

Shame and Guilt in Personality and Culture

To understand the psychology Shakespeare shows us in his plays, we begin with a brief overview of the opposite and antagonistic moral emotions, shame and guilt, and their role in stimulating or inhibiting violence, from homicide and suicide to war and genocide. We include a discussion, also relevant to Shakespeare's plays, of the moral value systems motivated by shame and guilt (shame ethics vs. guilt ethics), shame-driven versus guilt-ridden character structures, shame cultures versus guilt cultures, and the role of shame and guilt in law (retributive vs. restorative justice) and politics (authoritarian, right-wing tyrannies vs. egalitarian, left-wing democracies). All in preparation for our telling of what Shakespeare shows us through the words and actions of his characters.

The emotions of shame and guilt (and their opposites, pride and innocence, respectively) are as central to human motivation and behavior as love and hate are – because they are love and hate, except as directed toward the self, rather than toward others. Shame is the absence or deficiency of self-love and love from others, and its opposite is pride, or self-love, self-esteem, self-respect, and the feeling of self-worth, as well as love from others, as in being respected, esteemed, and honored by them. The feeling of guilt, or sinfulness, is the presence of self-hate and the feeling of deserving punishment and needing to perform acts of penance; its opposite is the feeling of innocence, the absence of self-hate and self-blame.

We speak of shame as a generic term for a family of related emotions, just as we use the term “flower” to refer to roses, daffodils, and many other species that belong to the same family. The centrality of shame in human emotional life is indicated by its many synonyms: feeling inferior, inadequate, weak, incompetent, ignorant, unlovable, a failure, a loser and so on. Since shame as a feeling always presumes an audience, real or imagined, in whose eyes one feels shamed, shame also includes the feeling of being disrespected by others, humiliated, insulted, dishonored, disgraced,

slighted, rejected, unloved, ridiculed, mocked or laughed at by them, or perceived as weak and inferior, and suffering what some Asian cultures call “loss of face,” psychoanalysts call “narcissistic injuries,” and Alfred Adler called an “inferiority complex.” The feelings of envy and jealousy are members of this same family of feelings: one feels inferior to others with respect to whatever one feels jealous or envious about.

Pride or self-love (the opposite of shame) refers to feelings of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-worth, and to receiving or at least deserving love and esteem from others, as in having them respect one’s dignity, honor, and reputation.

Guilt and remorse are the feelings of being sinful, culpable, or blameworthy. Its opposite, the feeling of innocence, is the absence of self-condemnation and self-hate, and the feeling of righteousness, which at the extreme becomes the feeling called self-righteousness.

Shame, because it is the lack of love for the self, motivates directing love toward the self and directing hate, the opposite and extinguisher of love, toward others.

As Freud observed and as everyone who has ever loved knows, we are never as vulnerable as when we love – vulnerable to grief and sadness if someone we love dies, or to shame and humiliation if someone we love does not love us or loves someone else instead. In response to this loss, we may simply choose to defend ourselves against our pain, by withdrawing our love and ceasing to care. Thus we can treat others with indifference, neglect, contempt, and abandonment. Or we may choose an active defense (which is a more powerful weapon against shame), namely, hate, aggression, and violence toward them. Indifference and neglect, however, which is also called passive aggressiveness, can be just as deadly as the active form, overt violence – as, for example, parental neglect of children, neglect of the poor by the rich, and so on.

Thus we can understand hate, whether passive or active, as a defense against the emotional pain of losing love, by reversing our love for the other person or group into hate. In this conception, then, hate and violence are not instincts but rather defenses or protections against an instinct – the normal and healthy instinct to love others – when that exposes us to emotional pain.

To say it differently, shame (the actual or threatened deprivation of love) leads people to want to receive love from others but to give love only to themselves, not to others – just as starving persons may hoard any scraps of food for themselves. Shame also motivates people to direct hate away from themselves and toward others – in fact, to hate others, even to the

point of killing them, in order to avoid or undo being shamed by them, and to achieve pride and honor instead. This they can do by demonstrating strength rather than weakness, and transferring shame from themselves onto their victim, which violence does, by proving that their victim is weaker than they are. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare shows us how a noble soldier comes to kill his king in order to avoid being shamed by his wife for not having the courage (being too cowardly) to do the deed that would raise him in her esteem and enable him to attain the pride and honor of becoming the king himself. In *King Lear*, the children of Lear and Gloucester, who feel themselves less loved by their fathers than their siblings, engage in violence toward their fathers (and siblings) to gain the pride and honor (in the form of wealth, power, and status) they feel deprived of.

Shame and guilt can be considered as dynamic opposites in that shame motivates people to direct hate toward others and love toward themselves, and guilt motivates people to direct hate toward themselves and love toward others.

From a developmental point of view, shame is the precursor and precondition for guilt. This is true on every time scale, such as the moment-to-moment movement from one emotion to the other, as with Othello, who feels shamed when he believes that his wife, Desdemona, has been unfaithful, and then feels guilt when he learns, after having killed her, that, in fact, she had been innocent of that offense and had continued to love him faithfully. Shame also precedes guilt on the larger scale of the human life cycle as people move from one stage of development to another, avoiding shame and achieving pride by mastering the skills and competencies required by each new stage of development. The capacity for feelings of guilt occurs when one realizes that one has achieved so much of those skills and competencies that one possesses the power and ability to injure or kill others (toward whom one has some feelings of love, as well as of hate). And this progression occurs on the much larger time scale of the evolution of whole cultures as they evolve from shame cultures into guilt cultures (or, potentially, beyond either of those categories, as we will discuss below).

To explicate this sequence: shame stimulates hate and thus violent impulses toward others. These impulses in turn stimulate the feeling of guilt, which motivates people to inhibit their hate and violence toward others by redirecting those feelings and impulses toward themselves instead. So, no one feels guilt without first having felt ashamed. For shame is what causes the hate and the violent impulses that guilt redirects toward the self.

