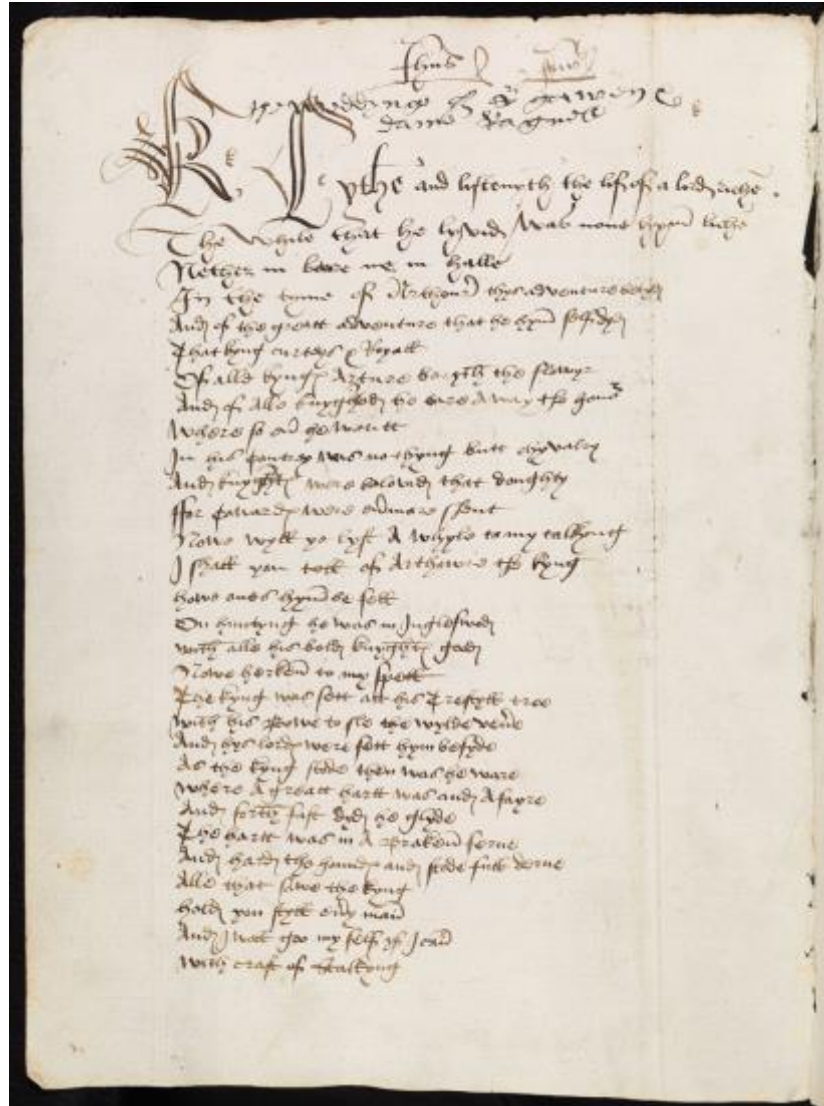


Shame and Honour in Late Medieval English Literature

An analysis of two narratives from the Sir Gawain Cycle: *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Avowing of Arthur*



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1. Introduction

The concepts of shame and honour have been the topics of various papers in the field of English medieval literature (Bremmer, Díaz-Vera and Manrique Antón, Flannery, Trigg). Shame is often viewed as an important aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture (Bremmer, Díaz-Vera and Manrique Antón). Scholars have argued that Anglo-Saxon heroic poems, such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, illustrate how honour and shame were core values within this past society (Bremmer). As Anglo-Saxon society was Christianised, its culture is believed to have changed from a shame culture to that of a guilt culture (Carroll, Faust). The concepts of shame and honour underwent changes as a consequence of changing culture and the introduction of chivalry in the mid-thirteenth century (Flannery), but continued to play an important role as a social mechanism in late medieval England, as is evident from the chivalric literature of the period (Bremmer, Flannery, Trigg). For instance, *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* has been shown to reflect the importance of shame in this period (Trigg, Flannery).

In discussing shame, it is important to bear in mind that it has both a personal and social dimension. Stephanie Trigg believes that “[c]hivalric and courtly shame is often ritualized and performative, embedded in anxieties about social and political hierarchy and public reputation rather than psychological inwardness as such” (84). On the other hand, Mary C. Flannery argues that shame is much broader than previously assumed by scholars: “shame is social as well as personal, and plays a key role not just in individual emotional experience, but also in shaping and enforcing social expectations and codes of behaviour, as well as determining the status of individuals within a society (167).

This present paper aims to build on previous analyses of shame in English medieval Arthurian romances (Trigg, Flannery) by exploring the concept of shame and honour in two Arthurian tales taken from the Sir Gawain Cycle: *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame*

Ragnelle (DR) and *The Avowing of Arthur (TA)* that have not been looked at yet from this perspective. References to William Caxton's translation of Ramón Lull's *Le Libre Del Orde de Cauayleria* will serve to place the concept of shame within the context of chivalric tradition. It also builds on analyses of the late medieval popular romances as political allegories (Donnelly) that reflect criticism on nobility in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. These centuries were a time of great political upheaval, which is apparent in events such as the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 and the Wars of the Roses. These events are important to take into account when analysing *DR* and *TA*.

