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SHAME IN THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF GERMANIC HEROIC POETRY

Abstract

Far from being uncomplicated celebrations of individual heroism, Germanic heroic poems are often tragic tales foregrounding the reckless pursuit of personal glory and the burden of shame as the sources of complex societal problems. This article explores how shame and honour are conceptualized and experienced in texts like *Beowulf* and *Hildebrandslied*. Concretely, it will analyse how these poems articulate ambivalences about heroic culture and its hypermasculine poetic paragons in light of the lived realities of their Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian martial elite audiences. Methodologically, this research builds on recent work on the sociology and psychology of honour and shame and its negative societal and individual effects. This article aims to clarify the socio-emotional dynamics of honour and shame on which the heroic ethos is based inside the texts and for their audiences.

Keywords: Germanic heroic poetry, *Beowulf*, the *Hildebrandslied*, the history of emotions, shame, honour cultures

Two enemy armies face each other, bristling with hate across an empty field. The battle has not started yet, and it never will because two men from their ranks step into the makeshift arena to face each other instead. One is a grizzled veteran, the other is a fiery young warrior who recently earned his laurels in battle. They are the champions of their respective kings and they are about to fight each other to the death. What nobody except Hildebrand, the older man, knows is that his opponent is his son, Hadubrand. Hildebrand is in a double bind: to refuse the duel thereby becoming a coward, less than a man, earning shame for himself, his king, and his band of brothers; or try to gain the honour that is the currency of his warrior way of life by fighting and possibly killing his only son, which is a form of suicide in a society where the only ways for a man to win some kind of immortality is being honoured in songs after death or ensuring a male lineage (Ward 1983, 9).

This is the double bind at the heart of the ninth-century Old High German heroic poem known as the *Hildebrandslied* (Braune and Ebbinghaus 1994). For many in the early medieval martial elites amongst which similar Germanic verse was produced and consumed, this conundrum would have been a living emotional reality, as it revolved around shame as the dark emotional core of the socio-emotional economy of honour they participated in and that is represented (in however stylized a form) in these texts. Like many other Germanic heroic poems, *Hildebrandslied* describes the lives and deeds of heroes, figures larger than life leading their existence according to a code of honour always ready to fight, win treasure and glory through deeds of socially-condoned violence.

Germanic heroic poetry (henceforth, referred to by the acronym "GHP") has often been taken for a window on early medieval society or at least on the behaviour and ideals of the elite male portion of it. Yet the relationship between Germanic heroic poetry and the social realities of, for instance, ninth-century Carolingian Francia, is much more complicated. Outside obviously eulogizing texts like the Old English *Battle of Brunanburh* singing the praises of king Æthelstan's 937 victory over a coalition of Olaf Guthfrithson, King of Dublin, Constantine II, King of Scotland, and Owain, King of Strathclyde, many heroic poems are fundamentally tragic texts, full of double binds like the one just pointed out. Even though their heroes, like Siegfried and Beowulf, appear at first sight as admirable figures inhabiting the perfect image of hegemonic masculinity of an honour-based society like those of their audiences (usually male war-making elite), often these texts offer subtle critiques not only of the heroes themselves, but also of the entire way of life they lead. Yet these insider critiques are often elided over in most scholarly and popular accounts of Germanic heroic verse due to the way we are still reading this corpus – namely, through a nineteenth-century Romantic nationalist and masculinist filter.

Past and current research on GHP is skewed towards philological and literary approaches to individual texts and usually lacks in cohesive theories to explain the work it fulfilled in early medieval society. The few attempts to understand it in the social and political contexts of its diverse audiences fail through an ahistorical comparatist view that elides the differences both between the diverse socio-cultural environments in which it flourished and between ancient Germanic culture as described by Tacitus's *Germania* (itself mostly a propagandistic fiction) and medieval societies nine centuries later describable as 'Germanic' in little else but language (Murdoch 1996; Murdoch 2004; Magennis 2010). Other such

studies, while illuminating, are implicitly based on the tenuous assumption that the world within *Beowulf* is coterminous with Anglo-Saxon society at large (Hill 2000; Baker 2013). Critiques of these views highlight the complex relationship between early medieval society and GHP and argue against taking the latter at face value as evidence for the former (Goffart 1995; Frank 1991a; Frank 1991b).

At the same time, there has been little attempt to explain the socio-emotional workings of heroic poetry – Barbara Rosenwein's seminal study fails to even mention it (Rosenwein 2006). The recent work on Anglo-Saxon emotions is valuable but mostly addresses individual cases limited to particular texts, few of which are heroic (McCormack *et al.* 2015). The present article aims to contribute a few methodological and theoretical footnotes towards a fuller and more nuanced account of the socio-emotional role of heroic verse in Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian societies through a theory of socially-interactive emotion drawn from recent research on the sociology and psychology of honour and shame, thus placing GHP in a wider methodological and intertextual context.

