

Shame Culture, Reputation,
and Honour in HBO's *The Wire*

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ABSTRACT

HBO's *The Wire* examines the relationship between institutions and individuals in American society and concludes that institutions restrict the agency of individuals, and series creator David Simon likens the power of institutions to the gods of Greek tragedy. In this project, I argue that shame culture enables institutions to have the social influence described by Simon. The paper's introduction defines the term "shame culture" and distinguishes it from "guilt culture," and I use medieval examples of shame culture to illustrate how shame functions in *The Wire*. This paper divides its detailed discussion of *The Wire* into four sections, each of which focuses on a different institution. The essay's first section explores how drug dealers and criminals use their reputations aggressively to build drug empires or simply survive, as the characters Marlo Stanfield, a drug kingpin, and Omar Little, a stickup artist, demonstrate. The second section examines Marlo and Omar's influence on young drug dealers, called corner kids in the series, and I argue that the public schools cannot prevent shame from being ingrained in these children. The third section focuses on police officers and, specifically, eventual police commissioner Cedric Daniels, and I examine how the police department's preoccupation with crime statistics reveals their dependence on shame and reputation—the police force is ineffective since they mirror in many ways the criminals they are trying to arrest. Lastly, the essay's fourth section analyzes politicians in *The Wire* and how Mayor Carcetti is powerless to respond to and exacerbates the city's social problems due to his need to preserve his public image. The paper concludes that social reform that grants agency to individuals in *The Wire* is impossible as long as shame culture shapes the various institutions depicted in the series.

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Introduction

HBO's *The Wire*, created by David Simon, depicts a plethora of social problems in Baltimore, Maryland as part of its commentary on the decline of American society, and one of the show's prime objectives is to examine the relationship between institutions and individuals in modern society. Criminals and police officers alike refer to the rules of their respective institutions as "the game,"¹ and institutions consistently restrict and limit the agency of individuals throughout the series. Few characters manage to play the game to their advantage, prompting characters like Marla Daniels to call the game "rigged." Hence, Simon likens the drama's institutions to the gods in Greek tragedy:

But instead of the old gods, *The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason.²

Simon's comparison is apt, and critics such as Mark Chou and Chris Love examine the influence of Greek tragedy on the series in detail.³ Yet Simon and these critics do not explain why institutions possess such influence on society. I will argue that the presence of shame culture, particularly among criminal organizations, enables the institutions to exert control over individuals, since the need to bolster reputations and avoid incurring shame dominates characters in prominent positions of power. In this manner, institutions create the tragedy that Simon mentions, as characters who preserve the elements of shame culture are rewarded, while those who challenge the existing status quo are punished. To this end, I will first define the term "shame culture," discuss its literary precedents and elaborate how shame and reputation can create tragic situations. Finally, I will examine how shame influences the decisions of drug dealers, children, schools, police, and politicians in *The Wire*.⁴

Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer define shame culture and its counterpart, guilt culture, as different means of social control. Their book, *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study*, describes shame cultures and distinguishes them from guilt-centered societies. The book's first half, written by Piers, discusses the psychology of shame and guilt. The second half, by Singer, explores the anthropological significance of this psychology. Singer differentiates shame and guilt cultures by the relative priority they place on external and internal sanctions. Externally-sanctioned actions are approved by an individual's society, while internally-sanctioned actions are approved by an individual's sense of morality. Singer writes, "If a culture depends primarily on external sanctions, it is considered to be a shame culture; whereas if it depends on internal sanctions it is a guilt culture" (63). He notes that shame is not the only external sanction, nor guilt the only internal, and that people do not exclusively feel shame or guilt—both exist simultaneously in cultures and individuals.⁵ Furthermore, as Bernard Williams writes, people "can feel both guilt and shame towards the same action" (92). In *The Wire's* final season, for example, Detective McNulty feels both shame and guilt about inventing a serial murderer. Regardless, the two cultures are separated by whether external or internal sanctions are the *primary*, not the only, means of control.

¹ Paul Anderson elaborates on the allegorical significance of the game in "The Game Is The Game."

² Simon's response appears in an interview conducted by Nick Hornby for *Believer Magazine*.

³ Chou and Love's articles are "Tragedy, Politics and *The Wire*" and "Greek Gods in Baltimore," respectively.

⁴ Shame culture is not limited to the institutions listed and can be seen in the news media and the docks, but I am focusing on the groups that *The Wire* examines across multiple seasons.

⁵ Singer's traditional distinction between shame and guilt cultures, which distinguishes the two by internal and external sanctions, can become problematic since shame can become internalized (65-66).

Thus, a guilt culture encourages feelings of guilt among its citizens for undesirable behaviours and these citizens believe some actions are immoral, as a result. External punishments are not necessary to discourage most people from committing certain actions, since they will internalize an aversion from what is socially perceived as unethical. For instance, a Roman Catholic Christian must avoid sin and regularly confess his or her sins to reconcile with God or suffer eternal damnation. An individual's sense of guilt supersedes his or her public image, since the rest of society does not determine if he or she goes to hell; the threat of damnation exists outside the court of law. Consequently, maintaining a clear conscience is both difficult and paramount in a guilt-oriented society. In *The Wire*, Roland Pryzbylewski retires from the police force after accidentally killing a fellow officer, since guilt overwhelms him to the point that he can no longer work. In contrast, the perceptions of others are of greater importance in a shame culture since shame, or the loss of honour, is the primary means of social control. Undesirable behaviours or attitudes are punished with social ostracization or death. Thus, how the rest of society perceives an individual determines his or her fate, so maintaining a good reputation is critical. Unlike the guilt of sin, shame cannot be absolved through confession. Once shame is incurred, individuals can only restore their social standing by gaining honour, often by conforming to whatever the society expects of them in a given situation. Valentine Pakis defines the value of honour and shame: "Honor is a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged, and shame, its reciprocal value, is a claim to worth that is publicly denied" (167).⁶ *The Wire's* Major Colvin illustrates Pakis's theory, as he gains honour from his "Hamsterdam" experiment when his superiors see its positive effect on crime statistics, but he is shamed and forced to retire after the public learns that he has essentially legalized drugs.

