

Guilt and Shame
Ritual Forms of Dealing with Deviant Behaviour
From Aias to Abu Ghraib

International Conference in Bremen (Germany), 28. – 30. April 2006

as part of the project

National Identities and European Myths

Call for Papers

In a state of rage, Aias, the outstanding Greek hero at Troy slaughters a herd of cattle which he mistakes for his enemy. When he comes to his senses, he falls onto his sword, full of shame about this loss of honour. The unheroic deed, committed in madness, as well as the loss of face, can be removed only by a dignified death.

Causes and modes of reaction may have changed, but the feeling of shame is still of existential and individual importance and replete of public symbolism. According to Giorgio Agamben, '[i]n shame, the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject'.

Aias's ritual suicide corresponds today to the withdrawal from political office, the offer of resignation or the admission of impropriety, staged by and for the media. There still appears to be a strong collective need for this kind of ritualised act of exculpation. The function of sacrifice remains the same, despite the changes.

The conference will look at the following aspects of the phenomena of guilt and shame:

- Figures
- Discourses of Coming to Terms
- Rituals
- Mythical narratives
- Conventions
- Staging of humiliation and shaming
- Attribution of guilt

Mythical figures like Aias, Oedipus or Penthesilea illustrate the spectrum of personal representations of feelings of guilt and shame, a spectrum which reaches to literary

characters like Franz Kafka's K. of whom it is said that 'it was as if his shame was to survive him'. Historically, the line reaches from Greek antiquity 'without conscience' (Hegel) to the 'shameless' present; from a systematic perspective the different cultures confront each other in their definitions and compensations of deviant behaviour: from pagan Greece via Christian Europe to Islam. In the 20th century, discourses of coming to terms determine public confrontation with the history of colonialism, with questions of war guilt or genocide. Cultural, national, historical as well as gender differences determine the rituals which structure reactions to deviant behaviour: in verbal apologies, public and private behaviour, dress codes, body language, by calculated normative adjustments to masculinity and femininity. These differentiations are reflected in mythical narratives just as in everyday conventions.

Rituals and discourses of shame serve to regulate deviant behaviour in one's own society or to justify it before the self. On the other hand, attribution of guilt and purposeful shaming of the other, function as instruments of power, as, for example during the European witch-hunts or in the photographs from Abu Ghraib, are used as.

The conference is planned as a collaboration between five European Universities:

Bremen (Fachbereich Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften; Institut für kulturwissenschaftlich Deutschlandstudien) / Prof. Dr. Heinz-Peter Preußner

Ferrara (Dipartimento di Scienze Umane) / Prof. Dr. Matteo Galli

Leiden (Faculteit der Letteren; Centrum für Sprache und Identität, CTI) / Prof. Dr. Anthonya Visser

Liège/Lüttich (Philosophie et Lettres, Département Germaniques) / Prof. Dr. Alexandra Pontzen

Warwick (Dept of German Studies) / Dr. Helmut Schmitz

(Internationaler Arbeitskreis Literatur und Politik in Deutschland e.V.).

We are looking for contributions from the disciplines of Literary and Cultural Studies, Classics and Classical Philology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Media Studies, History, Art History, Political Science, Sociology and Theology, as well as related disciplines. Contributions can be in German as well as in English. Please send an abstract of 300

words max to all five email addresses below by 31 October 2005. Replies will be sent out by 30 November 2005.

A publication in the series 'Jahrbuch Literatur und Politik' with Universitätsverlag Winter (Heidelberg) is planned.

Prof. Dr. Heinz-Peter Preußner

preusser@uni-bremen.de

Prof. Dr. Matteo Galli

matteo.galli@unife.it

Prof. Dr. Anthony Visser

a.visser@let.leidenuniv.nl

Prof. Dr. Alexandra Pontzen

a.pontzen@ulg.ac.be

Dr. Helmut Schmitz

h.schmitz@warwick.ac.uk