In terms of methodology, I build on the perspectives brought by John Niles and Scott Gwara. Niles has successfully used his 'anthropology of the past' to reveal the social life of Anglo-Saxon poetry by exploring the meaning of texts and social practices in terms of an "integrated theory of culture, whereby any one element, as in human language, takes on meaning in relation to other elements" (Niles 2007, 83). Gwara's reading of *Beowulf* proposes that rather than being mouthpieces for a purported 'transcendental heroic ideal' (Hill 2000, 112), secondary characters in the poem debate the hero's motivations and effectiveness, modelling a wide spectrum of reactions to the same issues in the audience outside the poem (Gwara 2008). In this understanding, the comments made by members of the male warrior community who would bear the brunt of the consequences of Beowulf's actions provide what he terms "the subaltern perspective", the main source of conflicting opinions on the hero and the honour culture in the poem.

Moreover, I will bring the rich sociological and psychological literature on honour cultures of the past two decades (referenced previously) to bear on the study of GHP, since both the fictional social world inside the poems and the societies in which the latter emerged were, by all definitions, honour-based societies (Nisbett and Cohen 1996). Members of honour cultures regard their reputation (positive social evaluation) as their most treasured possession, far more important than money or property. Thus,

they will go to great lengths to maintain or earn more honour because its loss leads to social rejection under the form of shaming. These studies of the dynamics of honour and shame in such cultures has much to offer to my exploration of these issues in GHP, since its audiences were most likely male members of war-making elites who "zealously cultivated and jealously defended their warlike reputations" (Baker 2013, 15). This is a culture ripe for violence and anxieties, since honour is always in need of being proven (usually by symbolic or physical deeds of violence that can escalate easily) because its main ingredient is the opinion of others.

Hence, this article aims to redress the two main scholarly models by which previous literature misrepresents the complex relationship between the society inside GHP (intratextual), the society outside it which produced and received it (medieval audiences), and the society which GHP purports to describe (quasi-mythical ancestral Germanic society in the heroic age): 1. that GHP is a mirror held up to reality, i.e., that the fictional society inside the poem and the historical society outside the poem which produced and received it are coterminous; 2. that GHP idealizes and holds up for praise a presumed "transcendental heroic ideal", in its instantiations in the *comitatus* ethic (i.e., serving one's lord even when it means killing your own son, as in the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*), suicidal loyalty (as in *The Battle of Maldon*).

As I have demonstrated more extensively elsewhere, Germanic heroic poetry did not simply serve as a mirror held up to life, nor was it upholding the heroic way of life as ideal, and it should therefore be used very carefully and only in conjunction with other types of discourse to reconstruct the social realities of their audiences (Taranu 2021, 199). In other words, this corpus of verse often acted more like a dream screen (Earl 1994, 129-36) or a socio-cultural sandbox through which elite textual and emotional honour-based communities worked through and negotiated cultural anxieties, political changes, moral dilemmas, socio-emotional upheavals, and individual fears and desires. More sophisticated texts like *Beowulf* or the *Waltharius* were ludic spaces in which burning socio-political and cultural issues could be toyed with, allowed to measure against each other, brought to their ultimate consequences in a 'parallel version of reality that helps make the world intelligible and navigable' (Niles 2007).

Adopting Derek Neal's argument about high medieval romance, such texts can be seen as functioning like a collective dream meant to "solve problems and deal with conflicts that are too difficult for conscious life" or, to use John Niles's terms, as "a form of play, a mental theater" that

"not only give voice to a given mentality or worldview, but also in which issues of worldview are precisely what are at stake" (Neal 2008, 10; Niles 1998, 146). This type of imaginative literature, then, is a precious resource for understanding social realities, and more specifically, for how emotions were performed by their audiences, not as mirror images of social reality, but as a repertoire of scripts for the performance of emotion (Scheer 2012) as well as a space for collective reflection on and negotiation of socio-cultural norms.

For instance, a close reading of many of these Germanic heroic poems suggests that the male protagonists display, "through their heroic acts, also some form of monstrous behaviour which severely undermines the whole notion of heroism" (Classen 2003, 296). And, as Ralph O'Connor shows, a wide range of corpora of heroic literature (Old Norse, Old Irish, Ancient Greek, alongside GHP) "did not always invite their audiences to identify with the dehumanized warrior in any simple manner. Sometimes forthright disapproval is implied" (O'Connor 2016: 181). While Beowulf is a killer of monsters, he, too, is described by the poet in terms that are identical to those attributed to Grendel and his mother (Taranu 2021, 203). They are both *angenga* or *anhaga* ("solitary", *Beowulf* 449a and 2368a), *gebolgen* ("swollen up with rage", *Beowulf* 723b and 1539b), *healðegnes* ("hall-thanes", *Beowulf* 142a and 719b), and *wrecca* ("wanderers in foreign lands"); both killed thirty men at once, so they share a co-extensive identity, being each other's alter ego (Gwara 2008, 17; Köberl 2002, 98; Cohen 1999). Furthermore, deducing from the comments of the poet or some of the characters' reactions to the protagonist, Beowulf may not have been perceived as an exemplary hero or a perfect leader, "nor did darkness lie exclusively outside of him", and as such, even for the most sympathetic audience, he might have appeared as "a man who [was] not fully likable or understandable" (Dragland 1977, 606; Rosen 1993).

Other texts, like the *Hildebrandslied* or the Persian, Irish, and Russian heroic poems depicting similar father-son duels (to be discussed below) bring into the limelight conflicts that are deeply embedded in the configuration of values at the heart of heroic masculinity and the honour-based habitus it is usually constructed upon. Thus, far from being uncomplicated celebrations of individual heroism (as they are usually interpreted), the more sophisticated Germanic heroic poems like *Beowulf* and the *Waltharius* actually foreground issues that are at the heart of the entire socio-emotional economy on which heroic masculinity is built, by having subaltern characters voice the constant dilemma: at what point

does the pursuit of individual honour become counterproductive for the community its success is based on? (Gwara 2008, 25).