To underscore this point, which we will see dramatized in Shakespeare's plays, violent impulses are not the result of an instinct, if by "instinct" we mean what Freud and Konrad Lorenz meant:¹ a universal, inborn impulse or drive to kill others or oneself that is "natural," meaning it occurs spontaneously and universally – and will only grow in strength until it is satisfied by being acted out in the form of violence, as hunger and thirst do until they are satisfied by food and liquids. Likewise, the instinct to reproduce is inborn and occurs spontaneously in all cultural and demographic groups (by definition since any group in which it did not occur would become extinct within one generation).

The desire to socialize, to seek out relationships with other people and form attachments to them, meaning love, is universal among all healthy human beings, as a result of evolution, for it supports life and survival; and when it is absent or deficient, as among those who suffer from autism or personality disorders, the absence itself may endanger life and survival. Thus Aristotle was right when he observed that only gods and beasts can live independently, in isolation from others of their kind, whereas humans are inherently and universally social animals (*zoon politikon*) or political animals (the two adjectives are synonymous). Thus our need and desire for relationships – familial love, friendships, partnerships – appear to be instinctual.

Neither homicide nor suicide, neither war nor capital punishment nor terrorism, occur universally, among all humans. While the potential for violence may be universal – if there were not such a potential, there could never be actual violence – the frequency of actual violence varies enormously from one culture or nation to another at any given time, from one historical epoch to another even within the same national or ethnic group, from one individual to another, and even at different times within the same individual. Eating, drinking, and the desire for sexual as well as non-sexual loving relationships with other humans may be biologically determined and universally experienced instinctual drives (except among rare and damaged individuals), but violence is not. Our potential for violence becomes actualized only when a violent response is provoked by the kind of psycho-social stimulus that stimulates violence.

Even here, Shakespeare shows what we have just told. In one play after another, he dramatizes how it is possible to prevent potential or threatened violence, or to put an end to ongoing violence or at least limit it to nonphysical forms – as in *Measure for Measure*, *The Winter's Tale*,

¹ Freud (1961); Lorenz (1974).

The Tempest, and even *The Merchant of Venice*. As I (James Gilligan) found, it was possible to reduce lethal violence from war-zone levels to zero in the prisons of Massachusetts, lethal and nonlethal violence to zero in the jails of San Francisco, and rates of violent reoffending to zero or near-zero after release from incarceration in both institutional settings² – which it would not be possible to do any more than we could prevent the wish to eat, drink, and reproduce, if violence were truly instinctual. Shakespeare’s dramatic portrayal of the ability of humane behavior to prevent violence is thus in line with current clinical/empirical evidence.

People who have had a relatively healthy, life-supporting upbringing will develop the capacity to experience and be sensitive to all of these feelings – shame and guilt as well as love. In fact, they are likely to reexperience these feelings each time they enter a new stage of development or maturation and face the challenges of that stage. When they solve the problems they confront, they demonstrate the emotional capacity that transcends both shame and guilt and removes the causes of both feelings and hence the causes of violence toward self and others: namely, the capacity to love both themselves and others (and to help others do the same). As we have mentioned, Shakespeare shows us this in Prospero in *The Tempest*, in Polixenes in *The Winter’s Tale*, and in Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*, among other plays.

Working in the prisons of Massachusetts made it possible to witness this sequence of emotional progression in the most violent of men. These were men who had committed extreme violence, up to and including multiple or serial murders, in response to feeling “disrespected” or “dissed” (shamed) by their victims or others (sometimes a lifetime of others, for whom their victims were merely the scapegoats). Their violence was a way of undoing their shame by transferring it from themselves to their victims, by showing that they were more powerful than their victims and could thus shame them instead. (The Latin roots of two of the words that refer to violence – assault and injury – both mean insult, among other meanings: so to assault or injure someone is to insult them – i.e., shame them. Thus one does not need to “add insult to injury”: it is already right there, in the meaning of the word itself.)

After these incarcerated violent men were exposed, typically for the first time in their lives, to people who were interested enough in them to want to hear the story of their lives and would listen to those stories and attempt to understand them respectfully rather than judgmentally, the men became

² Gilligan and Lee (2004); Gilligan and Lee (2005); Lee and Gilligan (2005).

able to attain an understanding and a catharsis of the shame that had motivated their murderous behavior. By a combination of individual or group psychotherapy, and gaining access to nonviolent sources of pride and self-esteem, notably, education (up to and including college degrees), such men became able to develop a conscience and the capacity to feel guilty. In time, this enabled them to empathize with others enough to recognize how much suffering they had caused them. At that point, however, many would feel so guilty they would feel they deserved to die; some would even make suicide attempts, sometimes fatal, to punish themselves for their guilt. Thus our work with them would then have to focus on learning how to help them overcome their suicidality.

In the course of this work, it became clear that there was one thing and one thing only that enabled these men to outgrow their suicidal impulses and find their lives, even in prison, worth living. This happened when a man realized that he could be helpful and useful to other people – mostly, to a fellow prisoner or prisoners. One man taught the illiterate how to read and write; one helped others to write letters home; another helped others to navigate the prison's law library and write their legal briefs or petitions; one helped to improve the quality of the food service in the kitchen. That is how they became able to love both themselves and others.

One man who worked as a pimp in Boston's red-light district had killed several people in the community, so he was incarcerated in the Charles Street Jail in Boston to await his trial for murder. However, he killed another inmate in the jail, so he was transferred to the state's maximum security prison to await trial, even before being tried in court, since he was considered too dangerous to await trial in the jail. But he then killed yet another person in that prison, so he was transferred to the prison psychiatric hospital, whose purpose was treatment, not punishment. At first, he seemed untreatable: he was mute and so paranoid that we felt he would consider any attempt to approach him as violating the space he felt he needed from others. Our main goal was simply to keep everyone safe, by enabling him to feel safe. He could sleep in a bedroom behind a locked door, and during the day we kept everyone – staff and patients – from getting too close to him.