The Sir Gawain Cycle consists of several popular romances about the adventures of Arthur and his knights. The tales within the Sir Gawain Cycle circulated in different countries, not solely in England, but also in France, Germany, and the Netherlands (Edlich-Muth 129). In the English versions of these romances, Gawain is often portrayed as the benchmark against which other knights, including Arthur, are measured (Hahn). The tales are considered popular romances as it is believed that they circulated among different audiences with various social backgrounds (Hahn). Both *DR* and *TA* are believed to have been composed in the second half of the fifteenth century (Hahn). It is, however, argued that *TA* might have been composed earlier; sometime in the fourteenth century (Hahn). So these tales were read among the people in a period in which England experienced great political upheaval. In exploring how shame is invoked in these late chivalric romances I hope to highlight the continuing cultural impact shame held as a force in late medieval England. Secondly, and more specifically, I argue that shame is invoked in the tales' depiction of chivalry with a satirical function that highlights the shortcomings and hypocrisy of Arthur and his court and serves as a critique of the failing of the ruling classes of late medieval England.

2. Shame cultures and guilt cultures

2.1 Shame culture versus guilt culture

The definitions “shame culture” and “guilt culture” were first discussed by the anthropologist Margaret Mead in 1937. Based on observations of various primitive peoples, she characterised their cultures according to how they achieved social control. One of the aspects she analysed in her work is “the nature of internal and external sanctions” (Mead 488). “One of the most crucial aspects in the problem of character structure is that of the sanctions by which the individual is controlled” (Mead 439). Sanction describes the way in which different cultures deal with obtaining conformity and “by which desired behaviour is induced and undesired behaviour prevented” (Mead 439). She draws a distinction between internal and external sanctions whereby internal sanction is similar to conscience (Mead 439). Internal sanction relies on guilt whereas “the individual who feels guilt must repent and atone for his sin” (Mead 494). A guilt culture maintains control by “creating and continually reinforcing the feeling of guilt and the expectation of punishment now or in the afterlife” (Faust). In contrast to this, in a culture with external sanctions, the fear of being shamed functions as a means to control individuals within a society (Mead 494). The individuals within a shame culture society are controlled by “the inculcation of shame and the complementary threat of ostracism” (Faust). Furthermore, shame cultures bear a close relation to revenge dynamics, which can be exemplified with the cultural tradition of blood feud after “a shameful incident” (Wilson 356). For example, according to Wilson, in traditional Chechen society, “after a crime has been publicly disclosed and a dark layer of shame has fallen onto the perpetrator and his family, it is the responsibility of the family to catch and deliver the perpetrator to the victim’s family” (356).

2.2 Shame culture versus guilt culture in Anglo-Saxon England

Over the years Mead's theory has been developed and adapted to different contexts and time periods, including past cultures (Bremmer 98). Scholars have used the theory and adapted it to medieval England in order to gain more insight into contemporary medieval society and its culture. In order to understand the concept of shame within the medieval culture of England, it is important to discuss Germanic culture, which predates the culture of Anglo-Saxon England. Germanic culture exhibits characteristics of a shame culture, which can be drawn from the frequently cited passage from Tacitus's *Germania*:

Cum ventum in aciem, turpe principi virtute venci, turpe comitatus virtutem principis non adaequare. Iam vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse.

[On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to equal the courage of the chief. And to leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame] (Tacitus, as cited and translated in Bremmer 100)

The passage from Tacitus implies that a warrior could not be more courageous than his lord, nor leave the battlefield, as this would result in lifelong shame. This reflects the important idea of the *comitatus*, which is a bond between a lord and his people where noble warriors "in return for the wealth, protection and guidance offered by their leader, are prepared to fight to death in defence of – or revenge for – their lord's life" (Allard and North 368). These warriors "committed themselves to [their lord] with public vows of loyalty" (Allard and North 368).

Shame as a result of breaking the *comitatus* is also found in Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry like *Beowulf*. When Beowulf fights his last battle against the dragon, the Danes take flight into the forest. After the dragon has been defeated, the men that had abandoned

Beowulf earlier return to the battlefield and are described as *scamiende*: “ac late scamiende scyldas bæran, guðgewædu, þær se gomela læg, wlitan on Wilaf” (ll. 2850-3) [Now in their shame they carried their shields, armour of fight, where the old man lay; and they gazed on Wiglaf]¹. They are ashamed because they broke the rules of the comitatus. The theme of revenge, another characteristic of shame cultures, can be drawn from Beowulf’s speech to Hrothgar. Aeschere, one of Hrothgar’s kinsmen, dies in the battle against Grendel’s mother, which causes the King great mourning. Beowulf then tells him to not indulge in mourning but to take revenge on the enemy after the death of his kinsman: “[s]ēlre bið æghwæm þæt hē his frēond wrece, þonne hē longe murne” [it is always better for anyone to avenge friends than to mourn for a long time] (ll.1348-5). Such comments suggest that revenge was important in primitive Germanic societies and continued to hold an allure in Anglo-Saxon England.