Indeed, Scott Gwara has argued very convincingly for *Beowulf*'s ambivalence about its protagonist as a feature of the text itself rather than as a post-factum projection stemming from a modern indecision as to which cultural paradigm (such as the "heroic code" or Christian morality) the hero is judged against, when in fact, "this dual consciousness comprises the poet's subject". (Gwara 2008, 13). Rather than being unconditionally in awe of the hero, not all the inhabitants of *Beowulf*'s warrior society approve of his confidence, and some worry about the consequences of his success. The problematic aspects of Beowulf's actions or motivations that are explicitly (although sometimes ambiguously) touched on in the text are often elided in scholarly conversations because of the assumption that he is either presented as heroic (according to a putative "Germanic heroic code") or sinful. Gwara's reading proposes instead that characters in the poem debate Beowulf's motivations and effectiveness, allowing for (and anticipating) a wide spectrum of reactions to the same issues in the audience outside the poem (Gwara 2008, 13). We do not have these voices in the *Hildebrandslied*, but in the following I argue that the entire poem consists of one such dissenting voice in early medieval society, and indeed, that it is not the only text engaged in this emic deconstruction of honour-based heroic masculinity by pointing to the role of shame in this destructive habitus.

The purpose of this article, then, is to read a selection of heroic verse, mainly the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* and, less exhaustively, the Old English *Beowulf*, as insider critiques of the role of shame and correlated emotions in the social economy of honour described by these poems and familiar to the martial elites producing and consuming these texts. In this endeavour, I will bring to bear on these medieval texts a range of insights from recent research in sociology and psychology which have the benefit of casting these texts in a fresh light, through which to better understand the emotional lives of the early medieval textual and emotional communities gathering around such texts. I begin with a discussion of the previous ways in which these texts have been understood, with special reference to the role of shame and honour in the social world depicted in these poems (which should not be assumed to be coterminous with the social worlds of their various audiences, but which were not isolated from each other, either) – not just a literature review, but a dialogue with the rich past historiography on these medieval poems. Then, I go on to

propose a new set of critical lenses (mostly from the social sciences) through which passages of these poems will be interpreted.

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It is better to die than to live in (and even merely feel) shame. The sentiment is expressed time and again by heroic characters in Ancient Greek epic, Old English heroic poetry, Old Norse sagas, Middle English and French chivalric romances: from Njál choosing to go down with his burning house rather than live on unable to avenge his sons in the Old Icelandic *Njáls saga* to Roland refusing to retreat when overwhelmed by enemies so that no shaming song would be sung about him in *The Song of Roland*. Meanwhile, a one-eyed Irish king reportedly chose to tear out his only remaining eye rather than face the humiliation of being ridiculed in songs (Ward 1983, 5). Were these mere rhetorical flourishes? Or was shame such a powerfully painful emotion in the societies creating, consuming, and circulating these texts that such fictional avowals might have reflected lived experiences?

For there are historical accounts of similar behaviours, in which death is an acceptable price for honour or for washing away shame. In Jean Froissart's chronicle account, the blind Bohemian king Jean of Luxembourg rode into battle to his death at Crécy in 1346, possibly to redeem himself after he had fled the field during a previous battle (Taylor 2012). Meanwhile Byrhtnoth, the Anglo-Saxon leader of an inexperienced troop meeting a raiding Viking army, allowed the latter out of an excessive sense of honour to move to a favourable position enabling them to defeat and kill him (*Maldon* 1981).

Despite official exhortations to more soul-saving reading, heroic literature in various genres (sagas, Germanic heroic verse, chansons de geste or chivalric romance) was enormously popular among aristocratic audiences throughout the Middle Ages all over Europe, and provided one of the main cultural forms through which their members conceptualized and engaged with their social reality. In eighth-century Mercia, for instance, the later Saint Guthlac decided to become a warband leader when "he remembered the valiant deeds of heroes of old" (Colgrave 1956, 80), while in the fourteenth-century poem *Vows of the Heron*, knights are satirized for thinking themselves the peers of Oliver and Roland (Taylor 2012).

And beyond the gulf between imaginative literature and social reality, the characters in these texts spend most of their time and energy striving to avoid shame, or to restore honour once it has been diminished, while

their aristocratic audiences, too, organized their social existence around honour as one of their key values. For this literature not only entertained, but also socialized and enculturated the members of the elites into certain patterns of behaviour, not as a mere pedagogical manual of aristocratic morality, but as a repertoire of the possible actions, gestures, and linguistic expression delineating the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu 1990; Scheer 2012), and ultimately, as a space of cultural experimentation where these very patterns were called into question, played with, and negotiated (Taranu 2021). The point is not that medieval literature is a transparent mirror to social mores, but that fictional behaviors bear some relation to those of flesh-and-blood people. And the nature of this relation is still in need of being clarified and contextualized for each text and each genre of this corpus, in each cultural space at various points in time.