The presence of shame culture in *The Wire* suggests that modern societies are less dependent on guilt as an instrument of social control than is occasionally supposed. Piers and Singer view modern cultures as guilt-centric, in contrast to shame-centered medieval cultures, but newer studies claim that shame remains a dominant aspect of social regulation. For instance, Thomas Scheff argues that shame is the "premier social emotion" (239).⁷ He claims that a taboo surrounds shame in modern society, and "because people usually feel ashamed about shame, one risks offense by referring to it" (240). In his view, feelings of shame affect people, but society prefers not to acknowledge shame's existence.⁸ Shame is a part of people's lives in *The Wire's* Baltimore, although the city's definitions of shame differ from those of medieval cultures. Instead of the chivalric code, the game functions as *The Wire's* code of conduct. Characters gain or lose social status depending on how they play the game, and they ostensibly follow the game's conventions as Arthurian knights ostensibly followed the rules of the Pentecostal Oath. Yet, as Simon Jeffery writes about *The Wire*, "sometimes the rules aren't clear and need to be restated. . . And sometimes the world is just murky."⁹ In theory, the series' institutions follow one code, but, in practice, both individual groups and people operate under different beliefs and values.

Medieval literature provides excellent precedents for the conflict and ramifications that occur in shame-based societies; while the gods inflict calamities on Greek protagonists "for no decent reason" in Simon's words, conflict in some medieval works, as in *The Wire*, arises from flaws inherent to society. For example, maintaining public image is crucial in thirteenth-century

⁶ Pakis, "Honor, Verbal Duels, and the New Testament in Medieval Iceland," *Tijdschrift Voor Skandinavistiek* 26.2 (2005): 163-185.

⁷ Scheff, "Shame in Self and Society," *Symbolic Interaction* 26.2 (2003): 239-262.

⁸ Scheff cites examples of past research, such as Freud's, which passed over shame.

⁹ Jeffery, "The Wire Re-up: Season Four, Episode Seven – The Rules of the Game."

Icelandic sagas because the societies depicted cannot rely on knights or police, as no group of enforcers existed in Iceland at that time. Therefore, when a Icelandic family member was insulted or murdered, the responsibility of justice fell upon the surviving male kin, who must avenge the slighted or deceased in order to save face for the family. As Preben Sørensen notes, social order in thirteenth-century Iceland and its sagas depended on free men and women acting in accordance with social norms. He writes,

The risk involved with this form of social order is that it depends absolutely on the individual human being, and that order therefore breaks down and turns into conflict if the members of society ignore the social contract based on honour, or if the individual is involved in a collision of duty between conflicting bonds of loyalty. (23)¹⁰

Acting with honour was necessary to ensure social stability, even if members of Icelandic society did not understand why they avoided shame or showing weaknesses. Social order regularly collapses in Iceland sagas since few characters can meet the demands of honour, and clans consequently feud over slights and matters of honour for several generations in the sagas. The social stability of *The Wire's* West Baltimore drug organizations are similarly precarious because they also emphasize reputation and honour and are a self-enforced society that for obvious reasons cannot rely on the police.

In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, a preoccupation with shame creates social disorder in Arthur's court. Shame outweighs guilt for knights such as Lancelot since to them, as Mark Lambert writes, "one's official, social identity is one's real identity" (850). The knights' reputations correspond directly to their social mobility, so they value chivalry because their perceived adherence to the chivalric code determines their reputations. However, the demands of chivalry are so high no knight, save Galahad, can avoid breaking the code. Even Lancelot, Arthur's best knight, breaks his vows through his affair with Guinevere, Arthur's wife, prompting a disastrous civil war between the king and Lancelot after the affair is revealed. Malory's *Morte* illustrates the tragic potential of collisions of duty, as Camelot's destruction cannot be prevented after Arthur learns of Lancelot's adultery. To protect his image, Arthur must execute Guinevere for her adultery since failing to punish her would weaken his regime. On the other hand, Arthur cannot execute his wife without losing the support of Gawain and Lancelot, two of his greatest knights, and Lancelot's support is especially necessary to uphold the fellowship of the Round Table.¹¹ Whether or not he executes Guinevere, Arthur will lose reputation and the social order of Camelot will break down. The conflict is exacerbated by the knights' different interpretations of the chivalric code. Beverly Kennedy separates knights into three categories: Heroic, Worshipful, and True.¹² Gawain, as a Heroic knight, views honour "exclusively in terms of family," so any "act which dishonours a member of his family also dishonours him" (Kennedy 65). Lancelot, as a True knight, defines "his individual honour in terms of his relationship with God" so "any sexual act which is sinful is also dishonourable" (71). Gawain cannot forgive Lancelot for the latter's adultery since he views the affair as a personal affront to his honour, and he refuses to agree to a truce to the civil war due to their conflicting chivalric ideals. Similarly, in

¹⁰ Passage is translated and edited by Margaret Clunies Ross from "Social institutions and belief systems of medieval Iceland (c. 870-1400) and their relations to literary production," *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*.

¹¹ A group of knights in the *Morte* collectively agree on Lancelot's influence: "For by the noble felishyp of the Rounde Table was Kyng Arthur upborne, and by their nobeles the Kyng and all the realme was ever in quyet and reste; and a grete parte . . . was because of youre moste nobeles, Sir Launcelot" (671).

¹² Kennedy, "Adultery in Malory's 'Le Morte d'Arthur,'" *Arthuriana* 7.4 (1997): 63-91.

The Wire, Stringer Bell and Avon Barksdale's partnership and drug organization fall apart when Bell's capital-oriented approach can no longer coexist with Avon's family-based beliefs.