In the period in which the Anglo-Saxons were Christianised, their culture is believed to have changed to that of a guilt culture, as Christianity is commonly associated with a guilt culture (Carroll). The emergence of this guilt culture is apparent in the Anglo-Saxon law system, where in the eight century, “[f]our-fifths of all punishments mentioned in [Anglo-Saxon legal documents] pertain to the afterlife, in one way or another” (Danet and Bogoch 149). This suggests that internal sanctions, which Mead considers a feature of guilt cultures, were increasing. However, scholars have argued that there are still many references to Germanic shame in various Old-English texts, which proves that the concept of shame persisted after the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons. Rolf Bremmer argues that “there is plenty evidence available in the literature to suggest that the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity very much left their traditional culture intact” (Bremmer 102). He proves that the concept of shame is still present in literature in the early-eleventh century heroic poem *The Battle of Maldon* (Bremmer 102). This poem exhibits references to Christianity, which

¹ All Modern English translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Bremmer illustrates with reference to the Christian leader Byrhtnoth, who “while mortally wounded, entrusts his soul in a prayer to God with words that are strongly reminiscent of the Office of Dead as prescribed in the Roman Missal” (Bremmer 103). However, according to Bremmer, it also contains aspects of the Germanic shame culture as it portrays the importance of the comitatus, which he draws from the following passage:

Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere / stedefæste hælæð
 wordum ætwitan, / nu min wine gecranc,
 þæt ic hlafordleas / ham siðie,
 wende fram wige; / ac me sceal wæpen niman,
 ord and iren. (ll. 249-253a)

[Steadfast warriors around Sturmer need not reproach me with words, now that my friend has died, that I travelled home without a lord, turned away from the battle; but a weapon must take me, point and iron] (*The Battle of Maldon*, as cited and translated in Bremmer 103)

Bremmer believes that this example shows how a retainer of Byrhtnoth is determined to avoid public shaming after the death of his leader (Bremmer 102). As Jeavier E. Díaz-Vera and Teodoro Manrique Antón also argue, “the Christianization of [the Anglo-Saxon society] did not imply the immediate individualization and subjectification of shame-related experiences, and public shame continued to be a powerful instrument of social control throughout the medieval period” (260). So public shaming, which is characteristic of shame cultures, persisted into the late Anglo-Saxon period.

2.3 Shame and honour in late medieval England

The late medieval period is commonly associated with that of a guilt culture, rather than a shame culture, as late medieval England was predominantly Christian (Faust, Carroll).

However, as Bremmer argues “a distinction between pre- and post-conversion England [...] is not relevant when it comes to matters of honour and shame, or should at least be nuanced” (Bremmer 102). The concept of shame persisted from the Anglo-Saxon period in the late medieval period because it continued to play an important role in contemporary society. Nevertheless, scholars have argued that the concept of shame underwent changes as it acquired new connotations and functions in the period following the Norman Conquest (Trigg, Flannery). This had to do with various societal and religious changes, such as the emergence of a Christian concept of shame, where it is “presented as an internal and subjective experience” (Díaz-Vera and Manrique Antón 101), and the emergence of the chivalric tradition in the fourteenth century (Flannery 166). These changes are also closely linked because the knights of the order of chivalry, were the defenders of the Catholic belief (Lull 1).

The imagination of shame within the chivalric tradition has been discussed by Trigg and Flannery. Trigg explains that in the chivalric tradition, “[s]hame is regularly invoked [...] as an important threat to chivalric identity, and to a knight’s obligations to his oath, his kin, his King, and to women” (Trigg 77). She argues that “[t]he most extreme form of shame in courtly structure of discourse is degradation, the formal humiliating and public dismissal from the order of knighthood” (Trigg 79). So shame is used as a means of societal control whereby the degradation of a knight was the most extreme sanction, which happened in a “humiliating reversal of the dubbing ceremony” (Trigg 80). The way shame is invoked within this process of degradation is illustrated by Trigg with an example from William Segar in *The Booke of Honour and Armes* (1590). She explains that “[a]ccording to William Segar, [...] the medieval practice was to bring the knight to judgement fully armed, and have prayers of dead said over him”:

At the end of euerie Psalme, they tooke from him one peece of his Armour.

First, *they tooke off his Helmet as that which defended his traiterous eyes, then his Gauntlet on the right side as that which covered a corrupt hand: then the Gauntlet of the left hand, as from a member consenting.* And so by peecemeale disployed him of all his armes, as well offensive as defensive, which one after another were throwne to the ground: and at the instant when every part of Armour was cast downe, the King of Armes first, and after him all the other Herehaults cried aloud, saying *This is the Helmet of a disloyall and miscreant Knight* (Segar, as cited in Trigg 80)

Furthermore, Flannery argues that “[a]s fear of disgrace, shame operated as a restraint on behavior, and as actual disgrace, shame offered a way to punish and correct deviant behavior” (Flannery 177). According to Flannery, literature plays an important role in the shaping of knightly behaviour as well. “[T]hose whom the texts presume are susceptible to shame and thus capable of bettering themselves. Consequently, [...] shame has the capacity to define not only social and behavioral communities, but communities of readers as well” (Flannery 180). So the element of shame in literature functioned as a warning to audiences and encouraged people to better themselves. Also, both Flannery and Trigg argue that the concept of shame within chivalric tradition stands in binary opposition to that of honour (Flannery 168, Trigg 166). Even though this is present in chivalric texts, this is not necessary confined to the late medieval period as Bremmer argues that honour and shame bear a close relationship in Anglo-Saxon culture as well (Bremmer 99).

A medieval text that is often discussed in relation to the concept of shame is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This text has been the topic of many papers that focus on the concept of shame in late medieval England, because shame is an important theme throughout the narrative. A frequently-used passage to illustrate the function of shame within this late medieval text appears at the beginning of the text when the Green Knight visits Camelot:

“What, is þis Arthures hous,” quoth þe hāpel þenne,
 “þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?
 Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
 Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
 Now is þe revel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
 Overwalt wyth a worde of on wyȝes speche,
 For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!” (*SGGK* ll.309-315)

[“What, is this Arthur’s house,” said the man then, “whose fame runs through
 so many realms? Where is your pride and conquest now? Your ferocity and
 your wrath, and your great words? The revelry and pride of the Round Table,
 overthrown with the word of one man’s speech, for everyone cowers for fear
 without one blow!”]