This is the point of departure of this article. For if all genres of medieval heroic literature have at their centre honour and associated emotions like shame or anger, then the way these were voiced and performed in these texts participated in the broader constellation of discourses making up the cultural systems of meaning which mediated the social reality of medieval elites. It is the structure and functionality of literary emotional performances related to honour and shame that I propose to chart and investigate, as a fruitful entry-point to a more fine-grained and holistic understanding of some aspects of the emotional life of medieval elites. Its main topic of research, to be clear, is literary emotionality, approached as a set of distinct but interrelated grammars of social action and linguistic expression – and only secondarily its relationship to social reality. By exploring the points where heroic verse provides critiques of the harmful societal effects of pursuing honour at all costs, I seek to provide a fuller picture of the way early medieval martial elites conceptualized the heroic ethos.

What did it feel like, as an individual living in elite communities where one's honour was always in need of being proven, to read or listen to such texts? How did such experiences of textual consumption impact the way its audiences conceptualized and performed emotion in their own lives? What can such imaginative texts tell us about how the norms of manifesting emotion changed over time and in transition between different cultural spaces in medieval Europe? It is questions such as these that the present article aims to answer, and in doing so, to reframe the way in which historical emotion, medieval literature, and the socio-affective economy of honour among medieval elites have been studied. Still, this

remains a desideratum – a single article can only aim to provide pathways to answer these questions by exploring socio-emotional performances and cultural and linguistic expressions of shame in a selected corpus of medieval heroic verse by using methodologies drawn from the history of emotions, the sociology of honour cultures, and the psychology of shame.

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The study of emotions in premodern societies has been flourishing for the past two decades, drawing on insights gained from the social sciences to literary, historical, and legal texts. Shame and its connection to honour has been a particular interest of philosophers, psychologists, historians, and the greater public. Throughout the imaginative literature of the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, we encounter a moral and emotional landscape rooted in shame and honour that appears strikingly alien from the institution- and dignity-based, modern liberal societies grounded in Enlightenment values familiar to most people in the Global North (the "Western World"). Shame is often maligned as a remnant of traditional societies. It serves as a marker for the moral otherness of the Middle Ages, a foil against which our enlightened modernity can shine more brightly.

Yet shame has never been far away. Indeed, modern affect theory, developed by Silvan Tomkins, posits that shame is at the centre of a set of nine genetically predetermined *affects* – the biological components of emotion that lie beneath the different socially- and culturally-bound scripts that make up *emotions* (Sedgwick and Frank 1995). And as sociologists often argue, shame (in its different manifestations such as body shaming, cyberbullying, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, disrespect, stigma, honour, revenge, violence) is in fact just as dominant in modern societies as it was in premodern ones, though in different ways (Scheff 2011). Furthermore, psychiatrists like James Gilligan propose that shame is the origin of most violence, especially in communities revolving around honour, such as prison inmates, gangs, or societies in the Middle East, Mediterranean, or Southern USA (Gilligan 1997; Novin *et al.* 2015). Shame is an unbearably painful affect for people acting according to honour-based socio-emotional scripts and leads to spiralling shame and deploying violence to erase that shame (evident, for instance, in the honour killings of women perceived as dishonoured by their family). From studying the dynamics of honour and shame in societies that are distant from us, there emerges the possibility that we will be able to better understand our modern troubled relationship with shame.

The historical study of emotions has been flourishing for the past two decades (Ronsenwein 2007; Champion&Lynch 2015; Jaeger&Kasten 2003). Yet this scholarly edifice is rising on a very fragmented set of methodological foundations and on problematic theoretical assumptions. Most of it consists of very localized studies of a particular emotion in a particular text or set of texts (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2015; Boquet&Nagy 2009) or of studies that are strictly linguistic, tracing the lexicon of a certain emotion in a particular medieval language with little interest in its socio-cultural underpinnings (Yeandle 2001; Ogura 2006; Tissari 2006). More ambitious attempts at broader surveys dispense with any need for a theoretical framework, producing insightful musings that tend to be descriptive rather than explanatory (Boquet-Nagy 2015; Miller 1993), or offer more of an intellectual history of theories of emotion (Rosenwein 1998). Historical-anthropological approaches, despite steering scholarly conversation away from naïve psychologism, are interested in emotion only insofar as it functioned within elaborate political rituals, upholding a well-oiled social machinery (Althoff 1997; Müller 1998; Smail&Fenster 2003). Most of these studies draw a sharp distinction between the study of premodern emotions in literature and in social reality (Rikhardsdottir 2017), despite the latter being always culturally-mediated through discourses based on structures of thought and feeling also shared by the former – literary emotion is overall understudied.

Much work has been done on more visible and less elusive emotions such as anger (Hyams 2003; Rosenwein 1998) or grief (Garrison 2015), especially insofar as they functioned in a system of revenge, feuding or, more generally, violence (Baker 2013; Throop&Hyams 2016). Shame has received far less attention (Boquet 2008), usually studied as a religious emotion (Jorgensen 2013; Burrus 2008), from a strictly functionalist perspective seeing it as the counterweight of honour in a zero-sum social game (Miller 1993), or within the problematic but surprisingly resistant paradigms of shame vs. guilt cultures (Gauvard 1991) or of a "civilizing process" moving Europe closer to modernity (Elias 1939; Jaeger 1985; Gvozdeva&Velten 2012).

