly, I believe that in the attempt to disengage contemporary theory from considerations of guilt we move ourselves ever further away from concrete ethical realities and ever further into academic irrelevance.

As for Criseyde, her story ends on a profoundly ambiguous note, as Chaucer tells us both that she submits to Diomedé's advances and breaks Troilus's heart while she is in exile *and* that she is not to blame for it. Alone, vulnerable, and without protection, Criseyde's acts are outwardly untrue, but Chaucer says he excuses her, has pity on her, and thereby distinguishes his account from all the others: "Men say—I do not—that she gave him her heart" (5.1050, my italics). To paraphrase Girard, the difference between Chaucer's account of Criseyde and the account offered by his sources lies not in the facts of her betrayal but in their interpretation. Consequently, Criseyde is shamed—her name will be "published so wide" (5.1095)—and yet she is innocent. Or rather, Chaucer has told us the story of Criseyde's shame but not the story of her guilt: he writes, "You may her guilt in other books see" (5.1776).

²¹ Fernie, 225.