According to Flannery, this passage indicates “the extent to which honor and shame are the
 foundation of the Round Table’s collective identity” (Flannery 169). The Green Knight is
 testing the members of the Arthurian court on “their shared code of behavior and points out
 that they have fallen short of it” (Flannery 169). In this confrontation shame serves an
 important role to indicate that Arthur’s knights do not live up to the reputation that the Round
 Table was known for.

3. Shame and honour in late medieval Arthurian literature

The following section will discuss the concepts of shame and honour in the late medieval romances *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (*DR*), and *The Awowing of Arthur* (*TA*). This analysis will illustrate how the concept of shame continued to have a cultural impact in late medieval England. Besides this, I will argue how shame has a satirical function that highlights the shortcomings and hypocrisy of the Round Table, which comments on the failing of the nobility in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England.

3.1 *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*

The narrative of *DR* starts with a land dispute between King Arthur and a knight called Gromer Somer Joure. He threatens the King and claims that Arthur has done him great wrong: “[t]hou hast gevyn my landes in certayn [w]ith greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen” (ll. 57-60) [you have given my lands to Sir Gawain with great wrong]. It has been argued that this narrative has a satirical meaning to it (Donnelly). Collen Donnelly believes that through the theme of land ownership the narrative contains an implicit critique against contemporary nepotism and favouritism (Donnelly 325). It is, however, important to note that, as Donnelly argues: “[w]e do not know if Gromer was in fact a loyal vassal of Arthur who was simply displaced by favoritism or nepotism [...] or if he fought against Arthur, lost, and had his lands confiscated” (Donnelly 325). The way Arthur deals with this threat shows how shame was used by sovereigns within the chivalric order as a restraint on knightly behaviour:

“A, Sir Gromer Somer, bethynk the welle;
 To sle me here honour getyst thou no delle.
 Bethynk the thou artt a knyghte:
 Yf thou sle me nowe in thys case,
 Alle knyghtes wolle refuse the in every place;

That shame shalle nevere the froo.
 Lett be thy wylle and folowe wytt
 And that is amys I shalle amend itt,
 And thou wolt, or that I goo.” (ll. 61-72)

[Ah, Sir Gromer Somer, think well; to slay me here will get you no honour. Remember that you are a knight: if you slay me now in this instance, all knights will refuse you everywhere. That shame shall never leave you. Let your honour go and follow reason, and I shall fix what is amiss, if you wish before I go]

So Arthur threatens the knight by telling him that he will lose his reputation if he kills him and as a consequence he will not be accepted by other knights. Also, he advises the knight to let his honour go and follow reason instead. The importance of following reason is also found in the code of chivalry, which is said to keep the knight from shame: “reason kepeth and deffendeth a knyght fro blame / & fro shame” (Lull 86) [reason keeps and defends a knight from blame and from shame]. Furthermore, Arthur tells the knight that it would be a shameful act to kill him during his hunt as Arthur himself is not wearing any armour: “I shalle now graunt itt the; [s]hame thou shalt have to sle me in veneré, [t]hou armyd and I clothyd butt in grene, perdé” (ll. 81-3) [I shall grant it you right now. Shame you shall have for killing me in hunting: you armed and I am clothed but in green, by God]. By protecting his skin, “Arthur has seized on chivalric convention: one does not attack an unarmed knight” (Donnelly 326). The fact that he refers to shame in these three examples shows how Arthur uses the concept of shame as a means to control the actions of his inferiors.

Arthur’s behaviour in this dialogue could be argued to have a satirical meaning to it, as he lectures Gromer Somer Joure on how to adhere to the chivalric code, whilst not behaving chivalrically himself. Arthur is evoking shame on the knight by telling him that he

is not acting chivalrously in order to save his own life. He alludes to a chivalric rule that will offer him “momentary protection” (Donnelly 326). According to Donnelly, “[t]he result is that the chivalric code sounds hollow” (326). Furthermore, fear was also considered shameful and unchivalric. Arthur tells Gromer Summer Joure that he is not afraid of anything: “[u]ntrewe knyght shalt thou nevere fynde me – [t]o dye yett were me lever” (ll. 116-7) [an untrue knight you will never find in me – I would rather die]. Despite his statement, Arthur is portrayed as a coward in his actions. According to Maurice Keen, cowardice was a serious transgression: “[g]ross cowardice was notionally punishable with death; lesser cowardice could involve loss of status and insignia” (Keen *Chivalry* 175). When he is on his quest to find an answer to the question Gromer Somer Joure proposed, he says to Gawain: “I wott I shal be slayn ryghte there. Blame me nott thoughe I be a wofulle man; [a]lle thys is my drede and fere” (ll. 179-181) [I know that I will be slain. Do not blame me though I am a woeful man; this is all the cause of my dread and fear]. He asks Gawain not to blame him, because he is aware that his behaviour is considered shameful and punishable from the perspective of the chivalric code.

