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Oh, for Shame: Public Perception and Punishment in Chretien’s Cligès

Kathryn L Weber

Medieval French romances suggest that societies depended on a system of honor and shame to keep every individual in his or her place and to draw a distinction between men and women. Society expected women to abide by the standards it established, just as it did knights, and failure to uphold these expectations led to public humiliation. Chrétien de Troyes’s Cligès models these two sets of codes and illustrates not only this culture of honor and shame but also how society held women to higher standards and punished them more severely for failing to uphold those standards. Placing them under a greater degree of scrutiny kept women out of the public, male sphere. The actions and reactions of the characters in Cligès reveal their understanding of this division between the sexes and the implications of failing to play these assigned roles. The romance highlights the importance of public perception during the time and the difficulty that one—especially a woman—might encounter after facing shame and the importance of avoiding it at all costs.

To develop this argument, a basic understanding of medieval society’s conventions is necessary in order to outline the parameters of this honor/shame culture. Larry D. Benson focuses on the involved role tournaments played in the society about which Chrétien writes. According to Benson, “tournaments were a very important activity, and a plausible image of the noble life” (6). Tournaments helped to determine a knight’s parameters and illustrate how a knight achieved honor and, at times, experienced shame. In tournaments, knights intended to show loyalty and bring honor and booty to those they represented, to flex their prowess muscle and to establish their own reputation in every confrontation with other knights—all qualities Sidney Painter discerns necessary for a knight. Not only did tournaments largely determine the worth of a knight, but also the court from which he came.

Early on, the Cligès romance illustrates the importance of tournaments. Despite his father’s sadness, Alexander insists on proving himself worthy of a knight’s honor by fighting for King Arthur. Alexander explains his reasoning to his
father: "[N]o man wins renown / Who spends his days quietly / At home. Weak men can't / Be brave; brave men won't / Be weak" (153-163). Though he does not explain this need for brave men in the context of tournaments, Alexander does realize that "courtliness and courage" will not come to the knight, but that the knight must set out to achieve such things (152). Tournaments, as Benson asserts, became such a place for knights to do so. The image of a knight:

is most clearly defined in the tournament; and the tournaments, thus, are essential to Chrétien's romances, even though they contribute little to the action. [Tournaments were] an essential activity of the hero and the clearest and purest proof of his knightly virtue. (Benson 16)

Chrétien carefully weaves together elements from his own experiences with fictitious elements, in order to make a strong case for the romance's hero and story. This clear and pure proof of knightly virtue strongly reflects the expectations of the medieval society and, most importantly, establishes qualities to which knights can be measured.

Equally important to note is that Benson suggests these illustrations of knightly achievements in tournaments serve as clear reflections of the time period itself.

The tournaments are included in Chrétien's romances not as part of the marvels that shape the tales but as part of the definition of the noble life. They are [...] among the most realistic elements in Chrétien's narratives and thus help define the everyday reality against which we measure the marvels. [...] Chrétien had no literary precedents for these descriptions, and he therefore had to draw directly on life. (6-7)

Benson's valuable observation affirms the connection between historical evidence and Chrétien's fictional accounts of medieval society. Thus, readers should not be surprised to find that Chrétien's "fiction" runs rather parallel to historical evidence established by other researchers.

Women, according to Benson, also played a role in tournaments, for "all the knights [fought] hard but those who [had] been in the carol with the ladies [fought] hardest" (23). Women encouraged their knights in tournaments, even if only in their presence. The role of women in tournaments then, according to Benson's argument, also serves as an example of fiction imitating life. Benson's argument will thereby help to extend my claim that both medieval society, as illustrated in Cligès, had to abide by a standard virtue to do so resulted in punishment and shame—women.

Knights intended to maintain society's expectations of brave men, especially in tournament or battle situations, as repeatedly described as being "brave and bold" (65) and "wise words" (336-7). He proves this to his father prior to court and continues to demonstrate these qualities as Cligès, Alexander's son, "was perfect wood swordsman / And archer than Tristan, King Mark's / shines" (2769-2773). Cligès represents the perfect knight in contrast to the women, specifically Fenice, in his society makes Fenice's actions reflect poorly on her. Nevertheless, so highly Fenice, and perhaps all courtly women, praised Cligès beautiful, but he gracefully meets society's expectations of prudence, generosity and strength. Chrétien even praises that Cligès "lack[s] nothing" (2773).

