

## Losing Face

Middle-aged sexuality grosses Hamlet out, especially when the matron in question is his mother. In a frothing Freudian frenzy over her ostensible bedroom antics he bellows rhetorically, "O shame, where is thy blush?" Bad enough, Mom, that you married my uncle; worse still that you don't seem embarrassed.

It now appears that if Gertrude could have raised a decent blush, Hamlet might have survived the play, he and the queen could have attended the next mother-and-son dinner at Elsinore, and Denmark might not have ended up as a branch office of Norway. It turns out that turning red turns away a lot of wrath.

Researchers at the University of Amsterdam say that blushing after a blunder amounts to a powerful plea for mercy. Scientists at Berkeley found that when frat brothers insulted one another, the frequency of blushing made the difference between fraternity and fratricide: The more blushing, the more bonding.

The fuchsia flush sends the signal that I realize I've messed up, and that I care. Even animals know this. Coyotes can't blush, but an errant pack member slouches, droops his ears, and drags his tail in order to indicate the same idea. By showing shame, he throws himself on the mercy of the coyote court.

It seems to bug God when we show less remorse than frat boys or coyotes. In Jeremiah 6.15, God goes a little Hamlet on ancient Israel: "Were they ashamed because of the abomination they have done? They were not even ashamed at all; They did not even know how to blush." The Lord likes that line so well that he inspires it all over again a couple of chapters later in Jeremiah 8.12. When the Almighty takes to repeating himself, perhaps we should pay attention. God warns that he will import some Babylonian

humiliation because Israel seems incapable of producing the product domestically.

The same Hebrew word, though translated differently, shows up in Jeremiah 3.3: "You had a harlot's forehead; you refused to be ashamed." Looks as if the ultimate scarlet letter is the inability to turn scarlet.

In a society that shuns shame as harmful to our self-esteem, it might be a good idea if Christians, at least, remember how to blush. Isaiah 1.8 paints broad strokes of scarlet and crimson as the color-scheme of sin, but promises the purity of God's forgiveness. If we can't be pure, we can at least be embarrassed. And, amazingly, God says that is good enough.

Shamefully,

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