

Erin Wilcox

December 2, 2004

English 201

Dr. Koster

Individualism and Society Throughout the Ages

Individualism and its defining importance are determined by society and its standards set to shape and form a particular ideal. Throughout the Medieval, Early Modern, and Neo-Classical eras, an important recurring theme in British life and literature has been the significance of an individual within society and how the individual relates to societal conventions. Amongst these varying periods, this struggle has transformed and adapted according to new prevailing conventions in each social structure and is represented by various works as well as some author's lives during those particular times. Individual-societal relationships of the Middle Ages are best represented by the Heroic elegy "The Wanderer," found in the Exeter Book as well as *Le Morte D'arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory. Edmund Spenser's poetry and William Shakespeare's play "The Tempest," are works that embody the individualist role in society in the Early Modern period of British Literature. The individual-societal relationship of the Neo-Classical era is best represented by the lives and writings of Samuel Pepys, Jonathan Swift, and Jane Austen.

British literature and lives in the Middle Ages were based on conventions of loyalty and devotion to a lord and master; the emphasis placed on the welfare of the society, as opposed to the individual, is what most shaped the individualist role. In the heroic poem "The Wanderer," the importance of belonging to a society is the main

emphasis and, throughout the poem, the speaker is lamenting the loss of his lord as well as his loss of a society in which to belong. The grieving wanderer states, “Time and again at the day’s dawning I must mourn all my afflictions alone. There is no one still living to whom I dare open the doors of my heart” (151). In this heroic society it was understood that once your clan or group of associates was gone, that was it; there is no place left for you to go. The wanderer is not just lamenting the loss of his lord and friends however, he is also lamenting the sense of failure he feels in not having perished along with the others, this being another key element in defining the individual in the medieval, heroic, society.

While the association with a society and a lord-protector are of great importance, also included in the conventions of the time are the ideals of virility and the characteristics that embody this ideal. In lines 65-69, the ideals of virility held by this society are set forth in a moving statement by the wanderer: “...a wise man must be patient, neither too passionate nor too hasty of speech, neither too irresolute nor too rash in battle; not too anxious, too content, nor too grasping, and never too eager to boast before he knows himself” (151). These statements are parallel with the ideals held in the society being affected by this poem. There was a sentiment expressing careful and very deliberate confessions and actions as the acceptable social orders of the time. People in this era were as a whole very conservative and devoted to the rules of the church and very much opposed to the showy display of an imagination and unyielding in their positions of “stories” as lies. Gradually, even in the Middle Ages, a change in loyalty toward the monarchy became evident as confusion among the people ensued when the York and Lancaster families fought for the English throne in the War of the Roses.

Sir Thomas Malory, writing during the War of the Roses, is quite obviously inspired by the confusion provoked by the two embattled families. In his prose narrative, *Le Morte D'arthur*, there begins a shift in the great importance of society to the more selfish importance of the individual and the fading away of the society motivated by love and loyalty to the lord-protector, and in this case, the king. Queen Guinevere is accused of causing the demise of one of King Arthur's knights and is thus in need of someone defending her honor. The king then practically begs one of his other knights to do that very service for him and while it should have been done with pleasure in the heroic society, the knight reluctantly accepts the responsibility. "My lord...ye require me the greatest thing that any man may require me. And wit you well, if I grant to do battle for the queen I shall wrath many of my fellowship of the Table Round" (264). As seen in this quote by Sir Bors, a man's individual pride has now taken place of the honor once found in dedicating a man's life to serving his king.

The Early Modern period not only brought about a change in socio-economic mobility, but it also brought about a change in the individual and how the individual relates to the society in which he/she lives. In the Middle Ages an individual strove to blend in with a group, be it fitting in with and winning the graces of his lord as in "The Wanderer," or wanting to be accepted by a particular group, not necessarily associated with the king as in *Le Morte Darthur*; individualism-shaping societal conventions in the Early Modern period shift from the overwhelming importance of society to the individual as being of growing importance.

Self-fashioning of the individual was the theme of the Early Modern period of British literature. No longer did people accept that the position they were born in is set

without any possible way to change it. Society was changing in that upward mobility was becoming more common and people were now able to make names for their families by way of new money procured by trade. *Sprezzatura* and counterfeiting are a few other terms defining the individualist role in this “Modern” society.

Sprezzatura was the goal of every person: to be graceful and appear to be genius without allowing anyone to see all of the hard work and effort put into each accomplishment. For those who could not truly commit to the idea of self-fashioning or changing oneself into something else indefinitely, there was another option: counterfeiting. Counterfeiting, or pretending to be something that one is not, was popular with the lower classes especially, who could not possibly change themselves completely.

Throughout this early modern period, writers such as Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare and John Milton, became known for their display of *sprezzatura* while characters in their works became known for their self-fashioning and counterfeiting. Poetry became one of the more popular outlets in which individuals would accomplish themselves and display their *sprezzatura*, their grace and ability to be, or give the illusion of being “easily” accomplished. Of the many poets coming forth throughout this era one of the most accomplished, possessing great *sprezzatura*, was Edmund Spenser because of his creation of the Spenserian sonnet, a creative and challenging combination of both the popular Italian and English Sonnets.

