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Title: "Tyranny of Public Opinion," by Henry B. Hamsberger

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Duration of Public Opinion.

Public opinion is the conclusion of one, or, at most of a few minds. It is commonly the sentiment or the inference of one man adopted and published by ~~the mouth~~ of many. Originating in intemperance of feeling, when the intellect is clouded by prejudice, or starting up submissively undirected by reflection or perchance, uttered after investigation, it is as often wrong as right. Authority gives it birth, and authority secures its circulation and adoption.

From the earliest times ~~and~~, false public notions have held dominion over the understandings and affections of mankind. The random quips of the literary empiric; the heavy and half formed fancies of the philosophical skeptic; and the bold denunciation of the noble leader have at all times lighted up the mad passions of men, and then, tied down their wills by the strong cords of error, - the public fiat commands obedience and ^{all} it homage; Ignorance and crime; power and science; pride and humility alike ~~run~~ ^{follow} its notice. They who should stop and retrench it are its vilest slaves.

Respect to the senior by no means implies contempt to the junior. But who feels the power of the tyrant more than the latter? The pride of years chokes magnanimity and it will not bear to learn from the severer study and riper knowledge of youth. It betrays partly the petty desire to direct and partly substantial ignorance - underrating the ability

of three and twenty years, are the parents of this despotism. The one has penetrated into time fifty years; the other only half as far, and how can the latter instruct the former? Why tolerate the dictatorial tones of presumption? The former has rolled toward the grave, mentally a waste, a child in learning a man, in years only; the latter has stocked his intellectual garner as man, in letters—in all but years—

The most potent difficulty with which a young man who starts ^{into} life has to contend is the stern and malevolent ~~power~~ ^{force} of the ill grounded public opinion, ^{which} meets him at the threshold; it deals with him at arms length, it casts suspicion around all his movements. The hope artlessly cherished, of friendly encouragement, fails; doubt looks in every countenance; his buoyant spirits are chilled; his motives are impugned, and his acts misunderstood or misrepresented. If success crown his efforts, it is only by dragging up or casting off public opinion; the merit is in himself not in others. Overrating itself it undervalues him. The distance mentally and physically between manhood and middle age, falls far short of the usual computation. —

The world judges very partially. The stripling pampered in the lap of luxury has no barriers to surmount; the noble falls back; he has no rival—no jealous and carping competitors; his progress of course is hailed with approbation. Slow is it with the son of poverty? Let him advance his foot beyond his humble abode—overstep the limit set to

to his cost. Let the concurrence of circumstances or his own masculine energy lift him a little above his prescribed sphere, and the jaundiced insinuation of quarrelsome associates; the sharp sallies of captious equals, and the hot ~~blasts~~^{breath} of jealous superiors ~~beat~~^{blast} him at every step.

How does it bear on immunities of rank and cast; what class and fashion may ordain, is potent, moral, beseeching and wise. Some, tho' it be penny garbed, in credit, enjoys a primary license to act at will. Honest indignance is more circumscribed, it has bounds set to its gambelings. What in the one is regarded as an unpardonable indecency is in the other a modest frankness. In both it may be censurable, but the people see with only one eye.

"Criticism" a noted writer particularly defines to be, "to tickle; to slash and to plaster." Many a writer had become sensible of the forceful truth embodied in the definition. After he has consumed his time; collected his materials; given them shape and proportion; prostrated the energies of mind and body; when the bosom throbs with the fervent confidence of a generous response to his efforts, a popular review eagerly seizes up, and scans the production, and in one fell stroke of some witting critic, the purest conceptions, the noblest thoughts and the sublimest imagery, are consigned

to unending oblivion, or perhaps to neglect only till some less waspish judge lifts it from abasement and gives it rank according to its worth. Here permanently public opinion is made; and here too it exercises the most severe tyranny. On the dictum of the self-appointed voice hangs the life of the work. —

Public opinion is no where better enthroned, than in the field of politics. Above all others the movements of statesmen are most warily watched. Every obliquity from the line of duty is narrowly scrutinized; his suggestions weighed; his measures sifted; his association guarded; his zeal measured; every sentiment is probed into, and every neglect rigidly examined. Should he be so unfortunate as to shift his position, let it be from pure or corrupt motives he is at once banished without the political enclosure; confidence is instantly withdrawn; he is shaken off with scorn: and while he is regarded on one side as a traitor, on the other he is pelted with a vigilant distrust. — Pursuing not un frequently a middle course, or poised in uncertainty between the choice of creeds, he is crushed between the clashing trains of adverse tenets in the very passage out of one set of opinions into another. — In every department of life the oppression of public opinion is sensibly felt. Repudiated in all by a few — they yet want either the

strength or the courage to correct it. It may not
always be equally perceptible, altho' existent to a
limitable extent. So us it may not be as manifestly
obscured as the cruel bigotry of the Puritans, who made
old age a crime, and consigned to infamy, the grey
hairs and the wrinkled brow, under the delusion of a
wide spread public error. Time and the discrimination
of intelligence may relax it, but while wild and
inordinate passions inhabit the human breast, it
never can be banished.

H. B. Hamberger

June 21st 1841

Commencement Oration of Henry B. Harnsberger, Class of 1841
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

Tyranny of Public Opinion

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