The main problems with this scholarly landscape are both logistic and methodological. First, they tend to be isolated along lines that are both national/linguistic and disciplinary, so that no comparative work is done across the various related corpora separated by language (with valuable exceptions like Rikhardsdottir 2017) or textual genre. Second, the common preconception underlying most of this rich, though fragmented work is that

emotions are subjective manifestations of interiority, ineffable drives, and that therefore the textual traces with which we work can never capture the “real experience” of the people behind them. Yet this assumption is highly problematic, based on post-Romantic sensibilities presuming that “authentic” sentiment is incompatible with what are often seen as literary commonplaces and formulaic expressions (Garrison 2001).

A different approach provides a way out of this conundrum. Emotion has recently begun to be understood as fundamentally social and performative (Scheer 2012; Flannery 2020), arising out of the myriad daily interactions guided by culturally-constructed practical scenarios or scripts that we are socialized in (Longo 2020). Resisting norms of emotionality and behaving off-script are also part of this dynamics, but are unintelligible without recognizing the rules of the game structuring emotional expression and behaviour in general that we absorb unthinkingly through daily practice (Lutz&Abu-Lughod 1990; Bourdieu 1990), which leaves room for personal agency. In other words, emotions do not happen to us. Rather, we enact emotions, and it is the cultural scripts and the field of possibilities they delineate that give meaning to the mostly undifferentiated physiological impulses that we feel (Feldman 2017).

One of the main ways in which we are enculturated in these scripts beside social mimesis (Willerslev 2007) is through the media that we consume and share. Especially in the medieval context, the consumption of “literature” (a modern category that obscures the socio-cultural work that medieval literary genres perform) is an essentially social experience, being not so much read in isolation but heard, seen, shared with a textual and emotional community (Stock 1983; Rosenwein 2007), indeed, co-created by its performers and public (Hanning 1981). As such, it was part and parcel of the culturally-constructed “shared structures of meaning” (Garrison 2001) which mediate reality, playing an important part in the socialization and enculturation of its elite audiences. Literary performances and vocalizations of emotions in literature have to be recognized by their audiences as meaningful in order for the saga, romance, or heroic poem to engage them (Rikhardsdottir 2017). For these reasons, literature is a valuable (though still mostly untapped) source for the understanding of historical emotions.

Then, if emotions are not just interior, physiological events, but also emerge through discourse and social interaction (Lutz&Abu-Lughod 1990) and as practice (Scheer 2012) structured according to culturally-constructed scripts (Pancer 2008; Schank&Abelson 1977; Gibson 2008), they can be

identified in literary representations of emotive performance and practice that enabled audiences to relate emotionally to these texts (Rikhardsdottir 2017). Tracing the lexicons of shame in the languages of the corpus is only a first step in this endeavour, because, despite being discourse constructions, emotions are not limited to verbal expressions, including also social actions, gestures, cultural scenarios, patterns of correlation with other emotions and acts associated with the broad emotional spectre of shame.

A closer reading of texts like the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* in the light of the strictures that the ever-present spectre of shame places on the individuals that are part of honour-based communities, allows us to come to the conclusion that the negative consequences of this psycho-social dynamics were indeed clear to the medieval audiences of such texts. Building on recent work on the sociology and psychology of honour-based cultures, traditional gender scripts of masculinity, and the gender-role stress associated with them, I will trace the emotive scripts of "heroic" masculinity as rooted in shame and marked by the anxiety of never being man/honourable enough.

But at this point, the question might arise as to the relevance of all this research on emotions, and more particularly, shame, to studying honour cultures in general, and more specifically, the "heroic" society depicted in heroic verse and the behavioural ideal it proposes for its audience. Less verbosely – what has shame got to do with honour?

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It is true that in Anglo-Saxon England, Carolingian Francia, or the imagined quasi-mythical fifth century serving as the background for the *Hildebrandslied* and much of the corpus of GHP, and indeed in many other premodern cultures, "the highest levels of society were organized around war-making" (Baker 2013, 3). In his study of the social economy of violence and honour in *Beowulf*, Baker convincingly paints the picture of the audience of heroic poetry as a "warrior elite whose male members zealously cultivated and jealously defended their warlike reputations and whose women participated in the bellicosity in their own way" (Baker 2013, 3). In such premodern societies, a man's value was determined by his prowess as a warrior, and consequently, "everything worth having – status and the things that came with it: wealth, land, a desirable wife – depended on his lord's recognition of this prowess" (Baker 2013, 3). Honour, Baker concludes, is thus closely connected to "the practice of violence, the warrior's craft: it is an essential component of the identity of

the fighting man" (Baker 2013, 3). But to win honour it is not enough to perform socially-condoned violent acts (such as killing one's enemies on the battlefield or in a duel, or taking revenge for insults or for the death of kin or friend). Rather, "honour's sole ingredient is the opinion of others, so that whoever wishes to win it is constantly influenced by the people around him", and for this reason, "honour is an unstable commodity, always rising or falling in value" (Baker 2013, 3).

Yet honour is not an emotion. It is a name for the social capital all members of an honour-based community instinctively know they have. One can *have* honour, but what one viscerally *feels* (and desperately wants to avoid) is shame – indeed, we know that other primates also feel "proto-shame" (Maibom 2010, 577). Recent research in the social psychology of honour cultures underlines the extent to which shame and derivative meta-emotions such as fear of shame or shame about shame are central to the development of the self in such environments – more on this important phenomenon after a continuation of my discussion on the topic of honour in studies of Germanic heroic poetry.