As in medieval literature *The Wire*'s characters face ethical dilemmas relating to shame and reputation. Often, they have a choice between prioritizing their reputations or doing what is ethically correct. Other times, both choices will result in damaged reputations, regardless. In the essay's first section, I examine how Marlo and Omar aggressively use their reputations to their advantage within the series' criminal organizations; in the second, I trace their influence on corner kids and how the schools cannot prevent shame from being ingrained in these children; in the third, I analyze how the "stats game" corrupts the police department, limiting its ability to respond to corner kids and other criminals; in the final section, I discuss how the series' politicians are powerless to respond to and exacerbate Baltimore's social problems due to their preoccupations with preserving public images. Throughout the series, characters favour shame in ethical dilemmas, as the requirements for success in their institutions favour shame-oriented choices, but those decisions inevitably create tragedy, and, in this manner, their institutions function like the gods in Greek tragedies.

I. Criminals and Reputation

From the series' outset, criminal organizations and Omar use their reputations aggressively to maintain territorial power in Baltimore. In the first episode, D'Angelo Barksdale is disturbed when other drug dealers severely beat and hospitalize the addict Johnny Weeks after the latter attempts to buy drugs using counterfeit money. Stringer Bell explains to D'Angelo that the money is irrelevant: "It's the message, D. You can't show no weakness" (1.1). The Barksdale organization and later Marlo's preserve themselves by establishing reputations as violent, merciless gangs; if they fail to do so, they may be scammed by drug addicts or attacked by rival groups. Unlike the police, criminals measure reputation by word-of-mouth on the street and not numbered statistics. Thus, Marlo gains honour by killing a territorial rival, but his perceived image is not enhanced until others learn of his actions. Marlo recognizes the connection between the spoken word and reputation, so he aggressively protects his name by killing any dealers who slander him, regardless of whether their claims have merit or if they actually criticized him.

The absence of law enforcement stresses the need for socially-agreed rules among drug organizations, and shame discourages drug dealers from breaking the game's unwritten rules. To a degree, shame helps to govern behaviour on the street, but the social stability provided by the street's shame culture has tragic consequences. Drug dealers who question the necessity of the game's violence, such as D'Angelo and Namond, are swept aside by less scrupulous criminals, while Stringer dies in his attempt to adopt a capitalist approach to the drug trade and eliminate the reliance on shame in the Barksdale organization. Thus, the criminals who use reputations to their advantage are the most successful. Drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield and stickup artist Omar Little best exemplify how shame and honour become instruments for obtaining social status in *The Wire*'s criminal institutions; their aggressive methods of establishing reputations demonstrate the power of public image in crime, and shame governs both their fates and those around them.

Marlo secures his position as the most dominant drug kingpin by altering what constitutes shame in Baltimore. He dissolves the sanctity of family bonds in the game, separating himself from Avon and Proposition Joe. In "Transitions," he earns the loyalty of Prop Joe's nephew Cheese and turns the latter against his uncle in order to seize control of the New Day Co-Op. As a result, the game's rules change so that family relations lose their earlier significance. Simon, in an interview, stresses that Marlo seeks "Power. Totalitarian power. The desire that only dares to

speaking its name when a human being is sated with money and fame."¹³ Marlo views his reputation as a means to obtain totalitarian power, and he views familial loyalty as an impediment in his pursuit of power. As Ben Davie writes,

Both Avon and Prop Joe believe they see themselves in Marlo and miscalculate as a consequence, fatally in Joe's case . . . Marlo doesn't rely on heart and emotion like Avon, and he doesn't share Prop Joe's desire for friendship and community—and these traits which make Avon and Prop Joe so human also prove their undoing.¹⁴

Marlo, therefore, builds his organization around his image, avoiding the traits he exploited to undermine Avon and Prop Joe. He alters the values of West Baltimore's criminal society such that any actions that question his authority become punishable by death. Consequently, most rival drug dealers fear to challenge him, enabling him to seize control of West Baltimore.

Marlo succeeds because he ruthlessly works to strengthen his public image. He swiftly silences informants and retaliates against opposing gangs who attack his organization to ensure that his opponents recognize his power. An offender's guilt has no meaning to Marlo, as public perception trumps the truth. Michael asks Chris why they need to murder Junebug, who is rumoured to have called Marlo a "dick sucker," and Chris emphasizes the importance of perception: "Doesn't matter if he said it or not. People think he said it. Can't let that shit go" (5.2). Members of Marlo's organization are not safe from his tyranny, either.¹⁵ After Marlo's imprisonment, Snoop escapes suspicion due to her reputation for loyalty, yet Michael's reputation is doubted since he questioned Marlo too frequently. Marlo and Chris correctly believe that Snoop and Michael are innocent, yet Marlo still orders a hit on Michael. Chris says, "I don't see the boy snitching," but he has no answer when Marlo replies, "Neither do I, but you willing to bet your future on that?" (5.9). Marlo and Chris will not risk facing the possible consequences of allowing a possible informant, Michael, to go unpunished, and sentimentality does not influence Marlo's decision to order the murder.

In particular, his feud with Omar reveals the importance that Marlo places on his name. Omar begins the feud by robbing Marlo. The latter sustains minor losses from the robbery, and he retaliates against Omar to let others know he will punish any slights to his honour. However, when Omar slanders him on the street, Marlo becomes livid for the only time in the series:

Omar said what? . . . He used my name in the street? Talk, motherfucker. . . He called me a punk? . . . What the fuck you know about what I need on my mind, motherfucker? . . . When shit gets done here, go back on the streets and let those people know that word did not get back to me. My name is my name!" (5.9)

Being named a coward damages Marlo more than losing money. Marlo can afford to lose substantial sums of money, as he has more wealth than he can launder, but he will not tolerate any damage done to his reputation. By attacking what Marlo prizes most, Omar harms the drug kingpin more effectively than any other criminal, although his plan fails since Marlo learns of Omar's slander too late.¹⁶

¹³ Simon, interview with Heather Havrilesky, "David Simon on Cutting 'The Wire.'"

¹⁴ Davie, "The Wire Re-up: In Defence of Marlo."