However, after a few months, during which his needs were treated with respect rather than condemnation or punishment, he took a young man with profound intellectual disabilities under his protection, accompanying him to and from the dining hall, so that this vulnerable youth would not be assaulted or harmed, physically or psychologically, by any of the other patients. Following this means of entering the human community (not reentering it, but joining it for the first time), he became ready to start

talking about the events in his life, beginning with terrifying traumatic experiences throughout his childhood that had led him to where he was at this point. He then volunteered to do work in the hospital that benefited that whole community – so he not only became totally nonviolent himself (he has never even attempted to harm anyone again); he also succeeded in reducing the level of violence committed by others in the hospital.

Among people who are violent, the capacity to love others is a prerequisite for feeling guilty about the wish to harm them. That is, the capacity for ambivalence is a prerequisite for having guilt feelings, for one would not wish to hurt or destroy others unless one hated them, but would not feel guilty about having that wish unless one also loved them, as Shakespeare shows us in the story of Othello.

In sum, the feeling of shame (lack of self-love) is always accompanied by the feeling of innocence (the lack of self-hate). And the feeling of guilt (self-hate) is always accompanied by the feeling of pride (self-love). This is so because pride is caused by the feeling of being powerful, not weak, and guilt is caused by the fear that one is powerful enough to injure or kill others. Therefore, as we noted in the previous chapter, feelings of pride are a prerequisite for feelings of guilt, and the feeling of guilt is always accompanied by the feeling of pride. In the sin- and guilt-motivated moral value system of Christianity, pride is the deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins, and the feeling of humility (self-humiliation) is considered the highest virtue.

Shame Ethics versus Guilt Ethics

Shame and guilt (and pride and innocence) are the moral emotions in that they are the *affective* components of what we can call, paraphrasing William James, “the varieties of moral experience.” On the other hand, moral value systems – the value judgments, definitions, and preferences as to what constitutes good and evil, or justice and injustice, and the moral commandments as to what one should do or not do – are the *cognitive* content of moral experience. Just as shame and guilt are equal but opposite and antagonistic emotive and motive forces, they motivate two equal and opposite moral value systems, which we call shame ethics versus guilt ethics.

Shame ethics is a moral value system in which the worst evil is shame and humiliation, or disgrace and dishonor; and the highest good – the *summum bonum* – is the opposite, namely, pride and honor. Guilt ethics, by contrast, is a moral value system in which pride, far from being the

highest good, is the worst evil: it is the deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins, in the guilt ethic of Christianity. And humility, or self-humiliation, far from being the worst evil, is the highest good. In the guilt ethic of Christianity, as St. Augustine summarized it, “Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues; hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue.” And “It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.”³ Seen in this light, these two ethical value systems are the same, except that what is given a positive value in the one is given a negative value in the other.

This distinction and the claim that there are two moral value systems have been anticipated by many observers of moral psychology. St. Augustine, for example, contrasted the ethos of the Roman Empire with that of Christianity: “The glory with the desire of which the Romans burned is the judgment of men thinking well of men. [But] virtue is better, which is content with no human judgment save that of one’s own conscience. Whence the apostle says, ‘For this is our glory, the testimony of our conscience.’”⁴

Milton contrasted the ethic of God with that of Lucifer (the latter of which he summarizes as “Evil, be thou my good”). Nietzsche contrasted what he called “master morality” (the ethic of the *Iliad*, the Roman empire, feudal Japan, slave-owners, and of himself, whom he identifies as the Anti-Christ) with “slave morality” (the ethic of Jesus, who said we should be servants to each other, resist not evil, etc.).

Thorstein Veblen contrasted the ethics of capitalism (what we are calling shame ethics) with those of Christianity (guilt ethics).⁵ In *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Piaget’s study of the evolution from one morality to another during the course of child development, he called them heteronomous-gerontocratic morality (early childhood, where moral values and commandments are seen to emanate from other people who have more power, including the power to punish, i.e., the parents, so that “might” is what is “right”) and autonomous-democratic morality (from middle childhood on, in which morality increasingly emanates from one’s conscience or from the social contract of the group, in this case, agreement among children as to the rules of the game, how they are made, and how they can be changed – a democratic rather than authoritarian

³ *Humilitas homines sanctis angelis similes facit, et superbia ex angelis demones facit*. As quoted in *Manipulus Florum* (c. 1306), ed. Thomas Hibernicus, *Superbia i cum uariis*. See the Electronic Manipulus florum: www.manipulusflorum.com.

⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book V, Chapter 12.

⁵ Veblen (1910), p. 185: “there is . . . much that makes for an effectual discrepancy between the two.”

system).⁶ Adorno et al. and subsequent psychologists and psychoanalysts have contrasted authoritarian (“potentially fascist”) with egalitarian (social-democratic) beliefs and behaviors, noting that authoritarian personalities are hypersensitive to shame and hyposensitive to guilt, whereas the opposite is true of those who are egalitarian and democratic.⁷ The psychoanalyst Heinz Hartmann contrasted narcissistic (shame-driven) with compulsive-imperativistic (guilt-sensitive) ethics.⁸ And the psychologist Sylvan Tomkins found right-wing (hierarchical) political ideologies and value systems to be motivated by the wish to undo or avoid feelings of shame, whereas left-wing (egalitarian) political values and ideologies focused more on the wish to avoid the guilt of subjecting others to a level of social status, economic affluence, and political power that was inferior to what they themselves enjoyed. Thus left-wing politics appeared to be motivated more by placing the highest value on humility, equality, and democracy, rather than on superiority and hierarchy, such as patriarchy (male supremacy) or racial prejudice (white supremacy).⁹

Yet among those who have noticed or made this distinction between two contrasting forms of morality, law and politics, we prioritize Shakespeare, because he alone brought these value distinctions to life with great specificity and detail and in an immense variety of different contexts and circumstances, in the words and actions of the characters he depicted in his plays. For example, for Hamlet, “Thou shalt not kill,” as Judeo-Christian guilt ethics commands, vies with “Thou shalt kill” as the shame ethic that the ghost, his father, invoked, and commanded Hamlet to obey. As a result, Hamlet is paralyzed. He is caught between two diametrically opposite moral value systems, one of which commands the avoidance of guilt and sin, which it identifies with killing, and the other of which commands murder, as the only means by which to restore the father’s honor and undo his shame. Both value systems had coexisted for centuries as central components of the moral traditions of the culture in which Hamlet lived (and as he repeatedly expressed, he was profoundly sensitive to both emotions, shame and guilt). Hence, he was paralyzed.