Shame is indeed, more elusive, harder to identify than other more visible emotions like anger or love, and has consequently enjoyed far less attention. When it has been studied outside of its religious dimensions, it has often been seen as the inverse of honour, although just as often these studies of medieval honour tend to treat the emotions at its core as the byproduct heat of the social engine rather than its fuel. As such, honour is assumed to work according to a more or less implicit "code of conduct" (which, is assumed to have changed at some point from that of "Germanic" heroism to one based on chivalry). More sophisticated theories of honour among medievalists are either structuralist, seeing honour as a stabilising force in society, functional especially in societies lacking (strong) central authorities, like medieval Iceland (Sørensen 1993), or economistic, whereby honour is a scarce resource for which agents in a zero-sum economy of honour are in competition (Baker 2013; Miller 1993; see the general review in Barreiro 2016 and critique in Posner 1990).

But such functionalist views obscure the way in which a total system of socio-emotional meaning like an honour culture permeates everything from relationships between people to individual and collective structures of thought and feeling. At any rate, honour is not an emotion. It is a name for the social capital all members of an honour-based community instinctively knows they have. One can *have* honour, but what one viscerally *feels* is pride or shame. That shame is often correlated with suicide or homicide

(Hastings *et al.* 2002; Velotti *et al.* 2014) and that both arise more frequently in communities where honour and traditional gender norms prevail is attested by a solid body of psychological research (Scheff *et al.* 2018; Saucier *et al.* 2016; Baugher *et al.* 2015). And while drawing conclusions about past societies on the basis of research on contemporary individuals is problematic, this dynamics is often at the core of the social dynamics heroic literature and chivalric romance. Albeit they are still described as ideal embodiments of Germanic heroic or chivalric ideals of behaviour (Reichl 2010; Jaeger 1985), most of the heroes in these texts are deeply flawed, and it is the societal tensions making their flaws possible that these texts often bring into the limelight (Classen 2003; Niles 2007).

More simply put, feuding, flytings (verbal duels), acts of random or calculated violence, and even the concept of honour often used to vaguely subsume all such behaviours, do not in fact explain the emotions involved in the acts and utterances of the characters that perform them, but are merely some of the patterns of social action in which these emotions are deployed. This is not to say that emotions are the "real" fuel of the acts and behaviours depicted by sagas and described by Miller and Baker *et al.*, but that emotions are not some afterthought or some interior reaction secondary to these proceedings. Rather they are part and parcel of social action, at least in these emotionally-charged narratives. One cannot set out to avenge one's kinsman even in the face of probable death if the spectre of shame does not inflict actual pain, if real anger is not whetted by some old retainer, or if real grief had not been culturally scripted as being quenchable only by revenge. And neurological and psychological research shows that "social pain" like shame elicits very palpable physical pain via the same neural pathways (Velotti *et al.* 2014, 455). Shame and correlate emotions (anger, the fear of shame, the recursive shame of being ashamed) are thus the emotional core of what is often regarded in legalistic terms as the "code of honour", or by using functionalist approaches such as the gift economy (Baker 2013) or extended kinship (Miller 1993) which cannot account for the role of emotion in the web of socio-cultural meaning they aim to describe.

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I now return to the *Hildebrandslied* to highlight the importance of the emotional tension accumulating within individuals struggling at the limits of the honour-based moral system they are at pains to instantiate and the lack of explanatory power of economistic models of such social dynamics. The situation presented just before does not seem an impasse from our

perspective – why doesn't the old man, upon recognizing his son, just fling his weapons to the ground and run to embrace him? In his society, however, he cannot: he is *untar heriun tuem*, "between two armies". This means that both of them are in full view of all the warriors on their respective sides, so that each participant is having his actions judged by all his companions and their enemies (Ward 1983, 7). To behave under these circumstances in any way that would damage one's image would be calamitous: it would lead to ridicule, which in turn would mean shame and disgrace and the loss of all esteem in the eyes of others (Ward 1983, 7).

Within the limits of his culture, Hildebrand tries to prevent the battle, though, and the poem is at pains to show that none of his attempts work out due to both men being in full sight of their respective companions and thus liable to lose face and feel shame. When he recognizes the enemy champion as his son, Hildebrand attempts to placate the young warrior with gifts worthy of an honourable, even if enemy, warrior: gold rings and weaponry, but Hadubrand scorns the older man's attempts at peace and ups the ante by calling him out as an old man trying to buy his way out of a clean fight (Ward 1983, 8). Hildebrand's attempts to placate his son, his offering of the gift, his attempts to show kindness were thus under the most unyielding kind of surveillance, and he was making himself vulnerable to the ridicule of the members of both armies, i.e., shame. When he makes his fateful decision, the words he chooses give an indication of just how his actions until now have been judged: "he would be the most contemptible of the eastern-army who would deny thee battle when thou yearnest so much for it" (Ward 1983, 8).