Because tournaments and battles created the reputation of a knight, it is essential to understand why knights fought for glory in King Arthur's court to avoid avarice. Benson remarks on largesse in Cligès: "Chretien gives virtue [...] for largesse, he insists, is essential to the ideal knight's father aptly notes: "So, too, is generosity, / Success and shedding infinite / Grace on the good man, / Mak..." (210-14). By maintaining these important and widely remained in society's good graces.
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court and continues to demonstrate these qualities as he represents King Arthur.
Similarly, Cligès, Alexander's son, "was perfect wood under perfect / Bark; a better
wordsman / And archer than Tristan, King Mark's / Nephew [...] He lacked noth-
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ties of prudence, generosity and strength. Chrétien even goes so far as to declare
that Cligès "lack[s] nothing" (2773).

Because tournaments and battles created the most likely place for knights
to achieve and maintain such status like Cligès, they had much at stake in these
situations. According to Benson, "[t]he leaders [of the troops] decided who won the
pris, the 'honor' of the tournament, usually a verbal rather than a material prize"
(10). Each knight, in order to meet society's expectations, always kept such goals in
mind. Benson notes, that "[t]o maintain such a reputation, one had to avoid even
the slightest trace of avarice; though lesser men may legitimately fight for gain, the
great noble had to fight only for glory" (14). Remembering that Chrétien modeled
his romances after reality, suggests that knights such as Cligès and Alexander also
fought for glory in King Arthur's court to avoid avarice and, consequently, shame.
Benson remarks on largesse in Cligès: "Chretien gives his young heroes the same
virtue [...] for largesse, he insists, is essential to the ideal knight." In Cligès, Alex-
ander's father aptly notes: "So, too, is generosity, / Surpassing every other / Virtue
and shedding infinite / Grace on the good man, / Making him many times better."
(210-14). By maintaining these important and widely understood virtues, a knight
remained in society's good graces.
Knights like Cligès and Alexander also had to prove themselves in personal relationships, specifically those relationships with the women with whom they fall in love. In these personal situations Alexander and Cligès best illustrate their concern for shame. Chrétien carefully describes both Alexander and Cligès's concern with their appearances while courting. Alexander thinks "I ought to consider myself / A fool [...] / And why not? I'm afraid / To say what my heart feels, / For fear speaking would make it / Worse. [...] / Would reveal me as the fool I am" (622-29). He understands that to reveal his feelings prematurely might destroy any hope for a relationship with Sordamour and, more importantly, should her feelings not be returned he might be ridiculed by society.

Cligès finds himself in a similar, potentially shameful situation. Upon meeting Fenice, Cligès "had to struggle / With the pangs of love, unable / To confess his feelings, aware / That silence, now, might hurt him / Forever" (3802-06). Though he understands silence may ruin his chance of having a relationship with Fenice, he also fears turning against his uncle, Fenice's rejection and public perception. Later, Robertson notices how "a[fter he has returned to Greece, Cligès is still reluctant to tell Fenice about his love for her, partly out of shame" (194). Even after returning to Greece, specifically to be near Fenice, "Cligès blushed [...] somehow [they] miraculously managed, [...] not to fall / Straight into each other's / Arms [...] As Love would have liked. But what folly / That would have been!" (5107-14).

Cligès "longed to speak, / But was afraid" (5134-35). Cligès still carries the weight of society's expectations. After resisting prior to his departure from Greece and then only returning to be with Fenice, Cligès—not because he is a foolish adolescent—fails to act upon his love because he fears rejection by Fenice and moreover society as a whole. As A.W.H. Adkins's writes "A shame culture is one whose sanction is overtly 'what people will say'" (qtd. in Wasserman 79). Cligès is concerned with "what people will say" if he confesses his true feelings.

Joan M. Ferrante offers another explanation for the actions and reactions of Alexander and Cligès in these courting situations:

In the lyric, which describes emotional states, the lover (male) alternates between hope and despair, desire and frustration, resignation and resentment: in romance, where the love is part of a narrative, the lover is faced by conflicting demands of chivalry and love, of society and personal desire, or worldly reputation and personal integrity." (Woman 65)

Eight Latin words sufficed to sum [the mediately defining what men then saw as wor: filia, maritgura conjuX, dominca clemens, uter, wife, mistress of a household, and mother: woman] was all her life subject to a man [...]. She then became should be: meek, obedient, morigera. (The 4