Arthur’s inability to keep his own vows also highlights how shame and honour are important aspects within the chivalric code. *DR* portrays the importance of vowing in the chivalric tradition in the late medieval period, where “characters rise or fall in the audience’s esteem based on whether they keep their word, and every significant action in each of these tales is preceded by an oath, whether uttered honestly or deceptively” (Donnelly 23). Gromer Somer Joure makes Arthur swear an oath “[t]o shewe me att thy comyng whate wemen love best in feld and town” (l. 91) [to tell me, when you come, what women love most in the country and in town]. After Arthur agrees on the vow, proposed by the knight, Gromer instructs him to “kepe alle thyng in close” (l. 101) [keep it to yourself]. However, when Arthur returns to court, he immediately tells Gawain what has happened in the woods. A verbal bond was not to be broken in this period (Donnelly 326). *The Book of the Order of*

Chivalry also states this: “[a]nd by cause that god and chyualry concorde to gydre / hit behoueth / that fals swerynge and vntrewe othe / be not in them that mayntene thordre of chyualrye” (Lull 43) [And by cause that God and chivalry agree together it commands that false vows and untrue oaths be not in them that maintain to the order of chivalry]. So by breaking this verbal bond, he would not be considered a true member of the Round Table, as “the chivalric code simply does not allow a man to sacrifice the code for his own personal safety” (Donnelly 327).

Arthur is therefore shameless when he should not be, but he does feel shame on other occasions. When Arthur returns to court with Dame Ragnelle, he feels ashamed because of the lady’s ugly appearance. The moment they arrive at court, the lady rides next to him, which causes Arthur to feel publically shamed because nobody at his court had ever seen “so fowlle a thyng” (l. 523) [such a foul thing]. Arthur is not the only one who is ashamed of Dame Ragnelle’s presence at court; the ladies and the other knights of the Round Table feel shame as well. According to Donnelly, “[t]he poet concentrates his burlesque humor [...] on the most superficial qualities of aristocratic behavior to point at the shallowness of [the aristocratic] veneer” (329). Their shame is represented as superficial, as they are ashamed of the appearance of the old lady. For instance, at the day of the wedding, all of them feel pity for Gawain having to marry the foul woman. Moreover, Guinevere advises Dame Ragnelle to get married as early in the morning as possible and in private (ll. 566-71). She even tells Dame Ragnelle that she thinks it would be more honourable for her to marry in secret: “[b]utt me wold thynk more honour [a]nd your worshypp moste” (ll. 582-3) [but I am only thinking about your honour and your reputation]. Guinevere warns her that marrying in public can put her to shame and ruin her reputation. However, she solely does this to save the reputation of the court, because Guinevere and the other members of the court are the ones who are ashamed of having Gawain openly married to the ugly woman. Dame Ragnelle invokes

shame on Arthur when she tells him that she wants to be wedded in public: “Openly I wol be weddyd, or I parte the froo [e]lles shame wolle ye have” (507-8) [I want to be wedded publicly, before I part from you, otherwise you will have shame]. She tells Arthur that he cannot deny the request as she has saved his life: “[b]ethynk you howe I have savyd your lyf. Therfor with me nowe shalle ye nott stryfe, [f]or and ye do, ye be to blame” (ll.512-4) [remember how I have saved your life. Therefore, you shall not strive with me now, for if you do, you are to blame]. Dame Ragnelle kept her vow, as opposed to Arthur, so she has the right to demand a public wedding. At the same time, she turns the tables on the court, as she reminds them that it would be shameful not to give her the wedding she deserves. Her demand and the reactions of the members of Arthur’s court highlight how hypocritical and superficial Arthur and his court are.

Arthur and the court present themselves as noble people, however they do not behave nobly, which is criticised throughout the narrative. Even though a knight might be nobly born, he was only noble if he also proved to value his inner virtues: “[f]or noblesse of courage may not moūte in the hyhe honour of chyualry without election of vertues and good custommes” (Lull 89-90) [For nobleness of courage may not develop in high honour of chivalry without election of good virtues and customs]. In this period “[t]he claims of blood and virtue competed with each other” (Keen *chivalry* 157). This is also apparent in other tales from the fourteenth century such as Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* which contains the same loathly lady motif as *DR*:

But, for ye speken of swich gentillesse
 As is descended out of old richesse,
 That therefore sholden ye be gentil men,
 Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.
 Looke who that is moost virtuous alway,

Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay

To do the gentil dedes that he kan;

Taak hym for the grettest gentil man (ll. 1109-16)

[But, for you speak of such nobleness as it is descended out of old wealth, that therefore you be noble men, such arrogance is not worth a hen. Look who is always most virtuous, openly and secretly, and who most inclines to do what noble deeds he can; take him for the greatest noble man]

The loathly ladies in both *DR* and *WBT* challenge the knights of the Round Table in their belief that they are superior because they were nobly born. In the medieval period, “Beauty and nobility undeniably went hand-in-hand” (Donnelly 328). This is to say, it was believed that outward appearances reflected the extent of one’s virtue. The old hag, as well as Dame Ragnelle challenge this belief. They are both monstrous, but they also portray chivalric behaviour, whereas Arthur and his court portray unchivalric behaviour.