To put it simply, what we call immoral are whatever behaviors or motivations we feel are shameful or guilt-inducing. And as Shakespeare dramatizes, there are two moral value systems: one caused by the emotions

⁶ Piaget (1965).

⁷ Adorno et al. (1950); Altemeyer (1981); Altemeyer (1996). In fact, the highest scorers in Adorno et al.’s scale for measuring the degree of potential fascism, or right-wing extremism, were violent criminals in San Quentin Prison.

⁸ Hartmann (1960). ⁹ Tomkins (1995).

of shame versus pride and honor, the other by its opposite, the feelings of guilt versus innocence (self-righteousness).

It was among incarcerated men that these dynamics became not only observable but surprising. And because these dynamics are relevant to our discussion of Shakespeare, we will take a moment to follow the path that led us to these insights. When I (James Gilligan) first began working as a psychiatrist with violent prisoners, I assumed the validity of what I had been taught up to that point, and what many people believe: namely, that people who commit the kinds of actions that cause them to land in prison are simply “amoral.” That is, that they had never developed a moral value system, which is why they committed their heinous crimes. To my astonishment, the opposite turned out to be true. I had never encountered a group of people who were more dedicated to morality: more than I or any of my friends or colleagues were. They were willing to go to their deaths – and often did – in order to stand up for their moral principles. They were obsessed with issues of fairness and unfairness, justice and injustice, meaning how they had been treated unfairly and unjustly since childhood by parents and then by others in the community, by prison guards or their fellow prison inmates, or by members of other racial, religious, or ethnic groups.

These experiences led me to the conclusion that perceiving oneself as a victim of injustice causes feelings of shame (and therefore also innocence), which motivates violence against others; whereas perceiving oneself as a perpetrator of injustice (the opposite of how almost all violent prisoners judged themselves) causes feelings of guilt (of which an inextricable component is the feeling of pride), which motivates a need for self-punishment, or violence against the self. To carry the point further, the men who committed violent crimes were in fact disproportionately the victims of what a guilt ethic would call injustice; that is, the most violent among them were often the victims of life-threatening violence or even attempted murder by one or both parents, or were the survivors of a parent or sibling or other close relative who had been murdered, often in front of their eyes. Or they were the victims of other forms of child abuse: sexual abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, or the deadliest of all: neglect and abandonment. And they were also disproportionately the victims of another form of what a guilt ethic would call injustice, such as racial prejudice and discrimination; poverty; unequal access to education, employment, health care, and political power; invidious treatment by the law enforcement and criminal justice system; and so on. Their adherence to a shame ethic was the inevitable and in its own way “rational” and

“defensible” response to being treated in a way that could not without hypocrisy be defended by those who claimed to believe in a guilt ethic – although their behavior led to suffering and often death, for their victims and for themselves as well.

Among the most radically illuminating dramatizations in Shakespeare’s plays, and perhaps the most frequently overlooked, is that morality does not prevent violence. What Shakespeare shows us and what we are setting out to tell in this book is quite the contrary: morality stimulates violence. And by doing so, it causes deaths. The paradox here is that what we call morality (as defined by moral value systems, value judgments, and commandments) has been handed down to us a means of preventing violence; whereas in fact morality stimulates violence – toward others as shame ethics does, or toward oneself, as guilt ethics commands.

What, then, can actually prevent violence? Again, Shakespeare shows us the answer: love. Love toward self and others. For where love exists, morality, meaning moral value judgments and commandments, becomes irrelevant, redundant, and unnecessary. As Aristotle put it, “if men are friends [*philon*] there is no need for justice [*dikaiousunes*] between them; whereas merely to be just is not enough” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.i.4). Jesus said much the same when he said, “When you have done everything that was *commanded* you [by the moral law], you ought to say ‘We are useless slaves, we have done [only] what we were *obliged* to do’” (Luke 17:10). To paraphrase, love is much more generous than morality and hence love transcends morality, making it not only unnecessary but stingy, leading Hume to speak of justice as the “cautious, jealous virtue.”¹⁰

Kant also saw how love makes moral value judgments and commandments unnecessary and redundant: as he put it, if “we are conscious of liking to do” what the moral law commands us to do, “a command would be quite needless.”¹¹ And as he also saw, “Affection towards men is possible no doubt, but cannot be commanded, for it is not in the power of any man to love anyone at command.” And while “Duty and obligation are the only names that we must give to our relation to the moral law,” it is also true that “all duty is necessitation or constraint. But what is done from constraint is not done from love.” He adds, “It is a very beautiful thing to do good to men from love to them and from sympathetic good will . . . ; but this is not . . . the true moral maxim of our conduct.” In short, we need morality because, and only because, being humans and not angels or

¹⁰ Hume (1951), III.ii.2, p. 495; Hume (1975), III.i.145, p. 184.

¹¹ Kant (1952), Part I, Book I, Chapter III, p. 326.

saints, our capacity for love is limited and we often wish to do things that would be expressions of either hate or indifference rather than of love – toward others, or toward ourselves.