Woman had certain obligations to fulfill and ways. Their male dominated society clearly saw fied, fickle, chattering in church, forgetting all about was supposed to be praying. She bore all the respons alone was responsible for looking after the offspring: mother who had killed it by real or sham negligence. woman not only bore the responsibility of maintaining but she also was judged by the way she took care of her much scrutiny. Perhaps women endured even greater: Sandra Hindman asserts that "marriage can be under conventions of courtly love and, at the same time minimized legal status and lower social position of wor A married medieval woman was subjected to being vi perspective; narrowed because society held her to an tations; Any fall from societal grace—adultery being the severe punishment followed almost simultaneously by
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and Alexander also had to prove themselves in personal relationships with the women with whom they fell in love. Alexander and Cliges best illustrate their concern for courting. Alexander thinks "I ought to consider my own sake. I'm afraid / To say what my heart feels, / For fear it's fear. [...] / Would reveal me as the fool I am" (622-29). His feelings prematurely might destroy any hope for a relationship, and more importantly, should her feelings not be returned, society would punish him.

In a similar, potentially shameful situation. Upon returning from a struggle / With the pangs of love, unable / To confess his love, now, might hurt him / Forever" (3802-06). Cliges still carries the weight of his love for Fenice, partly out of shame" (194). Even after he has returned to Greece, Cliges is still afraid "to fall / Straight into each other's Arms [...] that what folly / That would have been!" (5107-14).

Adkins's writes "A shame culture is one whose sanctions are severe punishment and thereby shame meant a lifetime of loss, as it does for Fenice in Cliges. Georges Duby explains the expectations of medieval women:

Eight Latin words sufficed to sum [the medieval woman] up, incidentally defining what men then saw as womanly perfection: pia filia, morigera conjux, domina clemens, utilis mater. As daughter, wife, mistress of a household, and mother [the medieval woman] was all her life subject to a man [...] whoever ruled over the house where she lived. [S]he then became what all wives should be: meek, obedient, morigera. (The Knight 233-4)

Woman had certain obligations to fulfill and acted out these roles in certain ways. Their male dominated society clearly saw a woman as "frivolity personified, fickle, chattering in church, forgetting all about the dead for whose souls she was supposed to be praying. She bore all the responsibility for infanticide, for she alone was responsible for looking after the offspring: if a child died it was the mother who had killed it by real or sham negligence" (65). Duby emphasizes how a woman not only bore the responsibility of maintaining her own public appearance, but she also was judged by the way she took care of her children; women endured much scrutiny.

Perhaps women endured even greater scrutiny after being married. Sandra Hindman asserts that "marriage can be understood as exemplifying the literary conventions of courtly love and, at the same time, as a paradigm for the diminished legal status and lower social position of women during this period" (79). A married medieval woman was subjected to being viewed from an even narrower perspective; narrowed because society held her to even greater number of expectations. Any fall from societal grace—adultery being the classic example—meant a severe punishment followed almost simultaneously by shame.

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Although it at first seems petty, Sordamour and later Fenice have great concerns about how the public perceives them and the shame that might come upon them. While Alexander is largely noted for being bold and brave, Alexander sees Sordamour as having a “face God / Has made so clear that no glass, / No emerald, no topaz, can equal it” (805-07). From her “limpid complexion” (814) down to her teeth, Sordamour is a vision of beauty. Yet, it is because she is so seemingly perfect, that Sordamour must be well aware of her place in society. After all, God made her so clear that people could essentially “see through her,” better than they could through glass. Her love for Alexander and the turmoil she feels on account of it, illustrates this obvious concern with how the public perceives her. She thinks:

Whoever truly desires
Something is supposed to ask for it.
What? Shall I ask him to love me?
Never. And why? No woman
Makes the mistake of asking
A man for his love, unless
She’s totally out of her mind.
The world would know I was mad,
If I ever permitted my mouth
To speak such scandalous words. (992-1001)

Sordamour understands that it is clearly unacceptable for her to reveal her interest in Alexander.

Fenice finds herself in a similar situation, when she admits her love for Cliges to herself. She also is initially unable to reveal her feelings for Cliges, because she understands it as unacceptable to society. Fenice wonders “[t]o whom could she tell her secret, / Whisper her true love’s name?” (2971-72). Like Sordamour, Alexander, and Cliges, she fears revealing her true feelings, because she understands that to do so would be stepping beyond the boundaries society has established for her. Moreover, specifically because Fenice is in love with the nephew of Alis, her betrothed, she knows that to reveal her true feelings would cause her shame. She claims she would “sooner be torn apart / Than see Cliges and [her]self

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the Duke beyond this point, the circumstances may lead one to believe that the Duke of Saxony is eventually able to escape his shame and live somewhat peaceably. The very fact that Chrétien never mentions the Duke’s shame later may assure the reader of this. Though the knight may have temporarily experienced a loss of reputation and social standing, it would not last throughout his lifetime. Society did not completely and forever deny a knight his rights or existence.