The only knight who does not feel shame, nor invokes shame on other knights for his own benefit, is Gawain, which presents him as the benchmark of idyllic knightly behaviour. He proves to be chivalrous and shameless throughout the narrative. He keeps his vows to both King Arthur and Dame Ragnelle. Even though he is a man of few words in this narrative, he proves to be chivalrous in his actions (Donnelly 324). He promises King Arthur to save his life by marrying Dame Ragnelle: “I shalle wed her and wed her agayn, [t]howghe she were a fend; [t]howghe she were as foulle as Belsabub” (ll. 343-5) [I shall marry her and marry her again, even though she were a monster; or if she were as foul as Beelzebub]. Even though she be the ugliest woman on earth, Gawain wants to marry her for Arthur is his lord who has honoured him on many occasions: “[f]or ye ar my Kyng with honour [a]nd have worshypt me in many a stowre; [t]herfor shalle I nott let” (ll. 348-50) [For you are my King with honour and you have honoured me in many battles; therefore, I shall not hesitate]. This

shows that Gawain obeys the code of chivalry by proving that he is courageous and he will do anything to save his lord. He considers his honour increased for being able to help Arthur in this time of need: “[t]o save your lyfe, Lorde, itt were my parte, [o]r were I false and a greatt coward; [a]nd my worshypp is the bett” (ll. 350-3) [it is my duty to save your life, lord, or else I were false and a great coward, and my honour is more]. When Gawain marries Dame Ragnelle, he is considered a ‘true knyght’ for keeping his promise: “[t]her Sir Gawen to her his trowthe plyghte [i]n welle and in woo, as he was a true knyght” (ll. 539-40) [Sir Gawain plights his troth to her in well and in woe, like a true knight]. Furthermore, he proves to be a true knight because he acts chivalrously towards the lady, as opposed to the other members of the Round Table, who are disgusted by her. When Dame Ragnelle offers him the choice to have her either ugly during the day or the night, he leaves the choice for the lady: “[t]he choyse I putt in your fyst” (ll. 678) [I put the choice in your hands]. In the end he is rewarded for his courtly behaviour – he married the ugly woman in order to save Arthur’s honour, but ends up having the most beautiful woman of the Arthurian court.

3.2 The Avowing of Arthur

The Avowing of Arthur also portrays the importance of vowing and keeping vows in the chivalric tradition. In this tale the knights are tested as to whether they live up to their vows, and thus if they obey to the values of the chivalric code. Shame is alluded to implicitly and explicitly in this narrative and it serves a satirical purpose as well. At the beginning of the narrative Arthur makes a vow in the company of his knights, after which he commands Kay, Gawain and Baldwin to make their own vows:

“Sirs, in your cumpany,

Myne avow make I:

Were he nevyr so hardy,

Yone Satenas to say -
 To brittun him and downe bringe,
 Wythoute any helpinge,
 And I may have my levyng
 Hen till tomorne atte day!
 And now, sirs, I cummaunde yo
 To do as I have done nowe:
 Ichone make your avowe.” (ll. 117-27)

[Sirs, in your company, I make my vow: he were never so bold, to assay the fiend – [I promise] to butcher him and bring him down, without any help, and I keep my life from now until tomorrow morning! And now, sirs, I command you to now do as I have done: each one make your vow.]

Gawain and Kay also swear oaths: Gawain swears to protect the Tarne Wathelan during the night, after which Kay promises to ride around in the woods and kill anyone that comes his way. Baldwin, on the other hand, makes different oaths compared to those of the other knights. Joseph Taylor suggests that “Baldwin can be said to profane the sacrality of Arthur’s avowing and, in so doing, defuse the sovereign’s hold over him” (38). His vows are based on personal values, whereas the others make vows to uphold their reputation within the chivalric order (Taylor 38).

“I avow bi my life
 Nevyr to be jelus of my wife,
 Ne of no birde bryghte;
 Nere werne no mon my mete
 Quen I gode may gete;
 Ne drede my dethe for no threte

Nauthir of king ner knyghte.” (ll. 138-44)

[I vow on my life, never to be jealous of my wife, or of any attractive woman; nor to deny a person my food if I possess any goods; nor fear my death for no threat neither of the King nor a knight]

He does not promise action in his vows, which clearly ignores “the soldiery solidarity that Arthur desires”, and the importance of brotherhood (Taylor 38). Subsequently, Baldwin’s vows are tested by King Arthur and other members of the Round Table as Arthur and Kay want to know the specific nature of these oaths.

In order to test Baldwin’s vows, King Arthur sends Kay and five other knights to test his vow that he will not be afraid of death. However, Arthur has Kay test him on the condition that Baldwin will not be shamed in the process: “[t]hat ye do him no wrunge, [b]utte save wele my knyghte” (ll. 601-3) [that you do not shame him, but save my knight well]. The reason why Arthur says this is that he believes that Baldwin is a worthy knight who does not like to break his vows: “[H]im is lefe, I dar lay, [t]o hald that he heghte.” (ll. 603-4) [I know that it is important to him to keep what he promised]. Furthermore, according to the code of chivalry it is considered sinful to take away a knight’s good name without a valid reason or proof: “it is more grete deffaulte for to stele or take away chyvualry / than for to stele money or other thynges that ben not chyualry” (Lull 50) [it is more sinful to steal a knight’s good name than to steal money or other things that be not chivalry]. When Kay and the other knights test Baldwin on his vow, Kay offers Baldwin the chance to flee or fight (l. 635). Baldwin tells Kay and the others he will not flee, which shows that he is courageous: “[a]nd ye were als mony mo, [y]e gerutte me notte to flee” (ll. 639-40) [even if you were with many more, you would not cause me to flee].