There are two problems with morality, however. The first is that morality, which came into existence to compensate for the limitation of our capacity for love, actually inhibits that capacity. This insight, though not insisted on and not apparently even consciously recognized, is nevertheless ineluctably implied by several of the classical commentators on the relationship between love and morality (and specifically, moral worth or desert). For example, Kant notes in his discussion of Christ's commandment to love that "we must make the sad remark that our species, alas! is not such as to be found particularly *worthy* of love when we know it more closely."¹² Freud, likewise, objected to Christ's commandment "for a universal love of mankind" on two moral grounds: first, "a love that does not discriminate . . . [does] an *injustice* to its object; and secondly, not all men are *worthy* of love."¹³ But it was perhaps Shakespeare who summed up the antagonism between moral value judgments and love (both of neighbor and of self) most powerfully when he had Hamlet exclaim: "Use all men after their *deserts* and who would 'scape *whipping*?"¹⁴ Here he is saying in effect that moral value judgments (having to do with what one deserves, according to moral criteria) lead to the withdrawal of love and the infliction of violent punishment (whipping). So moral value systems, which we humans rely on to compensate for the limitations in our capacity to love, actually inhibit that capacity.

In short, the stricter the moral standards by which people judge themselves and others, the more strongly they will be inhibited from loving those same people. Specifically, shame ethics inhibits the capacity for love of others (altruism) in order to reserve love for the self; but the higher the standards and level of aspiration for achievement and power which a given person has incorporated into their shame ethic, the more impossible it will be for the person to satisfy those standards and feel self-love (pride). Correspondingly, the stricter a person's guilt ethic is, the more strongly it will prohibit what it calls "selfishness" and inhibit the capacity for self-love (pride). But by the same token, as Kant, Freud, and Shakespeare revealed in the remarks just quoted, other people will also fail to live up to standards high enough to make them morally "worthy" of love either.

¹² Ibid., p. 370 (emphasis added).

¹³ Freud (1961), p. 102 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

The second problem with morality is that while it ostensibly serves the purpose of promoting beneficent behavior and thus protecting and enhancing people's lives, welfare, and happiness, it actually motivates the destruction of people's lives, welfare, and happiness. Shame ethics motivates the destruction of other people (and often, as noted above, of oneself as well); and guilt ethics motivates the destruction of one's own life (and sometimes, as noted above, of others' as well). Or, to be more exact, the ultimate goal and deepest wish that guilt motivates is not the welfare of others but the elimination of the feeling of guilt; and that is achieved most directly by self-punishment and self-sacrifice, which may indirectly but ineluctably entail harm to others as well – especially, for example, those who are dependent on oneself, and who can therefore only be harmed by the self-sacrifice of the person on whom they are dependent.

Shame and Guilt Cultures

The anthropological concept of shame cultures and guilt cultures and the contrast between them dates back at least to Ruth Benedict's 1946 classic: *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Culture*. As Benedict observes:

A society that inculcates absolute standards of morality and relies on men's developing a conscience is a guilt culture by definition, but a man in such a society may, as in the United States, suffer in addition from shame when he accuses himself of gaucheries which are in no way sins. He may be exceedingly chagrined about not dressing appropriately for the occasion or about a slip of the tongue. . . .

True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism. A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasizing to himself that he has been ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not.¹⁵

Benedict had earlier developed an anthropological theory of shame cultures in her summary and paraphrase of observations that her mentor Franz Boas had made during his fieldwork with the Kwakiutl, an Amerindian people on Vancouver Island. The Kwakiutl competed for pride and prestige by means of what they called a "potlatch," which corresponded closely to what Thorstein Veblen described in an

¹⁵ Benedict (1946), pp. 222–3.

American context as the conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste by which the “robber barons” of the late nineteenth century competed for status and prestige (like the robber barons of today).¹⁶ In a manner roughly reminiscent of what Shakespeare dramatizes in *Timon of Athens*, the Kwakiutl used competitive conspicuous displays of wealth and power to demonstrate and validate their own superiority over their less affluent competitors.

The anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo developed the theory of shame cultures further through her study of New Guinea tribes, in which she argued that “of all themes in the literature on culture and personality, the opposition between guilt and shame has probably proven most resilient.”¹⁷ With respect to violence, pure and extreme shame cultures place a positive value on aggressiveness toward others (war, murder, torture, theft, enslavement, and social and economic inequalities) and do not inculcate or even recognize either the feeling or the concept of guilt. The Kwakiutl, for example, as Boas¹⁸ and Benedict¹⁹ described, engaged in headhunting, cannibalism, burning slaves alive, and indiscriminating, merciless war and murder against even totally innocent, unsuspecting, hospitable, sleeping friends, neighbors, relatives, or hosts – adults and children. Furthermore, it seems clear that the motive for this aggression was the desire to minimize or wipe out feelings of shame, humiliation, and “loss of face,” and to maximize feelings of pride and the attainment of social prestige. Aggressive behavior was a recognized and honored way of doing this. As Ruth Benedict writes,²⁰ “all accidents were occasions upon which one was shamed . . . Death was the paramount affront they recognized. . . . They took recognized means . . . to wipe out the shame” – such as killing a neighboring chief in order to wipe out the shame of having suffered a death in one’s own family. While this illustrates the principle that it is less painful to feel angry than it is to feel shamed, it also shows that it is less painful to feel angry than to feel sad.

An approach to quantifying the concept and description of shame cultures has been made by Slater and Slater (1965), who surveyed the cross-cultural literature as summarized in the Human Relations Area Files,²¹ and extracted five characteristics of “narcissism” (a synonym for shame) in cultures, and a summation of the five, which they called a “composite narcissism index.” They found that cultures that had characteristics definitive of shame cultures also exhibited extremes of both

¹⁶ Veblen (1953). ¹⁷ Rosaldo (1983), p. 135. ¹⁸ Boas (1966). ¹⁹ Benedict (1958).
²⁰ Ibid. ²¹ Textor (1972).

violence and social inequality with a frequency that was highly statistically significant (i.e., would occur by chance less than once in a hundred times). The shame-related categories included “Extreme sensitivity to insult,” “Boastfulness,” “Invidious display of wealth,” and a “Composite narcissism index.” In every culture ranked high in these characteristics, “warfare is prevalent.” And all of them also ranked high in other varieties of violent behavior, such as “killing, torturing or mutilation of the enemy,” “extreme bellicosity (high incidence of wars, raids, homicidal vendettas, violent aggression toward surrounding tribes, and other evidence of belligerence and warlikeness),” “strong or moderate emphasis on military glory,” “incidence of personal [violent] crime,” “alcoholic aggression,” and early socialization practices that permitted, disinhibited, or actively encouraged aggressive behavior.

