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Oh, For Shame: Public Perception and Punishment in Chrétien's *Cligès*

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Oral Presentation O2.3

OH, FOR SHAME: PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND PUNISHMENT IN
CHRÉTIEN'S *CLIGÈS*

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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 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.

Knights like Cligès and Alexander needed to prove themselves in battle and tournaments to fulfill society's expectations and in personal relationships, specifically those with the lady with whom they fall in love. Examples of knights punished for failing to uphold expectations, however, are few and far between. A lady, though, had greater worries. Punishment and thereby shame meant a lifetime of loss, as it does for Fenice in *Cligès*. We see this concern with public perception at the conclusion of *Cligès*, when Fenice's tribulations with adultery are revealed. Fenice comes as close as she can to becoming like Iseult, while avoiding being called "another Iseult." However, she ultimately ends up like Iseult regardless of her efforts and is therefore punished, though, Cligès, in a situation similar to Tristan, is not.

By considering this honor/shame culture in Chrétien's *Cligès*, we see a sort of social criticism. Society's demanding expectations of women prepare Fenice for failure, thereby reinforcing these expectations and guaranteeing more severe punishments for women. Through 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.