

Chapter 5: Humiliation – Part II: Historicizing Humiliation

Melantha: Truce with your *doceur*, good servant; you see I am addressing to the princess; pray do not *embarrass* me – *Embarrass* me! What a delicious French word you make me lose upon
you too!
- John Dryden, *Marriage à la Mode*

PHILOLOGY AND HUMILIATION

Our emotional vocabulary it would be greatly impoverished if we lacked the words *embarrass* and *humiliate*.¹ Such words as *awkward* or *uncomfortable* could, I suppose, fill in partially for *embarrass*, and *shame* or *mortify*, though sounding a bit formal and old-fashioned could do service for *humiliation*. But we would feel we had lost two very useful words for getting at important features of our emotional life. It should then come as a surprise that both words were rather late additions to English in the sense indicating the uncomfortable emotions we are all very familiar with. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the earliest recorded use of *to humiliate* meaning to mortify or to lower or depress the dignity or self-respect of someone does not occur until 1757.² Its usual sense prior to the mid-eighteenth century is more closely related to the physical act of bowing, of prostrating oneself as in “Such a religious man may not... humiliate himself to execute the right of homage” from 1602. The metaphoric underpinning of *humiliate* connected it more to humility and making humble than to what we now think of humiliation. The *OED* nowhere actually defines humiliation or related words as an emotion but brings it into the orbit of the emotions of self-attention by linking it to modification and the lowering of self-respect.³ Under *humiliation* the listed usages tend to be examples of displays of humility or of humble condition clustering around religious devotions. As

Page 176:

with the entries under *humiliate*, only the last example from 1866 clearly distances humiliation from humility or being humbled: “I think ‘humiliation’ is a very different condition of mind from humility. ‘Humiliation’ no man can desire.” It is under *humiliating* that we get our earliest instances of uses that strongly imply the emotion. In 1776 Adam Smith can describe bankruptcy as “perhaps the greatest and most humiliating calamity which can befall [sic] an innocent man.”⁴

Smith takes us into the world of finances and hence to the intimate association of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century embarrassment with money matters, either too much or (usually) too little. What linked an embarrassment of riches to being pecuniarily embarrassed was a shared notion that embarrassment’s root sense meant something that encumbered or impeded. Unlike *humiliation*, which was floating around in English in devotional senses from the fourteenth century on, *embarrass* in its various forms in any sense made its presence felt only in the seventeenth century. Dryden gives an indication of its strangeness with the quotation that provides the epigraph for this chapter. The *OED* finds it in the late seventeenth century referring to the state of being perplexed, but it is not until almost exactly to the year that *humiliating* means what it does to us that *embarrassment* does too: perplexed, yes, but with particular reference to

awkwardness about the propriety of certain actions.⁵ The first instance given by *OED* is from Burke in 1774: “If my real, unaffected embarrassment prevents me from expressing my gratitude to you as I ought...” The *OED* gives earlier instances of *embarrassed* meaning perplexed, but the first examples that evidence awkwardness and constraint are from the 1760s, one of which comes from Laurence Sterne, a writer who would have had to invent the word if it did not exist.⁶

Let me add another bit of information. Take these two collocations: (1) I feel + emotion term (e.g., guilty, embarrassed, ashamed, humiliated, said); and the similar one (2) I am + emotion term. I do not want to discuss why some are nearly synonymous as, say, I feel or am sad, and why others are not, as I feel or am guilty. What I do want to note, however, is that as far as I can tell (I supply the basis for my claim in note 7), the construction with feel + emotion term is relatively recent in regular usage, in fact becoming common only in the nineteenth century. After that, both the *be* and *feel* constructions were available for most emotions; before, the *feel* construction is encountered only rarely.⁷

Page 177

I don't want to make too much of this shift. It does not provide a secure basis for grand claims about the effects of romanticism, industrialization, and capitalism on the articulation and conceptualization of the individual and the self. These “isms” are the usual unsavory suspects rounded up when real explanation fails us. But even so, this is a rather remarkable piece of evidence possibly indicating a change in the imagining of the self. One could hazard the claim that as late as the seventeenth century the self did not feel emotions at all; instead the emotions were borne almost as a quasi-judicial status or as allegorical personae that the subject put on masklike. When one *was* sad, one became the character Sadness in a moral and social drama, with its behavior thus constrained by the role. But when one could at last *feel* sad, sadness became a feeling, a perturbation of the nerves coupled with the effects of the thoughts one might have about that perturbation. The new self could thus be something more than its feelings; it could be more detached from them, more ironical, perhaps more restrained, and definitely more self-conscious. And this last characteristic – self-consciousness – might also tend to make this new self more likely to feel such emotions as humiliation and embarrassment than heretofore. This claim may seem a bit mystifying, but it is not without some reason. It is reasonably consistent with some of the drift of Norbert Elias's work.⁸