Shame cultures, as defined by the criteria noted above, also have hierarchical, authoritarian, ethnocentric social structures and values that divide people into superior versus inferior grades of socioeconomic status, with wide variations of social class and caste, prestige, wealth, and power. These distinctions separate the population into aristocrats, commoners, and slaves. The hierarchies in terms of which shame cultures divide their populations into superior and inferior in modern societies include those of socioeconomic class, caste, ethnicity, religion, gender, and age. In the age of feudalism, which was just ending during Shakespeare’s lifetime, serfs were the equivalent of slaves; and two and a half centuries after Shakespeare’s time, chattel slaves were replaced by what Marx called “wage slaves.”

To the extent that any given society is a shame culture, its political psychology requires hierarchy and a lowest class, what has been called a *lumpenproletariat* or “underclass,” and relies on what I (David Richards), have called “moral slavery,” a structural stigmatizing that rationalizes shaming and scapegoating of those assigned to the inferior status. Shame cultures are found in the cross-cultural surveys just cited to be significantly more likely to stratify their population into upper versus lower socioeconomic classes and castes, masters versus slaves, aristocrats versus commoners, invidious displays of wealth, and the possession and inheritance of private property. Patriarchy, because it is founded on a gender binary and gender hierarchy, similarly bears the markings of a shame culture. Thus, the perceived shaming of manhood (the casting of any doubt on a man’s masculinity, his sexual adequacy as a man, even in areas of behavior that are not literally “sexual”) does not merely permit or justify his resorting to violence, it requires it – as the only means, ultimately, for him to prove that he is a man, and a sexually adequate one at that.

Extreme guilt cultures²² are classless, democratic, and communistic, with an equal sharing of prestige, power, and wealth. Competition, such as it is, is more likely to be for the highest degree of humility than for prestige and honor. As for violence, one such culture, the Hutterites, an Anabaptist sect that practices a way of life modeled on strict adherence to the New Testament, experienced not a single homicide, assault, or rape during their first seventy-five years of existence in the United States (from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries), nor did they have any need for a police force; and many Hutterites spent time in federal prisons (some were even tortured and murdered there by the US federal government, during World War I), because, as strict pacifists, they refused to kill people for the US military.²³ Their only lethal violence during that entire period of more than eight decades was against themselves: two or possibly three suicides. Extreme guilt cultures, such as this one, institutionalize confession of sins as a means of relieving guilt (and, of course, that increases shame – which is one of the reasons that it decreases guilt), whereas in shame cultures, exposure of transgressions of social mores is avoided and concealment of them is sought. Hence the prevalence of lying, deception, and fraud as means of avoiding shame, in people and cultures that are especially sensitive to feelings of shame.

In sum, shame and guilt ethics are the ethos, the moral value system, of shame and guilt cultures, respectively.

The stunning relevance of Shakespeare to our analysis of shame and guilt follows from the observation that tragedy is the literary form in which guilt cultures and guilt ethics critique the shame cultures and guilt ethics that preceded them. Not only that, they do so by showing the enormity of the violence, death, destruction, and suffering that shame cultures cause, both to individuals and to societies. Seen in this light, the invention of tragedy is a sign or signal of the transition from a shame to a guilt culture. This occurred first in fifth-century Athens with the great Greek tragedies and then again in Elizabethan England, with the reinvention of tragedy as a literary form. As Zevedei Barbu²⁴ put it, “Cannot the rise of tragedy itself, with its centred motive of guilt and expiation, be taken as symptomatic . . .? One wonders indeed whether

²² An example would be the Hutterites, a strictly pacifistic Anabaptist community in the northern United States and southern Canada which models its way of life on that of the earliest Christian communities, including the communal sharing of wealth, or “primitive Christian communism,” as described in *The Acts of the Apostles*. See Eaton and Weil (1955); Kaplan and Plaut (1956); Hostetler and Huntington (1967).

²³ Hostetler and Huntington (1967). ²⁴ Barbu (1960), p. 106.

the birth of tragedy in any civilization is not a symptom of guilt-culture, or of the beginning of guilt-culture.”

Shame and Guilt in History

In *The Greeks and the Irrational*, the classics scholar Eric Dodds, drawing on Ruth Benedict's definitions, documented the transition in Greek history from an earlier shame culture (the society depicted in *The Iliad*) to a later guilt culture (classical Athens at the time of the tragedians and the philosophers).²⁵ Speaking of “the uninhibited boasting in which Homeric man indulges,” Dodds says that

Homeric man's highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of *time*, public esteem [honor]... And the strongest moral force which Homeric man knows is not the fear of god, but respect for public opinion, *aidos* [shame or sense of shame and honor, meaning sensitivity to shame and dishonor]. In such a society, anything which exposes a man to the contempt or ridicule of his fellows, which causes him to “lose face,” is felt as unbearable.

By the time the Greeks became a guilt culture, however, they worried not about experiencing too little pride and prestige, but too much – overweening pride or arrogance, up to and including violence – for which they used the term *hubris*. Far from being the highest good, pride by this time was called the “prime evil” (*proton kakon*), as Theognis called it; the *hamartia*, or tragic flaw, for which, in Aristotle's analysis, Sophocles' Oedipus punished himself. It is significant that in the earlier shame culture's version of the Oedipus myth, as alluded to in the *Iliad*, Oedipus, far from feeling guilty and self-punitive, continued to reign in Thebes and was eventually buried with royal honors.²⁶

Probably the individual who symbolized this transition to a guilt culture most vividly was Socrates, who declared that it was better to be a victim of injustice than a perpetrator of it, and who finally committed suicide,

²⁵ Dodds (1959), pp. 17–18.