The minstrel tests Baldwin’s vow that he will not deny any person his food, which he also proves to keep by providing food and wine to all of his people; lower classes and higher

classes. It is important to note that shame is evoked when the King instructs the minstrel to test the vow. Arthur commands him to go to Baldwin's castle in order to check if Baldwin remains true to his vow: "wete me prevely to say [i]f any mon go meteles away; for thi wareson for ay, [d]o thou me nevyr more" (ll. 713-6) [inform me secretly to say if any person goes away without having have eaten; and for your reputation, do nothing more than that]. Arthur threatens the minstrel by telling the minstrel that he will lose his reputation if he does not listen to him. Like Arthur's dialogue with Gromer in *DR*, this again shows that shaming is a tool to manipulate the members of the Arthurian court and keep them under control.

Arthur tests Baldwin on his vow that he will not be jealous of his wife by getting Baldwin's wife to lay in bed naked with another knight. The King himself uses shame as a means of testing Baldwin: he asks Baldwin if he is not angry with him for having done this. At this moment, Baldwin proves to be chivalric in his answer by saying that he wants to keep his honour: "gif I take hitte thenne to ille, [m]uche maugreve have I" (ll. 899-900) [if I take it then too ill, I would incur much dishonour]. This parallels the idea within the chivalric code of maintaining one's honour as the most important thing within chivalry: "[a] knyght ought more to doubte the blame of the people and his dishonoure / than he shold the perylle of dethe" (Lull 62) [a knight ought to fear the blame of the people and his dishonour more than he should fear death]. So according to chivalric values, Baldwin is a good knight as he proves to keep the vows that he made and he does not show any shameful behaviour.

Satirical aspects are present in this tale because both Kay and King Arthur exhibit unchivalric behaviour when testing Baldwin. Kay does not keep his vow because he is captured after he has lost his battle against Menealfe. When he asks Gawain to save him, he admits that he did not keep his vow: "I, Kay, that thou knawes [t]hat owte of tyme bostus and blawus" (ll. 353-5) [It is me, Kay, who you know, who boasts and brags at the wrong times]. But yet he tests Baldwin on his oaths, after he had broken his own vow. This can be

interpreted as an element of satire because a knight was not allowed to test others if he showed signs of unchivalric behaviour himself (Lull 47). Kay also acts against the code of chivalry in other tales within the Gawain Cycle, like *The Carle of Carlisle (CC)*, where he is boasting as well:

Be the Carle never so bolde,
 I count hym not worthe an har.
 And yeyf he be never so stoute,
 We woll hym bette all about
 And make his beggyng bar. (ll. 155-9)

[Be the carl never so bold; I consider him not worth a hair. And if he be never so tough, we will beat him thoroughly and make his stronghold bare]

In this tale Gawain is also protecting Kay from breaking the chivalric code by telling him that he should stop boasting because it will get him into trouble. As for Arthur, he goes after the boar by himself and seems to keep his vow by killing the animal, which could imply that he lives up to the chivalric code. However, the way he fights the animal implies that he is not as courageous as he claimed when making his vows. As in *DR*, Arthur is afraid of his death, which indicates cowardice: “[h]e se nevyr no syghte are [s]o sore gerutte him to drede. He hade drede and doute [o]f him that was stirrun and stowte” (ll. 175-178) [He had never seen this sight before, which caused him to be afraid. He had dread and felt doubt of him [the boar] that was fierce and strong]. So Arthur is not worthy of testing Baldwin either as he is not obeying the chivalric code, which orders a knight to be bold and brave.

Furthermore, the way Menealfe is treated in *TA* could also be interpreted as satire, as his actions do not have any consequences. Menealfe loses his battle to Gawain, which is also criticised by Kay: “[t]hi leve hase thou loste [f]or all thi brag or thi boste” (ll. 429-30) [You lost your life because of all your bragging and boasting]. Boasting was equally important as

vowing as both are verbal contracts: “[a] person's word was his contract; from boast to vow, the word was virtually equivalent to the action” (Donnelly 324). The fact that Kay criticises Baldwin’s boasting can be seen as satirical in itself, as Kay also boasted before his battle against Menealfe, which he lost. As for Menealfe, his behaviour is expected to lead to some form of punishment or shaming, however, instead he is rewarded by King Arthur. When he arrives at court and is awaiting Queen Guinevere’s judgement, Arthur tells him: “Menealfe, and thou be wise, [h]old that thou beheghte, [a]nd I schall helpe that I maye” (531-3) [Menealfe, be wise, keep your promise, and I will help you where I can]. Guinevere leaves Arthur to decide the knight’s fate, and the King decides to add him as a member to the Round Table:

The Kinge sone his othe toke
 And squithely gerut him squire;
 And sekirly, wythouten fabull,
 Thus dwellus he atte the Rowun Tabull,
 As prest knyghte and priveabull,
 Wyth schild and wyth spere. (ll. 567-72)

[the King took his oath and made him swear; surely, and without reservation, that he would dwell at the Round Table, as a worthy and ready knight, with shield and with spear]

This seems to subvert the consequences of breaking the chivalric code, as shameful behaviour is celebrated, instead of being punished. This is also apparent in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where Arthur adopts the green girdle as a sign of honour and brotherhood, whilst Gawain initially carried it as a sign of his failure and sin: “remorde to myselven þe faut anf þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed” (l. 2435) [as a reminder of the sin and the weakness of the erring flesh]. So this shows that honour and the reputation of the Round Table proves to be

more important than real chivalric values.

