Book Review: The Mask of Shame

John Steiner

October 1982

The Mask of Shame. By Leon Wurmser. London: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1981. Pp 345. £17.50, $31.25.

The author of this interesting if slightly uneven book rightly points out that shame is a neglected topic. Psychoanalysts have been preoccupied with guilt and have not always sufficiently differentiated it from shame. It is true that clinical material to do with shame has been extensively studied under other headings, especially in the area of narcissism and self-esteem; however the subject is such an important one that a review of this kind is timely and stimulates a new look.

The author suggests that shame results from a failure to live up to the expectation first of an external person but subsequently of internalized objects. It is chiefly concerned with concepts like weakness, defectiveness, dirtiness, badness, loss of control and sexual misdeeds, especially masturbation. The experience of being watched by internal or external figures is very important and a sense of shame can spread to other people in the family, colleagues, associates and the whole ethnic group one belongs to. Shame has many useful adaptive functions, and the author emphasises the way privacy and intimacy are protected by the experiencing of shame. One could add that the same goes for honesty and decency and this is clear in the chapter on "Shamelessness" where it becomes clear that to feel no shame opens one to every kind of depravity.

The author discusses defences against shame and emphasises the way people obsessed with shame cover themselves in a mask or false self, hence the title of the book. He also attempts a structural analysis which I think is not entirely successful, and many of the literary quotations and clinical fragments were not as relevant as they might be. It seemed to me that the author did not fully explore the relation of shame to sexuality, and his discussion of the Eden myth which I think must be central to an understanding of shame, is not entirely convincing. It seems to me that shame is connected with the feeling not only of weakness, dirtiness, defectiveness or inadequacy, but with a sense of badness or wrongness which I think can often be linked with sexual embarrassment, especially with embarrassment about perversion and perverse phantasies. I think these are often prominent in borderline patients, and it may be that shame is more important in these conditions than we have realised. It seemed to me possible that if persecutory anxiety is the affect most relevant to the paranoid-schizoid position and guilt the affect relevant to the depressive position, then perhaps shame is the most prominent affect in the borderline position.

Despite its shortcomings, this book deserves careful study and psychoanalysts and psychiatrists will I think find it useful.

John Steiner, *Consultant Psychotherapist,*
The Tavistock Clinic, London

The Ted K Archive

John Steiner
Book Review: The Mask of Shame
October 1982

British Journal of Psychiatry, volume 141, issue 4, pages 433–434.
<www.doi.org/10.1017/S0007125000112978>

www.thetedkarchive.com