²⁶ Dodds (1951), pp. 36, 55. “We get a further measure of the gap [between the shame-centered values of the Homeric shame culture and the later guilt culture of classical Athens] if we compare Homer's version of the Oedipus saga with that familiar to us from Sophocles [which was of course the version on which Freud built his explanation of the source of guilt feelings]. In the latter, Oedipus becomes a polluted outcast, crushed under the burden of a guilt ‘which neither the earth nor the holy rain nor the sunlight can accept.’ But in the story Homer knew he continues to reign in Thebes after his guilt is discovered, and is eventually killed in battle and buried with royal honors” (p. 36).

choosing to be a victim of the injustice of the Athenians, even when he could easily have escaped from it.

For the most extreme development of guilt in the ethos of a culture, however, we must turn to Judeo-Christian culture. Many scholars have made this observation. Freud, for example, commented that “the people of Israel . . . out of their sense of guilt . . . created the over-strict commandments of their priestly religion.”²⁷ And Nietzsche saw that “the arrival of the Christian God . . . has brought with it the phenomenon of the uttermost sense of guilt.”²⁸ And we have already noticed that the earliest extant description of the difference between a shame and a guilt culture was written by one of the early Christian thinkers, St. Augustine. The greater intensity of guilt in Christian as compared with Greek culture is indicated by the growth in guilt-affective tone of the word *hamartia*, from “tragic flaw” (the usual translation of Aristotle’s meaning) to “sin,” the New Testament meaning of the word. And of course St. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin (which Hamlet paraphrased in saying, “use every man after his deserts and who would ’scape whipping?”) made it clear that you could not be a Christian without accepting that we are all guilty, or sinful. Or as Jesus put it, no man is good, only God is good (Matt. 10:17).

Like Socrates, Christ became a personal symbol for the values of a guilt culture, becoming a victim rather than a perpetrator of violence (and severely chastising his followers when they were ready to defend him). This does not necessarily indicate any great difference between early Christianity and the religious and moral values of major portions of the Jewish community at that same time, for Jesus was, after all, a rabbi, and most verses of the “Sermon on the Mount” have rabbinical precedent.²⁹ In other words, Christianity began as a subculture within the larger religious culture of the Judaism of his time.

It is worth noting, however, that the Judeo-Christian tradition, like the Greek one, began as a shame culture and only later developed into an extreme guilt culture. The earliest moral emotion mentioned in the Bible, for example, immediately after Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is the “shame” they felt over being naked. Their children then demonstrate how shame stimulates violence: Cain kills his brother Abel because God “had respect unto Abel and his offering, but unto Cain and his offering God had not respect.” In other words, Cain kills Abel because he felt disrespected, or “dissed” – exactly the reason contemporary murderers give as to why they had to kill someone.

²⁷ Freud (1961), p. 127. ²⁸ Nietzsche (2004), p. 66. ²⁹ Buttrick (2002).

What is unique about Judaism, however, is how early and strongly the theme of guilt (called sin) emerged. Although in the earlier books of the Hebrew Bible, God commands the Jewish people to commit genocide against their enemies, stone to death adulterous women, and so on, and the Jewish leaders pray to God to help them succeed in putting their enemies to shame, by the time of the later books the moral exhortations of the Prophets warn against the sinfulness of pride, violence, injustice, and neglect of the poor, until the latter theme finally drowns out the former. The parallelism between Greek and Jewish culture – first a shame culture, then a guilt culture – together with the apparently much wider distribution of shame than of guilt cultures throughout the world, suggests the possibility that there is a general trend for cultures, like individuals, to be sensitive to shame before they are to guilt, but also that cultures can progress from being shame-dominated to being guilt-sensitive.

However, the history of Christianity also illustrates another possibility – the regression of a culture from a guilt into a shame culture. During its first three centuries of existence, Christianity existed under conditions that would appeal to guilt-ridden people – namely, persecution and martyrdom. Early Christianity fit Nietzsche's description of slave morality, since it identified with slaves and the qualities necessary to be slaves, such as meekness, passivity, and submissiveness in the face of domination and exploitation (advice it gave to those who literally were slaves, as well as to the free). But it also did the opposite: that is, far from enslaving anyone themselves, the early Christians were remarkably egalitarian, sharing their wealth equally among the whole community, in what has been called "primitive Christian communism": that is, from each according to their ability, to each according to their need (Acts 2:44–5).

However, with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine early in the fourth century, Christianity became the religion of the masters, not the slaves or the poor; and the motives for becoming a Christian reversed accordingly. Thus Christianity changed from being a relatively pure and extreme guilt culture to a mixed, but primarily shame-dominated culture, capable of inspiring extremes not only of masochism, as formerly, but also of sadism; of martyrdom and murder, saintliness and savagery, piety and power, and pacifism and genocide – Francis of Assisi and Torquemada. The Crusades in which people who called themselves Christians slaughtered Muslims and others were only among the most extreme of the atrocities committed in the name of the Prince of Peace. The earlier self-sacrificing guilt culture of Christianity survived, or was revived, in only a few atypical pockets of extreme religious fervor, such as some monastic

communities and, after the Reformation, in some Anabaptist religious guilt cultures such as the strictly pacifist Hutterites, Mennonites, and Amish, or in firmly pacifist denominations such as the Quakers.