Unlike a knight who may have been publicly shamed—a period of shame far more short-lived than a woman’s—society never forgot a woman’s shame. Her failure to uphold society’s expectations, thereby experiencing a loss of reputation and social standing, is most frequently seen in cases of adultery. Adultery, like Iseult’s with Tristan, created the most prominent reason for punishment in romances and later serves as the cause and culmination of Fenice’s and largely all women’s unrelenting concern for the way society perceives them.

With such a strong association, and thereby fear, of women as adulteresses, the opportunity to inflict punishment—and therefore shame—allowed society to keep every person in their place, again establishing this “set up” for women to fail. Ferrante notes the double standard in the case of adultery. Society sees men involved in adulterous relationships as having “aspirations,” while women in adulterous relationships are representative of “destructive passion” (Woman 92). Women thus represent the danger of adultery, “both spiritually and politically” (92). Ferrante reveals how women always bear the weight of punishment and shame no matter the circumstances; they are blamed for everything. In the Tristan romance, although both Tristan and Iseult have committed adultery, “only Isolt’s adultery is treated as such in the story” (92). Tristan does not get blamed for having an adulterous relationship, but Iseult finds herself under constant scrutiny. The most imperative element to note in adulterous situations in medieval societies is that:

Men, even married men, could stray, as long as they did not go too far and destroy noble marriages in their quest for pleasure. [As noted in André le Chapelain’s treatise On Love] “This is tolerated in men because it is customary and also privilege of their sex to do everything in this world is unseemly by nature.” [André le Chapelain’s treatise On Love 1186–90, sixth dialogue Book II] Women, on the other hand, were expected to be modest and reserved. If they took more than one lover, they were breaking the rules and

Further on, Cligés illustrates society’s greater concern to uphold society’s standards—more so than men—when even when:

‘Dead’—the greater part of society has no reason to live—Fenice, despite her wishes, is still under suspicion of having a relationship with Cliges. At first, Fenice refuses to be his as long as she is not allowed to belong, like Ysolt, to two men, but Chrétien does not pursue this conflict between her supposed marriage with Alis and Cligés. At first, Fenice “refuses to be his as long as she is not allowed to belong, like Ysolt, to two men, but Chrétien does not pursue this conflict between her supposed marriage with Alis and Cligés. At first, Fenice refuses to be his as long as she is not allowed to belong, like Ysolt, to two men, but Chrétien does not pursue this conflict between her supposed marriage with Alis and Cligés. At first, Fenice refuses to be his as long as she is not allowed to belong, like Ysolt, to two men, but Chrétien does not pursue this conflict between her supposed marriage with Alis and Cligés. At first, Fenice refuses to be his as long as she is not allowed to belong, like Ysolt, to two men, but Chrétien does not pursue this conflict between her supposed marriage with Alis and Cligés.
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Society, again establishing this "set up" for women to uphold society's standards, and thereby fear, of women as adulterous punishment—and therefore shame—allowed society place, thereby experiencing a loss of reputation in adulterous situations in medieval societies is tolerated:customary and also privilege of their sex to do as they please. (Duby, The Knight 218)

Though Alis and Fenice's marriage does not necessarily remain ideal, it can still be said that no matter the circumstance women, like Fenice, never win their true desires. Sordamour, and most importantly Fenice, because she finds herself in a situation nearly identical to Isolde, recognize this, and are therefore cautious and always concerned with their public appearance because they earnestly fear society's wrath. This concern becomes most important when Fenice faces the conflict between her supposed marriage with Alis and her love for Alis's nephew, Cligès. At first, Fenice "refuses to be his as long as she lives with his uncle, unwilling to belong, like Ysolt, to two men, but Chrétien does not mean us to admire rectitude. [Later, her solution is to leave her husband and live in hiding with Cligès, thereby avoiding public disgrace but not the act which would incur it" (Ferrante, "Conflict" 149). In order to avoid public shame, Fenice finds herself forced to side step the supposed crime at hand by going into hiding.