4. Discussion

DR and *TA* illustrate that King Arthur is a sovereign who uses shame and honour as a means of controlling and manipulating the Knights of the Round Table, which is apparent when he threatens Gromer and the minstrel that they will lose their reputation if they do not obey him. As he is at top of the hierarchal order, he should function as a role model of knightly behaviour. Instead, Arthur misuses shame to manipulate while not adhering to the code himself, which highlights his hypocrisy and failure to live up to the chivalric standards that should guide him. Arthur, as well as some of his knights, often undergo ‘deconstruction’. This term refers to “a technique of destroying, shifting and disassembling the image of the hero” in written and oral tradition within the medieval period (Millet 229). Furthermore, according to Victor Millet, this ‘deconstructing of the hero’ often occurs for parodic and satirical reasons. The deconstruction of the chivalric heroic ethos that occurs in *DR* and *TA* has a satirical function that highlights the hypocrisy of Arthur’s court. The way shame is treated in the romances under scrutiny also feeds the heroic deconstruction.

Kay and Arthur are deconstructed, because they do not portray chivalric behaviour as stated in the chivalric code. Neither Arthur, nor Kay keep their verbal contracts, which proves their inability to live up to the expectations of chivalry, as verbal contracts were “the true measure of nobility” at the time (Donnelly 326). Moreover, according to the chivalric code, breaking one’s verbal contract should result in punishment, shaming, or degradation, however, there are no consequences for shameful behaviour. It seems as if breaking vows is celebrated and encouraged, which shows how chivalric values are subverted in the narratives: after breaking his vow, Kay is sent to test Baldwin on his chivalric behaviour, so he is given a superior position. So the people of Arthur’s court testing knights on their vows, are breaking their own vows, which does not represent the Round Table as an ideal, but rather as corrupt and shameful. Furthermore, subversion is also apparent when Menealfe is added as a member

of the Round Table after boasting and losing his battle against Gawain, where shameful behaviour is again rewarded. As opposed to these deconstructed characters, Gawain and Baldwin are the only ones who are portrayed as adhering to correct chivalric behaviour. Gawain functions as the benchmark of knightly behaviour in *TA* and in *DR*, because he keeps his vows, shows courageous behaviour and also portrays important inner values by being kind to ladies.

Arthur's failure to live up to the code of chivalry can be read by extension as a comment on the contemporary aristocracy's failing to live up to the high moral conduct that should have been their guiding standard. As Sean Pollack argues, the conflicts represented in the narratives are "not only failings of a (fictional) Round Table, but must also be related to real problems of class, and regional, conflicts" (20). The fourteenth- and the fifteenth-century are characterised by class-tension (Donnelly 321). This is apparent in events such as the Peasants' Revolt in the year 1381, where the nobility killed the peasants for demanding higher wages (Donnelly 321). According to Chris Given-Wilson, "social distinctions which had in practice been a part of the English scene for a long time became more rigidly defined, more blatantly advertised, and more jealously guarded" (Given-Wilson 2 as cited in Donnelly 321). So status was becoming increasingly more important in this period and as a result the nobility gained more political influence (Given-Wilson 14). Also, "the nobility dominated the localities by corrupting and intimidating the legitimate agents of royal law and administration. This competition for local power led to conflict between rival noble dynasties for control over particular localities" (Spencer 101). According to Keen, "[t]he shadow of civil discord was looming [...] with party groupings among the nobility crystallizing into hostile factions (Keen *Later Middle Ages* 254). The factionalism of the nobility led to destabilisation of the political situation, and eventually initiated the Wars of the Roses (Spencer 101). During this period, there was a lack of strong central power which led to

breakdown of law and order. Another consequence was that the civil wars “provided a cover for personal vendettas to be pursued and for random acts of violence to be perpetrated” (Grummitt 147). So the fifteenth-century is a period of political instability, where there was an absence of law and order. Furthermore, Stephen Henry Rigby argues that “it is important to shed the modern notion that order is rooted in law and any private interference is corrupt” (277). This notion is of great relevance for this period, as it was the king and the nobility who created the laws and corrupted them, which led to revolts, civil wars and chaos.

The satirical function that references to shame play in subverting important chivalric values in *DR* and *TA* suggests that the romances function as criticism on the contemporary political situation of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, which was a period known for its “corruption, violence and stagnation” (Spencer 6). The Round Table is characterised by manipulation, corruption and claimed nobility, which reflects the contemporary government in these centuries. Moreover, the narratives show criticism on nobility by commenting on the aristocratic veneer and its superficiality, as well as the violation of contemporary values within the code of chivalry.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the concepts of shame and honour in late medieval Arthurian literature. The analysis of the narratives *DR* and *TA* shows that shame and honour are not restricted to Anglo-Saxon culture, but continued to be important concepts in late medieval England, which is in line with previous works on shame and honour in the late medieval period (Flannery Trigg). King Arthur uses shame as a means to control and manipulate his inferiors, whilst disobeying the rules of the chivalric code himself. This violation of the chivalric code should result in shame and punishment, however there are no consequences, which shows that these values are subverted in the Arthurian court. The deconstruction of Arthur and his knights suggests that the narratives could be read as political allegories as they contain criticism on contemporary society. Furthermore, like Donnelly also suggests in her work, the problems in Arthur's court reflect the conflicts of the political situation in late medieval England. The Arthurian court is characterised by manipulation, corruption, violence, and the failings of its ruling classes, which are aspects that were also present in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. The limitation of this study is that only two tales of the Sir Gawain Cycle have been analysed. Analysing more tales might provide a clearer understanding of the use of shame within this period. Furthermore, the present paper solely focuses on chivalric literature; a consideration of other genres in relation to shame and honour, also suggested by Flannery (180), would undoubtedly shed further light on shame as a social and cultural mechanism in late medieval England.

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