What this illustrates, however, is that people who are experiencing guilt (a precondition for which is that they have already attained feelings of pride) are motivated to identify with the underdogs, such as the slaves, in order to reduce their pride and hence their guilt. However, those who have not yet overcome their feelings of shame (i.e., they still feel weak and inferior) are motivated to identify with the “overdog” – or as Nietzsche put it, the “overman” or “superman,” the *Übermensch*, the slave-owners or slave-masters, or as the Nazis put it, the “master race” – in order to increase their feelings of pride, power, and superiority.

The relevance of all this to Shakespeare is this: given that tragedy, historically, has been the literary form in which guilt cultures criticize shame cultures (just as epic poetry – the Homeric poems, the Aeneid, the Icelandic sagas, etc. – are the form in which shame cultures celebrate themselves), Shakespeare shows us why the guilt culture that was just coming into being during his lifetime became motivated to repudiate the shame culture that preceded it. He dramatizes the costs of shame ethics not only in his tragedies but also in his history plays. For example, in *1 Henry IV*, with the character of Falstaff, Shakespeare deconstructs the concept of “honor” in a hilarious comic monologue. Thus he turns the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of shame cultures, namely, ridicule, against a central concept in shame cultures’ own ethos:

honour pricks on. Yes, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? Can honour set to a let? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word “honour”? What is that “honour”? Air. A trim reckoning. Who hath it? He that died o’Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. ’Tis insensible than? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. There I’ll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism. (*1 Henry IV*, V.i.126–40)

And in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare again points out how absurd it is to go to war for the sake of honor, in which whole armies “go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name,” and risking the lives of thousands of soldiers “Even for an egg-shell,” and “to find quarrel in a straw when honor’s at the stake.” Honor thus leads “twenty thousand men . . . for a fantasy and a trick of fame” to “Go to their graves like beds,” and to “fight for a plot” of land “Which is not tomb

enough and continent / To hide the slain,” that is, not large enough to bury the quantity of men who will be killed (V.iv.18–65).

Hamlet’s tragedy, however, is that while he cannot rationally defend that ethic, he is also unable to escape it: he has one leg in the shame ethic of his father’s and Fortinbras’ shame culture, which commands both individual and mass murder for the sake of honor, and another in the not yet completely dead nor yet fully resurrected guilt culture with which to replace the shame culture and its ethos of “honor through violence.” Thus he was left with no credible moral value system with which to guide his behavior. As he puts it, “the time is out of joint: / O cursed spite, that I was born to set it right.”

Shame-Dominated versus Guilt-Sensitive Legal and Political Systems

In his plays, Shakespeare shows us the enormous violence, death, and destruction that was caused by the hierarchical political system of his day – monarchy – and the shame culture that engendered and validated that system. And while it is true that he at no point evoked the kind of political system called democracy – it was not even one of the political possibilities during his lifetime – it does seem to us that the power of his critique of monarchy could hardly have left his audience without the incentive to try to imagine a less shame-provoking and violent political system, in which political power and regime change would be decided not by violence but by nonviolent means, such as persuasion, argument, reason, evidence, and noncoerced choice – in other words, democracy. And indeed, in the first generation after Shakespeare, Great Britain began an evolution, which is still going on throughout many nations (though not without constant conflict and many defeats and regressions) toward a more and more democratic system. With the growth of a more secular, skeptical, scientific mentality beginning in the seventeenth century, the traditional source of legitimacy of the system of monarchy, namely, the “divine right of kings,” began to lose its credibility – for without a divinity, how can there be a “divine right”? This trend began with the populist, quasi-democratic, and still religiously rationalized revolution that resulted in the beheading of Charles I in 1649, and then by the eventual transformation of the British monarchy from an autocracy into the constitutional monarchy it is today in an otherwise democratic and secular political system. In France, the United States, and many other Western nations (and, more recently, some

Asian ones as well, such as Japan and South Korea), monarchy has been replaced by more or less democratic, egalitarian, and secular political and economic systems.

With the end of feudalism, the middle ages, hierarchical (post-Constantinian) Christendom, and “the age of faith,” the legal system similarly became less and less moralistic, punitive, and violent. This is illustrated by the trend in all modern democracies (with the sole exception of the United States) toward the partial or complete abolition of so-called retributive justice: inhumane conditions of confinement, from life-threatening extremes of temperature (physical torture) to years or even decades of uninterrupted solitary confinement (psychological torture), life sentences, and capital punishment, among many other means of inflicting pain or death. Shakespeare, however, did envision and dramatize what a government could look like when its criminal justice system was no longer bloodthirsty and sadistic. In several plays, he shows us rulers who replace “retributive justice” (the euphemism for punishment, revenge, and violence) with what today is called “restorative justice” – namely, the rehabilitation, education, and therapy of violent or potentially violent offenders; their reconciliation with those they had offended against; and the acceptance of their return to the communities they had injured. Examples are *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, and *The Winter’s Tale*.

In a highly successful violence-prevention experiment in the jails of San Francisco, a central component was the replacement of the traditional model of retributive justice with restorative justice. In this “Resolve to Stop the Violence Project” (RSVP), violent offenders not only learned why they had been engaging in the violence that had, as they themselves came to see, ruined their lives as well as ruining or ending the lives of their victims; they spontaneously began doing what they could to restore to the community what they had taken from it, namely, a sense of safety, security, and trust. They became advocates, even therapists, themselves, devoted to helping new admissions to the jail make the same progress that they had made toward lives devoted to nonviolence and to healing; and then expanded that mission to similar work with actual or potential violent offenders in the community, after they were released from the jail. This experiment in violence prevention found that even as little as four months in the program reduced violent reoffending following release from the jails by more than 80 percent, and that in addition to making the community safer (the most important point), it also saved taxpayers \$4 for every \$1 spent on the program (given how much violent crime costs the whole community in

purely financial terms).³⁰ Thus we might conclude, to say the least, that in dramatizing the need for replacing retributive with restorative justice, through such characters as the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare was on to something that it would be very valuable for us to learn and apply universally today.

³⁰ Gilligan and Lee (2005); Lee and Gilligan (2005); Schwartz (2009).