¹⁵ The contrast between the fates of Dennis Wise and D'Angelo illustrates the importance of a good reputation in criminal society. Dennis, by silently taking a fall for the Barksdale organization, builds a great reputation while D'Angelo weakens his own by threatening to break his silence to the police. Hence, Dennis is allowed to walk away from the game in the third season whereas D'Angelo is assassinated in the second.

¹⁶ Fuggle argues that Marlo recognizes that "the strategies used to get to the top will also be used others against you." I would contend that Omar is the only character to use Marlo's strategies against him.

Because he conquers the West Baltimore drug scene so effectively and does not hesitate to murder to bolster his reputation, Marlo does not experience ethical dilemmas. Instead, his actions create dilemmas for other people, such as the children and police as I later discuss. Nonetheless, Marlo faces a choice at the end of *The Wire*. After Marlo is caught through an illegal wire tap, Levy imposes an ultimatum upon him to cease his criminal activities or face charges. In either case, he must abandon his drug empire, and he elects to avoid the long-term prison sentence. Under Levy's tutelage, he attempts to enter the business world and, ironically, has an opportunity to achieve the dream sought by Stringer. Marlo is unsatisfied by this life, and he leaves a high-level function and picks a fight with two drug dealers who fail to recognize him. Marlo appears agitated that his name has already been forgotten by other criminals; he continues to desire power and recognition in the drug trade, which suggests that he will be unable to adapt to the business world. Even when forced to leave the social sphere of his childhood, the importance of violently establishing his name remains deeply-embedded within Marlo. He cannot easily leave behind the shame culture of the streets.

Omar, the stickup artist, mirrors Marlo in that reputation is essential to his success, yet Omar interprets shame differently than other criminals. He believes in a personal code of ethics, as he tells Bunk Moreland:

BUNK. So, why'd you step up on this?

OMAR. Bird trifling, basically. Kill an everyday working man and all. I mean, don't get it twisted, I do some dirt, too, but I ain't never put my gun on nobody who wasn't in the game.

BUNK. A man must have a code.

OMAR. No doubt. (1.7)

He disparages Bird's lack of standards, and Omar's objective in following his code sets him apart from other criminals and Marlo, specifically. Marlo aims to further his reputation to gain power; his code involves doing whatever will enhance his reputation, and his only rule is to avoid harming his image. Omar's objective, in contrast, is to adhere to his code and not break his personal rules, such as not killing ordinary citizens. Unlike Marlo, he does not pursue reputation as its own goal, although Omar's actions improve his reputation. For example, since Omar is known for not harming citizens, McNulty is incredulous when Omar is charged with murdering an innocent bystander. "You ever know Omar to do a citizen?" McNulty asks Colicchio (4.6). Indeed, Omar is framed by Chris for that murder, and Omar avoids prosecution since McNulty and Bunk doubt his guilt since they know of his code. While he benefits from his reputation, Omar aims to live honourably in accordance with his code. Since he feels guilt when he breaks one of his rules, his code can be viewed as an internal sanction.

Nonetheless, Omar cannot remain faithful to his code, and he encounters an ethical dilemma in the fifth season. The dilemma occurs because Omar's code, which dictates that he keep his word and return favours to his friends, conflicts with itself after Marlo murders Butchie. In the fourth season, Bunk helps Omar avoid a prison sentence but orders Omar to stop killing:

And if you want to pay down any part of this debt, you know what you gotta do for me?

No more bodies. No more fucking bodies from you. No more comebacks or get-evens on this. No more killing. You owe me your word. (4.9)

Initially, he stays true to Bunk, and Omar manages to retaliate against Marlo by stealing the latter and Prop Joe's drug shipment without killing anyone. However, in the fifth season, after Marlo retaliates in turn by killing Butchie, Omar feels responsible for his friend's death. His sense of

honour demands that he return to Baltimore and seek vengeance against Marlo, yet he cannot murder Marlo without breaking his earlier promise to Bunk: the two are mutually exclusive actions. Consequently, Omar cannot make a choice that leads to a positive conclusion. If he keeps his word to Bunk, Marlo may kill more of Omar's friends and family until Omar returns to Baltimore. Thus, Omar elects to break his promise to Bunk, to the latter's disgust, and he attempts to kill Marlo, but the task proves too difficult and ends with Omar's death. Omar strives to adhere to his code, but he fails to live up to his personal standards because he puts himself in a situation in which he cannot act with honour. His decision to return to Baltimore and kill again is questionable, but Omar cannot see another option after Butchie's murder. This tragedy ends his and others' lives.

Still, Omar avoids moral dilemmas for most of the series because he aggressively uses his reputation to protect himself. While Marlo uses his name to create a criminal empire, Omar uses his to rob drug dealers against overwhelming odds. His social identity is his real identity, to use Lambert's words, and few drug dealers will confront his social identity; he succeeds since most criminals flee from him on sight. Eventually, Omar's reputation reaches mythical proportions, and criminals spread rumours that he cannot be killed. After failing to murder Marlo in an apartment, Omar leaps out a window and falls several stories but survives. Marlo and his subordinates survey the building in disbelief, and Marlo, at a loss to explain the situation, says, "That's some Spider-man shit there" (5.6). Omar's implausible escape prompts a comparison to a superhero since Marlo cannot imagine a non-fictional precedent. Even if he does not intentionally cultivate a public image and cares more about his personal sense of honour, as I argued, Omar is aware of his name's power. When Mouzone threatens him at gunpoint in the third season, Omar asks him, "So you gonna rob me now? Need I remind you who I am?" (3.11). Most people on the street run when they hear his name because they believe the rumours of his invincibility, and Omar takes advantage of their cowardice. Mouzone is one of the few who can challenge Omar since the former also possesses an impressive reputation.