What are the causes of this different way of articulating the relation of the self to emotions? We might start to find them by looking closely at changes in styles of religious devotion and the changes in language as a consequence of enthusiastic religion. In this regard, mortification, too, with its long association with religious self-abasement and the denial of the pleasures of the flesh came to indicate the unpleasant feeling of humiliation and chagrin roughly concurrently with the semantic changes we have already parsed for humiliation.⁹ This concurrence provides another small piece of fodder, or at least is not inconsistent with the idea that what was occurring was a secularization or recontextualization of devotional diction which attended major shifts in the styles of devotion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To this change in religious discourse might also be added the effects of the closer looks at the inner life, whether in the philosophical or medical treatments of the passions, the novels of Richardson and Sterne, or the extraordinary attention to manners and emotions supporting them in the elite social circles.

A modest story could also be told. It might only be that the...

¹ I use the infinitive form to stand for all the words for which it serves as a root.

² The *OPD*'s first instance that unambiguously refers to the state we associate with the unpleasant emotion and could not also refer to the fact of simply being humbled is from Christina Rossetti in 1879: "When we ask to be humbled, we must not recoil from being humiliated." This example is rather late. Humiliation, in the sense of an unpleasant emotion but still not unambiguously distinct from a more neutral notion of being brought low, is occasionally found in the pages of Jane Austen, where we find it linked, as might be predicted, with the piercing of vanity and the deflating of pretension:

"How despicably have I act it!" she cried. "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candor of my sister and gratified my vanity in useless or blamable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! Yet how just humiliation." (*Pride and Prejudice* chapter 36)

Note that "humiliating" seems to indicate a feeling, but "humiliation" only a state. But see *Emma* III.xi: "Every moment had brought a fresh surprise; and every surprise must be a matter of humiliation to her."

³ In its glosses for *humiliate* and its various forms the *OED* seems to prefer the state to the feeling. Yet under its entry for *mortification*, 6, and *mortify*, 8, the gloss is "the *feeling* of humiliation," "to *feel* humiliated," where humiliation is impliedly understood as an emotion.

⁴ Smith's use of *humiliating* is still consistent with seeing humiliation as a form of humbling, a simple objective lowering of status, but the coupling of it with calamity suggests this is humiliation as we now know it.

⁵ It may be worth noting that the nineteenth-century English editors of the *OED* still were unable to extend *embarrass* much outside the world of "difficulties" (mostly financial but also social), commodities, perplexities, confusions, and bashfulness as to the more uncomfortable feeling of blundering and social ineptitude.

⁶ Sterne's use appears in *Sentimental Journey*. See Ricks (3) who makes at this point about Sterne. It is somewhat remarkable that the word does not appear at all in the lengthy *Tristram Shandy*, for there are any number of situations in which one could imagine its appearing.

⁷ I do not have great confidence in this assertion, so let me supply the basis for the claim fairly quickly. The *OED*, as well as some 220 titles from English and American fiction, belles-lettres, and philosophical texts, is available as part of a computer data base. Nearly 120 of these texts predate 1800, although they are mostly short, including plays and verse by Shakespeare and Marlowe; there are also works by Milton, Sterne, Fielding, Dryden, Defoe, Swift, and others. This is hardly a perfect sample, but it cannot be without some significance that the collection gives no uses of *feel (felt) ashamed*, *feel (felt) shame*, *feel (felt) guilty*, *sad*, *aggrieved*, etc prior to the mid-nineteenth century. Yet *feel* plus an emotion word was not an impossible collocation before then: the *OED* lists Tyrwhyt in 1634 (s.v. *feel*, v. *ga*): "I have not at all felt the emotion I shewed"; the data base also yields "feel an emotion" from *Shamela*, while Pope writes of woes being felt (*Eloisa* 366). But the preferred mode, and almost exclusively so, of expressing the thought of having an emotion was with the *to be* constructions. Even in the nineteenth century it is greatly preferred, and not until the twentieth century did "feeling" emotions come into its own.

⁸ See Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.

⁹ See *OED* s.v. *mortification*, 6; *mortified*, 7; and *mortify*, 8.