The key word is OHG *argosto* (most vile, contemptible, cowardly, etc.). The very concept is loaded with the profound inevitability of Hildebrand's tragedy (Ward 1983, 8). It is the superlative form of the adjective *arg*, the same word used in Old Norse *argr* to designate and classify the worst offenses a man could commit in a premodern masculinist honour-shame society: bestiality, pederasty, effeminacy, sorcery, cowardice etc. (Ward 1983, 8). These were the offenses that made one susceptible to attack by the singers of the *niðvisa* (shaming verses considered an especially harsh type of insult in medieval Norse and Icelandic society). In these societies, to accuse another man of being *argr* was a legal reason to challenge the accuser to *holmgang* (a type of close duel). If duel was refused by the accused, he could be outlawed, as this refusal proved that the accuser was right and the accused was *argr* ('unmanly, cowardly'). If the accused fought successfully in *holmgang* and had thus proven that he was not *argr*,

the *niðvisa* was considered an unjustified, severe defamation, and the accuser had to pay the offended party full compensation (Ward 1983, 9).

While this Scandinavian institutionalisation of shaming was not current in Carolingian society, we can imagine similar connotations lay behind the word *argosto* and Hildebrand's decision to fight his son. As a heroic poem, the *Hildebrandslied* is fairly certainly not meant to present this way of life as ideal, as it focuses on what happens when it is taken to breaking point – its subject is one of the intrinsic contradictions of this social system: that of shame being a force that can needlessly kill a valuable member. Thus the possibility of living the shame of giving up battle sought by the foreign warrior outweighs Hildebrand's natural love for his son.

Yet this situation is not unique to ninth-century Carolingian male aristocracy. The motif of an old hero who must fight his son and kill him is widespread throughout Indo-European heroic verse traditions: we encounter it in Irish and Russian medieval literature, and in Persian heroic verse. In *Aided Óenfhir Aífe* (*The Tragic Death of Aífe's Only Son*), a part of the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*), the hero Cú Chulainn kills his son Conlaí. In the Persian epic Shahnameh by Ferdowsi (c. 1000 CE), Rostam kills his son Sohrab. In a popular Rus' *bylina* Ilya Muromets kills his son Podsokolnik. Still, the *Hildebrandslied* foregrounds the most social aspect of the choice between killing one's son and a potential loss of honour. But all of these heroic poems show the societies in which they were composed and performed (Persian, Russian, Irish, Carolingian) preoccupied with the dark side of shame, the negative effects of this dynamics.

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In order to fully understand how these heroic poems were shaped by and affected their audiences' emotional lives and sense of the self, we need to understand how the emotional economy of shame and honour works from the perspective of the social psychology of honour-based cultures. The following theoretical considerations aim to explain why in such cultures violence, honour, shame, and masculinity are so intricately woven together.

As we have seen, in honour cultures, people's worth is defined in terms of their claim to honour but also by the extent to which they are considered honourable by society. Hence, honour has both an internal and an external component. Because of this emphasis on strong reputations, men in honour cultures perceive interpersonal threats more readily than men in other cultures do (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). They are obliged to

respond to such threats vigorously, even violently, which can be both dangerous and difficult (i.e., it can and often does involve physical retaliation). Proper retaliation is perceived as necessary for maintaining one's reputation as well as one's personal sense of masculinity. In other words, a man's sense that he is a "real man" (and also his reputation for being such) depends on his ability to successfully defend himself, his name, and his kin against any and every threat (Scheff *et al.* 2018). Failure in any particular instance can undermine both a man's private sense of self-worth and, just as importantly, his public reputation (Scheff *et al.* 2018).

What is a member (and specifically a man) of an honour-based culture most afraid of? Shame. How does one prevent being ashamed and/or feeling shame in such a community? Violence. This is the nutshell account of a very rich literature on the vicious cycle Honour-Shame-Violence. Some useful steps toward a general theory of the causes of violence were suggested by James Gilligan through his experiences as a prison psychiatrist. For many years, he asked the prisoners why they had committed murder; most of the answers took the same form: "because he dissed (disrespected) me". This answer implied to Gilligan that they had used anger and violence to avoid shame. From this background, Gilligan proposed: "The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence… Anger is a necessary but not a sufficient cause of violence… The different forms of violence, whether toward individuals or entire populations, are motivated (caused) by shame." (Gilligan 1997, 110-111) Furthermore, Gilligan described the conditions under which shame leads to violence: "the shame is a secret, probably the most carefully guarded secret of violent men… so intense and so painful that it threatens to overwhelm him and bring about the death of the self" (Gilligan, 1997, 112).

Gilligan also highlights the connection between masculinity and shame-motivated violence. The majority of multiple killers were men, and social psychological research suggests that male multiple killers experience "masculinity threats", or negative assessments of their masculine identity, from peers (Scheff *et al.* 2018; Saucier *et al.* 2016; Baugher *et al.* 2015). Men feel shame for their perceived inability to meet societally expected masculine standards. Thus, hypermasculinity, or exaggerated male-associated behaviour, acts as a sort of "defense against shame", a means of ensuring that no one can perceive them as being "insufficiently masculine" (Scheff *et al.* 2018).

We can see men performing this type of masculinity in response to their subjective perception of another's evaluation of their masculinity.