However, since his power and safety are tied to his reputation, the strength of Omar's image depends on others believing his invincibility. Consequently, his death occurs after Kenard, a boy, sees through Omar's mythical social identity. While other criminals, including Michael, fear Omar even as he limps with a broken leg, Kenard recognizes Omar's weakened state and describes him as "gimpy as a motherfucker" (5.7). Conversely, Omar underestimates Kenard because of the latter's youth and lack of reputation and is blindsided. Thus, with his reputation dispelled, Omar is killed ingloriously by Kenard inside a convenience store. Regardless, Omar's reputation lives on after he dies, as stories of a more glorious death spread following his murder, since most dealers on the street, except Michael, cannot believe that a nameless boy killed the famous Omar. Kenard kills Omar, the man, but he cannot harm Omar's reputation.

II. Corner Kids and Schools

Although Marlo and Omar are removed from the game in the fifth season, their influence on children implies that shame will continue to affect their successors. Kenard may become the next Marlo while Michael's decision to rob drug dealers indicates that he will be the next Omar, and perhaps they will repeat their predecessors' tragedies. In West Baltimore, students are sensitive to public perception from a young age, as the "corner kids," juvenile drug dealers, demonstrate in *The Wire's* final two seasons. During Colvin's experimental school program, the children disagree on how to be a "good" corner kid. They argue about how severely to punish subordinates who steal drug profits, and Colvin asks them why subordinates must be punished. The children agree on the answer that one boy, Darnell, gives him: "There's always people

watching you" (4.8). Despite their youth, corner kids already guard their images, as they recognize the importance of establishing imposing reputations; other drug dealers quickly take advantage of any perceived weaknesses. The punishments that drug dealers and corner kids alike inflict upon any informants discourage children from ignoring the importance of reputation. As a result, the Baltimore schools are nearly incapable of preventing impoverished West Baltimore children from turning to crime.

Marlo, for his part, perpetuates shame culture on the streets by creating dilemmas for boys who disagree with his brutal methods. In the fourth season, Michael encounters an ethical dilemma when his stepfather, who molested him, returns home, and Michael fears his younger brother will also be abused but does not trust his teachers or social services; he solves his dilemma by asking Marlo for assistance, and the latter agrees on the condition that Michael becomes a soldier in his organization. Later, by altering the shame culture values in Baltimore, Marlo creates a dilemma for Bodie. The latter resents the changes made by Marlo: "This nigger kills motherfuckers just 'cause he can, not 'cause they snitching, not 'cause it's business, but 'cause this shit just come natural to him" (4.13). Bodie must choose between betraying Marlo by becoming an informant, perhaps the most shameful action in the drug trade, or permitting Marlo to disgrace the game as Bodie knows it. However, Bodie is seen talking with McNulty and is murdered before he can decide whether or not to betray Marlo. Most children and drug dealers accept Marlo's new rules since they fear his retribution and characters like Bodie and Michael are a minority. Even as he alters West Baltimore's drug trade, Marlo ensures that establishing reputation remains vital to future generations of criminals.

While Marlo influences children on the street, the students themselves punish boys or girls who break the rules of the game and inform the police. Most notably, Randy Wagstaff, one of Michael's friends, loses face and suffers severe bullying after he is revealed to be a "snitch." Immediately, the other school children ostracize Randy, and only a few of his friends stand by him. After class, a group of students assault Randy; later, teenagers set fire to his house and his foster mother is hospitalized with first-degree burns. As a result, Randy loses his guardian and, despite Sergeant Carver's efforts, is sent to a group housing project. His reputation as an informant precedes him to the group home, as the other group home children attack Randy for being a "Snitch Bitch" (4.13). The group home children force Randy to conform to their shame-based values, and his behaviour changes substantially after one year in the home. He publicly demonstrates his new hardened persona by refusing to cooperate with Bunk in a murder investigation, and he declares in the other children's hearing that he is "not a snitch" (5.6). Furthermore, after walking away from Bunk, Randy shoves down a younger child in the group home. Not only has the bullying altered him, Randy participates in the punishment of younger children who fail to guard their reputations, ensuring that shame culture will persist.

The Baltimore schools can do little to prevent children from becoming involved in the drug trade, and Colvin, as part of an experimental program, attempts to address this problem by dealing with children who have not been lost the game like Randy. He classifies the children into two groups: stoop kids and corner kids.¹⁷ The former group receives better parenting and behaves better inside classrooms, but corner kids already work in the drug trade and disrupt lessons. He and Parenti, a sociology professor, simply remove the corner kids from the regular classroom as part of their program. Colvin observes that the corner kids live in a society governed by radically

¹⁷ Initially, Parenti wishes to research inner-city youths who recently finished high school, but Colvin dismisses the notion as impossible: "Eighteen to twenty-one? By that age they're deep in the game" (4.3).

different norms than stoop kids and regular children. He describes the obstacles created by these differences:

You put a textbook in front of these kids, put a problem on the blackboard, teach them every problem in some statewide test, it won't matter. None of it. 'Cause they're not learning for our world; they're learning for theirs. (4.8)

In their world, the corner kids learn what constitutes shame and, in particular, the consequences of shameful actions such as informing.¹⁸ They disrupt classes since they view school as practice for the street; as Zenobia, a girl in Colvin's program, says, "We got our thing, but it's just part of the big thing" (4.8). To them, misbehaving in class is a small step towards committing serious crimes on the street.

Above all, the corner kids are acutely aware of other people's reactions, as demonstrated when Colvin takes them to a high-class restaurant in the episode titled "Know Your Place." Unlike in the classroom, the corner kids behave awkwardly and without confidence at the restaurant. Namond, one of the boys, laughs too loudly, and Zenobia remonstrates with him: "Shut it down, other people be looking at us" (4.9). Her response, reminiscent of D'Angelo's awkwardness at a restaurant in the first season, reveals her sensitivity towards other people's reactions. After they leave the restaurant, Namond turns up the volume when the radio plays a rap song, and Darnell expresses a desire to eat at McDonalds as the corner kids try to return to the environments that make them feel most comfortable. They recognize that the high-end restaurant is not their place, and, in order for his program to succeed, Colvin must accustom the corner kids to ordinary society outside the game.