Spenser’s poetry contained the five-rhyme constraint of the Italian sonnets and was set in the frame-work of the English sonnets, also at times cleverly utilizing Old-English language. An example of his writing comes from *Amoretti* and is sonnet number 68; “Most glorious lord of lyfe that on this day, / Didst make thy triumph over death and

sin, / And having harrowed hell, didst bring away/ Captivity thence captive us to win” (956). In order to make some of his rhymes work, Spenser chose to spell some of the words in a creative manner in which to get the message across and maintain the continuity of his scheme. Poetry, however, is not the only means in which writers could put their capabilities on display. William Shakespeare, like Spenser, was a poet, but also carried over his skillful writing into play-writing. His playwriting not only displayed his skillfulness so appealing to his society, but also put a focus on other popular social conventions of the time such as the self-fashioning and counterfeiting seen throughout the characters in his play, *The Tempest*.

Two characters in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare that best exemplify the two differing forms of shaping oneself are Prospero, the magician and rightful Duke of Milan, and his brother Antonio, counterfeiting as the Duke of Milan. Prospero throughout the play indicates his preoccupation with his individual needs in various statements he makes regarding his past and his motives for his present actions, such as in causing the tempest. In Act 1, scene 1 of the play, *The Tempest*, as presented in the *Longman Anthology* book 1B, Prospero, in revealing his past to his daughter states, “...Prospero the prime duke being so reputed in dignity, and for the liberal arts without a parallel; those being all my study, and to my state grew stranger...(1298).” In this very statement he shows the increasing importance of learning and self-fashioning in his personal life by admitting that his studies took precedence over his duties to society, and in his case, the people of Milan.

Another example of Prospero’s self-fashioning is when he states in the Epilogue, “...now my charms are all o’erthrown, and what strength I have’s mine own, which is

most faint” (1345). In this Prospero has revoked his individual magical powers and is prepared to “fashion” himself in such a manner as to better serve the people of Milan, which ultimately reflects the still prevailing importance of the society as a whole as opposed to the individual. Antonio, juxtaposed to his brother Prospero, is defined as counterfeiting, or pretending to be something he is not. In Act 1, scene 1 in *The Tempest*, Prospero says in relation to his accusation of his brother’s counterfeit, “...the government I cast upon my brother/ and to my state grew stranger...thy false uncle-” (1298).

According to Prospero, Antonio thought of his own individual interests and took advantage of the situation he was in to pretend to be something he really was not, he was counterfeiting the position of dukedom in order to improve his status in society, displaying the individualist ambition. Counterfeiting, being associated with those of the lower class, also indicates a lower intelligence in the individual. Prospero continues to speak of his brother by saying, “...to credit his own lie, he did believe/ he was indeed the Duke, out o’ the substitution and executing th’ outward face of royalty...” (1299). Thus, Antonio, possessing a lower mind than Prospero, in order to make his counterfeit more effective, began to believe his own lie the more he attempted to make it seem realistic to the rest of society, thus feeding his selfish and hungry individualist ambition.

As we enter into the Neo-Classical era of British Literature, there is yet another shift in society and how an individual relates to that particular societal structure. With overwhelming economic stability, the rest of the world came to be viewed as sub-standard in the collective British mind-set. As a result of this structural stability there was also a collective complacency among the populous where individuals found themselves immersed in free, idle time and thus spent an increased amount of time on

self-examination and improvement, taking the early modern ideas of self-fashioning to another level. Façades also took the place of counterfeiting, adding a certain elegance once lacking from falsehood, a giant leap from the conventions of the Middle ages, where anything false was considered a lie and thus a very bad and sinful thing. Along with the ever popular self-examining, there was also a newfound acceptability of examining the society as a whole. Self-examination was performed by many individuals with the introduction of diary writing, but few were able to master social-examination, which required wit, also known as verbal *sprezzatura* or the ability to express one's ideas in an intelligent and humorous manner with the inclusion of irony.

Pepys was a writer well known for his self-examination in his diary writing. In his writings not only did he describe his life and affairs in detail, but he also described society, its fashions and so forth, in great descriptive detail. An example of his explicit detail in one of his diary entries begins “[31 July 1665] Up, and very betimes, by 6 a-clock, at Deptford; and there find Sir G. Carteret and my lady ready to go—I being in my new colored-silk suit and coat, trimmed with gold buttons and gold broad lace round my hands, very rich and fine” (2091). Pepys spends quite a bit of time describing and praising what he is wearing and with his attention to detail; it is possible to picture him in his silk suit with the gold lace. All of the entries of his diary are as descriptive and make it easy to imagine a day in the life of Mr. Pepys. His style of writing is, however, somewhat varied from the writing of someone such as Jonathan Swift, also a great writer of this time. Swift specialized in satire, one such work being “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.”