Further on, Cligès illustrates society's greater concern with women failing to uphold society's standards—more so than men—when McCracken observes how even when:

'Dead'—the greater part of society has no reason to believe otherwise—Fenice, despite her wishes, is still undressed and touched (no doubt a parallel to molestation and rape), beaten and tortured. Even now, when no one can reasonably suspect her of infidelity, or her wish to be with another man other than her husband, she is punished for it simply because she is a woman. (45)

Putting McCracken's valid concern of Fenice's "molestation and rape" aside in order to focus on the argument at hand, society chastises Fenice—even though to them, for every sense and purpose, she is dead—because they do not trust her. The doctors "remembered / Solomon's wife, who hated / Her husband so much she pretended / Death to deceive him" (5957-60), and they immediately assume Fenice, again because she is female, must be intending the same thing. Regardless of the fact that she does indeed mimic Solomon's wife, Chrétien's description of the scene and the doctors' reactions clearly create a metaphor for this masculine society's insistence that one female stands for all females and therefore if one woman fails to uphold society's expectations than all have the potential to fail. As McCracken notes, by "[p]ositing the triangulated relationship as 'an elementary structure of
signification' that presume woman as object and man as possessor, [the Cligès romance] points out that a familiar double standard (adultery is acceptable for men, forbidden for women) permeates even semiotic models of social and cultural relations" (47). The punishment and shame for woman resounds much further and deeper than that for men, as it is often on both a figurative and literal level.

For example, Ferrante suggests that women, like Fenice, lose their identity in attempting to avoid society's punishment. Ferrante argues that Fenice loses her identity when:

The force of love that creates conflicts in the lover operates through the lady [...] In the lyric, love and the lady are virtually interchangeable: they have the same powers and the same effect on the lovers; the same images and pronouns are used for both, making it impossible at times to tell which is meant [...] The romance lady appears to be a separate being, but we will see that she is often a mirror image of the lover. (Woman 66)

The lady, thus, becomes one with her lover. Chrétien explains that Alexander and Sordamour have two hearts "[w]ithout physically joining. / They're one and the same because / What each one wants is sensed / And felt by the other" (2813-16). Though both she and Fenice experience such a situation, Sordamour says it best: "I am in love [...] Love / Has so overwhelmed me I've become / A fool, and my mind won't work; / I've no defenses left, / I'm obliged to yield" (926-33). Becoming one with her lover, Sordamour and later Fenice lose their own identity by becoming a "personification of love" as it should be duly noted that "Love," with a capital "L," may stand for either her love, Alexander, or Love personified (Ferrante, Woman 66). By sharing such a passionate love with Cligès, Fenice, as McCracken notes, not only suffers physical punishment at the hands of the doctors, but she also apparently is not able to maintain her own identity because society has forced her to abide by their rules. She consumes herself with the quest to maintain "womanly perfection" (Duby, The Knight 234) and in the process loses sight of maintaining her own identity. Yet again, because of society's rigid expectations and constant threat of punishment, any personal identity might not have been tolerated. Looking at women in these situations from many different perspectives reveals that women are virtually, in many senses, destroyed, either directly or by their own attempts to avoid society's punishments.

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--- The Knight, the Lady and The Priest: The Making
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The Undergraduate Review
Lesbian Suicide and Shortcomings of Society

Scott Reynen

Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent domination and recognize specific ways each system acts in ways that undermine our individual quests for liberation.

- bell hooks, Outlaw Culture

There were 342 cases of "female same-sex double suicides reported in the Japanese daily press between 1925 and 1935. If we include unreported and individual cases, the actual number of this period was probably much higher than twice this count. Lesbian double suicides alone constitute about thirty percent of all cases of suicide among lesbians in interwar Japan during this time period (Komine 1985, 174-5)." The rate of suicide among lesbians in interwar Japan is an indication of the exclusion of lesbians from the social and economic trends of the time.

Komine's research of this phenomenon indicates the high rate of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan as Yasuda Tokutaro asked in 1935, "Why are there so many cases of homosexuality among females these days?" (Komine 1985, 174-5). In Japan during this period, The lack of similar studies or public commentary before suggests that the frequency of lesbian suicides contrast to lower (and less notable) rates both preceding and following these years.

Robertson makes the only modern attempt to study the phenomenon of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan. She concludes: "The cases of attempted suicides were predicated on and both used and a revolt against the normalizing functions of tradition (Mother) as sanctioned by the civil code" ("Dying to Tell," 15). However, Robertson neglects to recognize the importance of this phenomenon in the broader context of women's struggles for liberation.