However, Colvin's program fails before he can do so, even though he manages to reach through to some corner kids, since the schools and mayor, concerned with statistics and their image, shut down the experiment prematurely. The schools evaluate teachers based on the number of students who pass their classes, and teachers are instructed to teach students how to pass the test rather than relevant educational skills. Przybylewski, after he becomes a teacher, observes a parallel between the school and police department's manipulation of statistics: "Juking the stats. Making robberies into larcenies, making rapes disappear. You juke the stats and majors become colonels" (4.9). Colvin's classroom teaches valuable social skills to Namond, Zenobia, and Darnell but does not immediately improve their test scores. In a hearing, the mayor's chief of staff Steintorf summarizes the experiment as "tracking, plain and simple" and complains that Colvin and Parenti "wouldn't be teaching test curriculum" (4.13), and he quickly rejects their proposal since it will reflect poorly on the mayor. Colvin dismisses Parenti's optimistic claim that their study is valuable research and asks "When do this shit change?" (4.13). Colvin does not change the corner kids or school's emphasis on shame and image, and his success is limited to the few children in the class and Namond, in particular.

III. Police Officers and Statistics

The Baltimore Police Department's responsibilities include arresting drug dealers and preventing crime, but, ironically, the department mirrors the street's preoccupation with shame and reputation. This preoccupation undercuts the force's effectiveness, as commanding officers share more in common with men like Avon and Marlo than they realize. More than the city's schools, the police force is impaired by the "stat game," and police officers experience ethical

¹⁸ Informing on colleagues or peers is not only shameful among corner kids or drug dealers. It is also taboo within the police force. When Przybylewski uses excessive brutality on a child in the first season, Daniels protects the former's actions and explains to his alarmed wife that "You don't give up your people to IID. You don't do that" (1.2). Carver, in a parallel incident during the fifth season, breaks the taboo by writing up Officer Colicchio.

dilemmas because crime statistics do not distinguish between minor and major offenses. The statistics that benefit commanding officers' reputations favour a quantity of arrests over quality, so police commissioners are less interested in cases that eliminate major criminals. Thus, many commanding officers focus on police work that results in better statistics but may not effectively deter crime. This "stat game," uses statistics as measures of honour and shame when determining the police force's reputation; positive statistics accrue honour to a commanding officer while negative statistics shame one, influencing who is promoted and who is dismissed.

The dilemma with statistics is twofold: they do not accurately evaluate an officer's performance, and they are susceptible to manipulation. The homicide division publicly exhibits detectives' clearance rates on "the Board," where open cases appear in red ink and cleared ones are written in black. Simon, in his non-fiction *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, describes the failings of "the Board":

. . . every detective in the unit was willing to concede that the board was itself a flawed measurement, as it represented only the number of homicides for the year. A squad could spend three weeks of nightwork knee deep in police shootings, questionable deaths, serious assaults, kidnappings, overdose cases and every other kind of death investigation. Yet none of that would be reflected in black and red ink. (41)

The difficulty of murders varies, as some are easier to solve than others, and cases are often cleared due to chance rather than a detective's ability.¹⁹ Furthermore, statistics are often manipulated so that crimes appear less severe or are not recorded. Despite the imperfections of statistics, officers are measured by their numbers; Colvin is criticized for poor statistics in the Western District early in the third season, while Detective Santangelo is demoted from homicide for a low murder clearance rate at the end of the first season. Since statistics correspond to honour and shame, the police department must discard or reform its reliance on statistics in order to break away from the trappings of shame culture.

But few high-ranking officers are willing to abandon statistic-driven arrests, and they prioritize the maintenance of their public images over efficient police work. This prioritization can be innocuous, as seen in the homicide unit's shame-based contest in which detectives caught sleeping are embarrassed by having their neckties cut by colleagues. A sleeping detective's shame is displayed publicly after his tie is put on a board, while the detective who cuts the tie gains honour. The triviality of the contest stresses the importance of appearance in the homicide unit. The Baltimore police's response to the shooting of Detective Gregggs demonstrates the larger failings of the police force's emphasis on image.²⁰ Commissioner Frazier believes that Gregggs's injury needs to be redressed swiftly in order to reassure Baltimore citizens of their safety and remind criminals of the consequences of attacking an officer. However, rather than pursuing Avon Barksdale, the man responsible for Gregggs's injury, Frazier seeks to put "dope on the table." Before the shooting, Daniels' unit discovers Avon's drug safe house, but Daniels delays a raid to avoid alerting Avon to the investigation before his unit can secure stronger evidence to use against Avon in court. After the shooting, Burrell, who learns through Carver that Daniels is hiding evidence, orders Daniels to raid Avon Barksdale's drug storehouse prematurely, and the

¹⁹ Simon identifies two types of homicides: "whodunits and dunkers. Whodunits are genuine mysteries; dunkers are cases accompanied by ample evidence and an obvious suspect" (41). Naturally, a detective with the highest clearance may benefit from being assigned many "dunkers" and few "whodunits."

²⁰ Image does benefit police officers, at times. The badge and police uniform symbolize an officer's authority, and these visible symbols protect officers as criminals are hesitant to harm police. Notably, Gregggs is shot while undercover, without her badge in sight.

department exhibits the confiscated drugs and weapons to the media, and Frazier declares that "a message has been sent" (1.11). Thus, the police force preserves its image by aiming for a quick arrest instead of pursuing substantial charges against Avon, and the message sent by the hunt reveals the wiretap to Avon, sabotaging Daniels' detail and reducing Avon's prison sentence.

Daniels is one of *The Wire's* few commanding officers, aside from Colvin, to confront the dilemma caused by the discrepancy between statistical and qualitative arrests. Other commanding officers, such as Burrell, are compromised by their sensitivity to public perception. For instance, Burrell fails to halt Daniels's Barksdale investigation because the latter recognizes Burrell's fear of bad press. Daniels says, "If you'd wanted to do me, I'd already be done. But there ain't nothing you fear more than a bad headline, is there? You'd rather live in shit than let the world see you work a shovel" (1.12). In the fifth season, Burrell emphasizes his public standing again when Senator Davis, under prosecution for money laundering, threatens to blackmail him. Davis's threats fail since, as Burrell tells him, "with Carcetti in, people are watching. I got eyes on me now" (5.2). In both cases, Burrell is paralyzed because he fears to have his image tarnished. In contrast, Daniels rises through the chain of command because his criticism of statistic-driven policies impresses Mayor Carcetti.