Throughout his work “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.,” Jonathan Swift utilizes his gift for satirizing and builds a foundation in his literature that others will attempt to match for years to come. This poem contains self-examination of himself and his position in the society to which he belongs. Not only does he write about how he feels of his work and his life, but he also attempts to write the feelings and thoughts other he knew might possess after he has passed on. Toward the beginning of his poem, Swift writes with much insight how every person feels, but perhaps does not feel is appropriate to say. “What poet would not grieve to see, his brethren write as well as he? But rather than they should excel, he’d wish his rivals all in Hell” (2450). With his wit and clever way with words and rhyme, Swift utilizes popular writing standards of his time to successfully write and share his ideas with others; his verse is funny, but yet ironic in that every person can relate to this very sentiment. He later goes on to express how he feels his friends and acquaintances might behave after his death.

Swift mentions that his closest friends will spend a certain amount of time grieving for him, but then goes on to say of others that “indifference clad in wisdom’s guise/ all fortitude and mind supplies: / for how can stony bowels melt,/ in those who never pity felt;/ when *we* are lashed, *they* kiss the rod,/ resigning to the will of God” (2455). His prediction is that others will not mourn, but accept his death as the will of God and move on without much feeling. While Pepys and Swift demonstrated the conventions of the time in their own lives more so than just in their writing, Jane Austen not only lived as an individual under the conventions of her time, but also wrote about the struggles her characters had in dealing with individuality as opposed to the conventions in that very same society in which she lived.

Austen applied the conventions of society and its effects on individualism within the characters in her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, which mirrored the society in which she lived, representing to the fullest the individual experiences faced by her readers on a daily basis. In the time that Austen wrote, the woman as an individual as well as her role in society were placed under much scrutiny prompted by male writers such as Reverend James Fordyce and Dr. John Gregory. The two men produced books lecturing young women on their conduct in order to produce a pleasing front to men and forego completely their own individual needs in such aspects as intellectual stimulation.

Of the two writers, Dr. John Gregory lends more of his writing to specific conduct he values to be most important in young women in an excerpt of his work, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774). In this he mentions modesty as being the greatest and most desirable quality in women, while wit is “the most dangerous talent you can possess.” Humor is to be used carefully, but even more surprising is his belief that something such as “good sense” should be guarded carefully. He also more bluntly states to his malleable readers, “if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men...” According to Dr. Gregory, intelligent women are more or less undesirable to men, perhaps because they take away that masculine security of being wholly dominant.

With respect to the social conventions of the time in the book as well as when it was written, there are two characters who specifically break away, to a degree, from these set social conventions; thus promoting their own individualist notions. Elizabeth, as well as Darcy set themselves apart, in a sense, from the socially acceptable ideals of the individual. Elizabeth remarks to Lady Catherine, toward the end of the novel regarding

her relation to Mr. Darcy, “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me.” At a time when projected appearance to neighbors as well as “to any person so wholly unconnected” with an individual, Elizabeth’s statement is very bold and revolutionary. Mr. Darcy, too, appears to bypass some of the set social conventions for men and their individuality. His views do not seem to correspond to the writing by Dr. Gregory adamantly expressing how, especially the display of “good sense,” are unattractive to men. Rather, Mr. Darcy gained more respect for Elizabeth, despite her uncouth family, in part because of her possession of “good sense.”

Social conventions and their affects on individuals have certainly altered throughout the Medieval, Early Modern, and Neo-Classical eras. The Medieval ideal was centered on the importance of community and society surpassing the importance of the individual, while the Early Modern movement toward self-fashioning and the individual being able to change themselves as well as society. And finally, the Neo-Classical era took self-fashioning to another level and brought about defining standards for individuals to attempt to live by, or in some cases totally disregard. In each differing time-period, the individual, however, was expected to follow specific societal conventions, whether the idea of individualism commanded any respect or regard from its shaping society.

Works Cited

- Anonymous. "The Wanderer." Damrosch 1A: 151-153
- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Eds. Claudia Johnson and Susan Wolfson. NY: Pearson Education Inc., 2003.
- Damrosch, David, Ed. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. 2nd Edition Vol. 1A-"The Middle Ages." NY: Addison-Wesley , 2003.
- Damrosch, David, Ed. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. 2nd Edition, Vol. 1B- "The Early Modern Period." NY: Addison-Wesley, 2003.
- Damrosch, David, Ed. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. 2nd Edition, Vol. 1C-"The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century." NY: Addison-Wesley, 2003.
- Gregory, Dr. John. "A Father's Legacy to His Daughters (1774)." "Contexts." *Pride and Prejudice*. Eds., Claudia Johnson and Susan Wolfson. NY: Pearson Education, 2003.
- Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*. Damrosch 1A: 252-279.
- Pepys, Samuel. "The Diary." Damrosch 1C: 2085-2100.
- Shakespeare, William. "The Tempest." Damrosch 1B:1294-1295.
- Spenser, Edmund. "Amoretti 68." Damrosch 1B: 956-957.
- Swift, Jonathan. "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D." Damrosch 1C: 2449-2461.