As such, we can understand the heroic ethos in GHP as a response to "living in the minds of others", and, therefore, as an "overcorrection or a defensive tactic against anticipated shame" (Scheff *et al.* 2018). The idea that people spend much of their time and energy involved in or avoiding shame was central to the work of Erving Goffman: "there is no interaction in which participants do not take an appreciable chance of being slightly embarrassed or a slight chance of being deeply humiliated" (Goffman 1990, 243). This means that shame and/or its anticipation haunts all social interaction. Avoidance of shame is the driving force behind Goffman's theory of impression management (Scheff *et al.* 2018).

To consider identity through the lens of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective as social performance is a powerful lens through which to view the otherwise baffling spectacle of heroes engaged in what to a modern reader looks like escalations of conflicts over the pettiest of reasons. Performers in the social arena always engage in "impression management", seeking to control the impression others have of them (Goffman 1990). This looking glass-self, shaped by the emotional mechanisms of pride and shame which encode the response to the gaze of the other, is at the junction of public and private. Building on Kemper (1978), shame can also be seen less as a situational emotion and more as a structural emotion that marks the adherence to a certain social category and which accompanies a loss of status.

For emotions are a key element of social interactions and more precisely, of mechanisms of societal control of behaviour and enforcing conformity with the norm. Shame in particular is understood as part of a system of emotional sanctions that doubles down on the external mechanisms of reward and punishment that buttress societal norms (Scheff 1988). Goffman (2013) investigates the individual anticipation of social embarrassment as a mechanism for internalizing the need to conform, helping in engineering compliant social performers.

With regards to the role of violence in this dynamics, Jeff Elison *et al.* (2014) confirmed Gilligan's research by developing evolutionary and psychobiological models which explain the multiple paths through which social pain may lead to anger and/or aggression. The chain of events begins with (perceived) threats of social exclusion or personal devaluation, which elicit social pain, and shame is one variety of social pain, evolving as a reaction to the threat of social exclusion (Scheff *et al.* 2018). Social pain elicits the same reactions as physical pain via the anterior cingulate cortex (Eisenberger, 2011). In other words, shame can

be very much as physically painful as any injury. And as Scheff explains, since the threat-defense mechanism to physical pain must often be rapid and automatic, operating prior to conscious evaluation, shame may result in maladaptive defensive aggression, even against innocent others (Scheff *et al.* 2018). In this context, anger and aggression in response to shame are understandable as emotion regulation, coping strategies, and evolutionary adaptations (Scheff *et al.* 2018).

To come back for one final time to the *Hildebrandslied*, the end of the poem has been lost, but comparative evidence from the other Indo-European versions of the father-son duel suggests that here, too, the father killed his own son. And, as Ward explains, since Hildebrand was a man who, except for his son, was without blood relatives (*friuntlaos man*), this is a form of suicide, for in heroic poetry blood lineage is accorded supreme importance (Ward 1983, 9). Thus, in the honour-based community he is part of, Hildebrand is in a lose-lose situation: if he lets himself be accused of cowardice in full view of all, he would open himself to the ridicule and humiliation that would destroy him, his ancestors, and his progeny, who even alive, would never be able to outlive the disgrace, but if he slays his own son, he has to live with the pain of this terrible deed and condemn himself to a form of lineage suicide (Ward 1983, 9).

For these reasons, the "master affect" (Scheff 2003), the central emotion in the socio-emotional economy depicted in Germanic heroic poetry is shame, understood in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms as the most deeply personal and intensely social of emotions and as the place where the question of self and identity arises "most originarily and most relationally" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 37). Sedgwick describes shame as a performance whereby one absorbs and acts out the emotions of others. Given its dual nature (as intimate experience and as communication), shame is also a cultural barometer. Hence, studying the dynamics of shame enables us to understand better the economy of other emotions and culture-specific constructions of selfhood. Building on the above-mentioned work on the sociology and psychology of honour-based cultures, traditional gender scripts of masculinity, and the gender-role stress associated with them, I have aimed to trace the emotive scripts of "heroic" masculinity as based on emotional performance rooted in shame and marked by the anxiety of never being man/honourable enough.

In conclusion, GHP contain both laudatory articulations of a hypermasculinist heroic ethos and voices that question it. This ambivalence voiced (and provided a model for) potential reactions of audiences

to embodiments of a potentially destructive, anti-social masculinity. Thus, the heroes' moments of weakness and doubt (like Hildebrand's) emerge as moments of discontinuity in a presumably monolithic heroic hypermasculine ethos. As such, GHP emerges as a field of negotiation for cultural anxieties and societal questions that troubled their intended audiences, in this case, the use and abuse of violence stemming from the dynamics of honour and shame among war-making elites.

My contribution has explored the way in which the audiences of these poems (mostly belonging to honour-based elite groups in ninth- and tenth-century England and Francia) related to these conundrums in light of their lived social and emotional realities – more precisely, the extent to which shame was experienced as a prosocial emotion in these communities. I have explored the ways in which shame (including secret shame, and meta-shame) and the pursuit of honour are conceptualized and experienced in these poetic sources, integrating them in the larger constellation of contemporary legal and religious texts, while incorporating questions and approaches from cognitive anthropology and social psychology (work on modern-day honour-based societies, such as that by Nisbett and Cohen). In doing this, I propose a significant shift in the terms of the scholarly conversations around honour by introducing the dimensions of shame and the violence it can engender. My foray into early medieval poetic sources can also provide a helpful counterpart to research on more top-down and/or later sources.

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