On two notable occasions, including the series' final episode, Daniels encounters ethical dilemmas, and he chooses to risk his image and career both times. The first incident occurs when the Barksdale investigation is connected to Senator Davis, prompting Burrell to order Daniels to quietly close the case. Like McNulty, Daniels wishes to charge Avon, but he wishes to avoid angering his superiors to appease his career-oriented wife. Hence, the expectations of his superiors, his wife, McNulty, and his conscience come into conflict, and Daniels must choose between advancing his career or advancing the investigation. He chooses the latter and is passed up for promotion. Later, upon becoming Baltimore's police commissioner in the fifth season, Daniels encounters his second dilemma after Carcetti, in order to be elected governor, reverses his stance on crime and requires Daniels to produce positive crime statistics. As commissioner, Daniels' responsibility is to deter crime in the manner he views as most effective, but he will lose his position if he disobeys the mayor's wishes. Daniels' reputation suffers if he is dismissed, but his sense of honour also suffers if he heeds Carcetti's demands and endorses ineffective police work. Ultimately, although willing to ignore McNulty's false serial murderer to protect the mayor's, his own, the department's and Rhonda Perlman's reputations, Daniels refuses to reverse his stance concerning statistics:

I'll swallow a lie when I have to; I've swallowed a few big ones lately. But the stat games? That lie? It's what ruined this department. Shining up shit and calling it gold so majors become colonels and mayors become governors. Pretending to do police work while one generation fucking trains the next how not to do the job. (5.10)

Immediately, Nereese Campbell, Carcetti's eventual successor, blackmails Daniels to resign, as he, while not afraid to have his image tarnished, is unwilling to sabotage his ex-wife and Perlman's careers in the process.

Consequently, statistics, along with the emphasis on minor arrests, retain their prominence in the police department, and the police cannot prevent children from becoming drug dealers or drug dealers from committing murders. In spite of his rank and willingness to reform the police department, Daniels is powerless to change his institution. In the first season, referring to the discrepancy between career-minded and qualitative police work, he tells Carver, "Comes a day you're gonna have to decide whether it's about you or about the work" (1.13). Daniels decides to focus on the work in his career, and he, along with Freamon and McNulty, is driven

out of the force. On the other hand, men such as Burrell, Rawls, and Valchek, who seek to boost their public identities, are most likely to succeed within the institution. In order to stay employed in *The Wire's* Baltimore Police Department, officers must protect their reputations and images to some degree. Unsurprisingly, Daniels fails to reform the department because he cannot erase the elements of shame culture that affect the police, since other men and women care about their reputations; these people are rewarded, while officers like Daniels who oppose the institution's ideology are punished. While he can choose whether to prioritize his career or the work, Daniels lacks the authority to determine if the department will focus on statistics or not.

IV. Politicians and Public Image

The politicians in *The Wire* are unwilling to grant Daniels the necessary authority, however, as they are preoccupied with their reputations because public image determines their political advancement. Negative public perception costs them votes and elections, and their livelihoods depend on reputation. The first mayor in *The Wire*, Royce, loses the trust of Baltimore and, desperate to reclaim his status, superficially changes his image by shaving his moustache and emphasizing his race by wearing the colours of the African National Congress. The corrupt Senator Davis, when finally charged with fraud, successfully wins public favour to escape punishment. After agreeing to manage Carcetti's campaign, Theresa D'Agostino tells him to improve his public image:

Do you think politics is only about winning the argument? That whoever has the right fact at the right moment wins? . . . It's not just facts. It's how you use them, and, Tommy, when you get hold of a fact or two, you go smartass and start beating on people. (3.8)

Winning arguments will aid him, but she stresses that he must also appear likeable, and he develops a kinder persona and is elected mayor. Of *The Wire's* major politicians, Carcetti best illustrates the moral quandaries of public office, and his decisions significantly affect all of Baltimore. Like Daniels, Carcetti initially must choose between his career advancement and the needs of Baltimore, but, unlike the former, he elects to prioritize his career and public image.

Despite building his campaign on promises to reform the police department, Carcetti shows early signs that public image is paramount to him. After being elected mayor of Baltimore, Carcetti refuses to have an affair with D'Agostino when she offers herself to him as a reward for his victory. Earlier, he cheats on his wife with a different woman, and he seems attracted to D'Agostino; whether or not they had sexual relations in the past is unclear. Carcetti's thoughts are not shown to the audience via narration or another cinematic technique, so his reasons for refusing her are ambiguous. Possibly, he refuses her due to guilt, but guilt seems unlikely to inhibit Carcetti considering his earlier willingness to cheat on his wife. Regardless, upon becoming mayor, Carcetti is more sensitive to his public image, especially after he decides to participate in the gubernatorial election. Earlier, Royce's reputation is endangered when Herc accidentally witnesses Royce receiving fellatio from a secretary in his office; Carcetti's career advancement would also be at risk if knowledge of an affair with D'Agostino spread. Guilt and shame might both influence Carcetti, but Royce's incident and other scenes demonstrate the necessity for politicians to maintain positive reputations. Certainly, Carcetti recognizes the value of his image, as he abandons his promise to reform the department when he believes accepting a bailout will damage his reputation more than breaking his campaign promises.

