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Oh, for Shame: Public Perception and Punishment in Chrétien'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 argu-

ment will thereby help to extend my claim that both men and women in the medieval society, as illustrated in *Cligès*, had to abide by a set of standards, and that failure to do so resulted in punishment and shame—with often a greater dose inflicted on women.

Knights intended to maintain society's expectations by aiming to be ideal knights, especially in tournament or battle situations. In *Cligès*, Alexander is repeatedly described as being "brave and bold" (65) and as having an agile tongue and wise words (336-7). He proves this to his father prior to leaving for King Arthur's 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 swordsman / And archer than Tristan, King Mark's / Nephew [...] He lacked nothing" (2769-2773). Cligès represents the perfect knight, which serves as an appropriate contrast to the women, specifically Fenice, in this romance. His perfect appearance makes Fenice's actions reflect poorly on her. Next to the knights society praises so highly Fenice, and perhaps all courtly women look bad. Not only is Cligès beautiful, but he gracefully meets society's expectations by exhibiting qualities 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: "Chrétien gives his young heroes the same virtue [...] for *largesse*, he insists, is essential to the ideal knight." In *Cligès*, Alexander'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)

Knights, like Alexander and Cligès, struggle with their own problems internally and reflect these problems outwardly in tournament and battle situations. Alexander and Cligès love Sordamour and Fenice, respectively, and find their love in conflict with the chivalric disposition society expects them to maintain. While they both aspire to fulfill their personal desires, they also face society's punishment and shame should they in any way dismiss what is expected of them in pursuit of these desires.

Although women, too, found themselves forced to abide by society's strict expectations and often faced similar internal versus external conflicts, they had even greater worries. Punishment and thereby shame meant a lifetime of loss, as it does for Fenice in *Cligès*. 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 conjunx, 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 an even greater number of expectations. Any fall from societal grace—adultery being the classic example—meant a severe punishment followed almost simultaneously by shame.

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 Cligès to herself. She also is initially unable to reveal her feelings for Cligès, 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 Cligès, 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 Cligès and [her]self

/ Relive the love of Tristan / And Iseult, a shameful story / To tell, full of foolishness. / [She] couldn't accept the life / Iseult was obliged to live!" (3126-32). Iseult's love for Tristan and the consequences that followed have been emblazoned on Fenice by society as wrong, and therefore she must avoid such a situation in order to avoid shame. Sordamour and Fenice's seemingly petty concerns now take on a different meaning; the women are justifiably concerned.

Knights and ladies' concern for maintaining their reputation can be attributed to what Loretta Wasserman designates the "honor/shame code" (78). Translated for this argument, both men and women concerned themselves with upholding society's expectations of them, for fear that failing to do so would lead to punishment, a punishment that was often more severe for women than for men. As Wasserman notes: "[r]eliance on public opinion as the measure of worth means that all success is regarded as honorable and all failure as shameful. What is public and provable counts" (79). Society's enculturation—the creating of a system of values used to judge others—simultaneously created a potentially uncomfortable situation for everyone. Thus, everyone strove to be on their best behavior, because even a minor slip up or cause for shame could be the demise to a person's social position. But as illustrated in *Cligès*, women's faults were almost always more "public and provable." At the very least, they were punished more severely, even if the crime was the same. Women were not honored for their commitment to uphold these standards, like a knight, but rather expected to do so.

However, though their concerns are numerous, examples of knights punished for failing to uphold expectations are few and far between. Furthermore, those that do surface in French romances, specifically Chrétien's *Cligès*, suggest a far lighter punishment and a more temporary shame for knights. Robertson recalls the Duke of Saxony in *Cligès* who desires to have Fenice for his own. His loss to *Cligès* disgraces the Duke and his notability in society is tarnished. Robertson observes, "The Duke is unwilling to sacrifice himself in his cause, even though there is some justice in it, and as a result he suffers disgrace [...T]he falsity of the Duke's fame is apparent to all, so that he and his men go home in great sorrow" (193-94). The Duke realizes that he has not met the expectations of his men and moreover society and therefore can do nothing but admit his shame. As Chrétien illustrates, the Duke is "[s]orrowful, sad, and shamed, / Knowing none of his men / Could think him much of a man" (4180-82). Though Chrétien's audience learns nothing of

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

would be excluded from the company of respectable ladies. (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 Iseult, 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, h]er 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 sidestep 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.

In considering this honor/shame culture in Chrétien's *Cligès*, a sort of so-

cial criticism is illuminated. Even early on, when Guinevere confronts both Alexander and Sordamour in regards to their love for one another she says, "So stop this silly concealment! / What dangerous folly, keeping / Your thoughts from one another: / What you don't say is killing / You both" (2284-88). Guinevere's perceptive comment criticizes society's unrealistic expectations and insistence that one should conceal feelings. Yet at the same time, *Cligès* surely predicts that this cycle of society's permanent suspicion, threat of punishment and shame of women will not end soon. For, as Chrétien's final words note, "No matter how noble she may be, / [...] their husbands never trust them. / Remembering what happened before. / They're shut in a room, as if / In prison, for fear of the harm / They can do; [...] No uncastrated / Males are admitted, which stops / Love from working its charms" (6758-66). Society's demanding expectations of women prepare Fenice for failure, thereby reinforcing these expectations and guaranteeing more severe punishments for women. By no fault of her own, Fenice continues the constant concern women must have for their public appearances for fear of an unrelenting punishment and shame.

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