The ethical dilemma Carcetti faces when he must choose between accepting a humiliating state bailout or refusing it so that he may later run for governor marks a turning point in the series. Carcetti's dilemma is similar to Arthur's in Malory's *Morte*, as both will lose face regardless of their choices. Norman Wilson, Carcetti's advisor, summarizes the dilemma: "If we

don't take the money, it looks like we're shorting our own kids. We take the money—we're giving up local control of education, which is gonna lose us a lot of middleclass black folks" (4.12). Nerese Campbell tells him that the city council will criticize him, regardless of his choice. Carcetti must either publically humiliate himself before the governor or be the mayor of a financially-crippled city—he cannot avoid being shamed since Carcetti's image suffers in either scenario. Accepting the bailout would allow him to remain true to his promise to reduce crime and benefit the most people; however, Carcetti chooses to reject the bailout since he believes that he will lose more votes from public humiliation than he will from conceding local control of education and solving the school's budget crisis. As advisor Michael Steintorf reminds him, "Kids don't vote" (4.13). Wilson, on the other hand, criticizes the decision for its short-sightedness: "He shorts the police department, the crime rate stays up, he ain't no governor, neither, just a weak-ass Mayor of a broke-ass city" (5.1).

As Wilson's assessment suggests, Carcetti's decision harms Baltimore in the short term. He justifies his decision to refuse a bailout by convincing himself he will later enact the necessary reforms upon becoming governor, but much of the series' later conflict is linked to his choice to leave the money on the table. The school system remains flawed, and Colvin's experimental classroom is deemed too risky and loses its funding. The debt cripples the police department and prompts McNulty to invent a serial killer to obtain funding to investigate Marlo. Marlo takes advantage of his freedom to increase his criminal activities; one of his victims is Butchie, and that murder later leads to Omar's death, among others. The decision costs Carcetti the trust and respect of Wilson, Colvin, Daniels, and most of the police department. Additionally, once committed to becoming governor, Carcetti discards his principles and abandons his pledge to Daniels to focus on quality arrests. In the long term, Carcetti perhaps can accomplish more good for Baltimore as the Governor of Maryland, but, by protecting his image, he devastates the city in the fifth season. He can be further criticized since he loses face regardless of his decision, and accepting the bailout would not have necessarily harmed his gubernatorial chances. By focusing on his career, he fails to address the problems in Baltimore; the school system and police department are not improved while crime is not reduced. Since the series ends shortly after he becomes governor, it is uncertain if the city later benefits from his compromised standards. Regardless, the fear of shame paralyzes Carcetti and compromises his ability to reform the city, and his fear reaffirms the importance of shame in other institutions. Because Carcetti lacks the courage to show weakness publicly, the corrupt state of *The Wire's* Baltimore remains unchanged during his tenure as mayor, as the faces in power change while the social issues remain unsolved.

For the criminal organizations, children, police officers, and politicians, the presence of shame culture compromises characters' abilities to make decisions. In most ethical dilemmas, the most logical option is to choose whatever will boost a person's reputation; the benefits of accepting shame culture and prioritizing reputation overwhelm the consequences of ignoring shame. Yet, even minor choices that prioritize reputation may have devastating consequences. Lieutenant Carver, in the final season, realizes the importance of his decisions while talking with his former partner Herc: "It all matters. I know we thought it didn't, but it does" (5.4). Herc, while attempting to protect his reputation by finding a missing camera in the fourth season, inadvertently creates chaos for Bubbles and Randy. When Carcetti rejects the Maryland governor's bailout, the police force and schools are crippled by a financial crisis. Consequently, the surveillance on Marlo slackens, and he begins killing again. The tragedy in the series is that it is rational for characters to accept the current state of Baltimore and look after

their personal interests, rather than attempting to reform their institutions and risk punishment. Consequently, shame culture causes the series' institutions to function like Greek gods since characters lack the ability to resist the social demands of shame, similar to how Greek protagonists cannot triumph over the gods.

Moreover, institutions suffer collectively due to their inability to cooperate with one another. For instance, in the first season, cooperation between the FBI and Daniels' detail on the Barksdale organization falls apart since the FBI and Baltimore Police Department have different objectives; the FBI wishes to make agreements with Avon to investigate political corruption whereas Daniels' unit wishes to imprison Avon. The two cannot compromise and agree, so neither accomplishes its objective, enabling Senator Davis and the Barksdale organization to create future problems in Baltimore. When characters such as Carcetti encounter ethical dilemmas, they usually choose what is most advantageous for them as individuals or their respective institutions, rather than considering the needs of the larger majority. There are few people like McNulty, Colvin, and Daniels who are willing to sacrifice their own reputations and public images in order to improve Baltimore as a whole. However, even they have limits—Colvin caves in to pressure when the livelihoods of his subordinates are threatened. Daniels is willing to expose McNulty's fake serial killer plot but is unwilling to risk the careers of Rhonda and his ex-wife.

In general, characters are reticent to undermine their careers by displeasing superiors, and those who do attempt to do so, like Colvin, are quickly displaced. On the other hand, Colvin's experiments in the third and fourth seasons suggest that it may be possible to reduce the prevalence of shame culture. His Hamsterdam experiment substantially alters street culture and the relationship between drug dealers and police officers. Arguably, these changes improve Baltimore, as children do not need to work the corners in Hamsterdam, and violent crime drops in the area; at one point, a man turns himself in for a murder to preserve Colvin's experiment. Moreover, the Hamsterdam experiment shows a different way of life to drug dealers that is less dependent on shame and the violent territorial disputes associated with West Baltimore's drug trade. Without such radical changes to the culture on the street, corner kids and criminals may not be aware that alternatives to shame culture exist. Additionally, Colvin's program in the fourth season improves the behaviour of at least three students, Namond, Darnell, and Zenobia. Notably, Namond becomes an award-winning debater when given a chance to leave the street.

However, both experiments are cancelled due to the risk they present to key people's images, and the potentially positive changes are undone by those who fear a loss of reputation. For such reasons, shame culture persists in institutions and limits the agency of individuals in *The Wire*. Due to the necessity of preserving reputations, characters lack the necessary motivation to attempt positive reformations since taking strides towards change is only acceptable whenever such actions benefit their public images. Therefore, experimentation is often discouraged. It may be in people's interest to say that they want to change matters since doing so can boost their public images, but their actions inevitably fail to match their words since they lack the power, individually, to fulfill their promises.

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