

## The Portrayal of the Private Sphere in Literature: 1500-1815

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As an example of a 'site of national historic formation' (Austen, 2004 p. xvi) Lynch takes the view that Austen's *Persuasion* is not just the personal story of Anne Elliott but that 'Austen takes pains to lodge the story of Anne's recovery of happiness in the interstices of the historical record so that it is framed on both sides by great public events' (p. xvii). This essay examines what Lynch means by 'a site of national historical formation' and how authors use different representations of the private sphere to illuminate the broader historical contexts that their characters inhabit.

When describing the lives of their characters an author is not only telling a story but is also commenting, directly or indirectly, on the society in which the characters' story is told. These characters always have a societal context to their actions, concerns, thoughts and motivations. Inevitably therefore, the novel tells us something about the author's view of that society. By telling their story, the author also contributes to a body of documentation that characterises the state of the nation at that time (a 'site of national historic formation'). For example, In *Persuasion*, Austen writes about England (her own nation) during the Napoleonic wars (her own times).

The thesis of this essay is that all authors provide such representations, either directly or indirectly. An author may consciously choose to do so because of their personal motivations, or they may do so unconsciously as a side effect of the process of creating their poem, drama or novel. Still, it is an inevitable outcome of the author's work that their characters will in some way document the world the author has placed them in. Such a broad thesis is difficult to address in a relatively short essay, given the heterogeneous nature of the

poetic, dramatic and prose works written in the period 1500 to 1800. The approach here will be to select two widely differing works, and thus show this thesis has general application. But before doing this, it is helpful to examine what Lynch meant by ‘a site of national historical formation’.

The private sphere is the domestic realm inhabited by ordinary people where ‘complex interactions between individual lives and larger social structures’ are navigated (Austen, 2004, p. xvi). Activities in the private sphere might be expected to occur in such private spaces as drawing rooms, shared country walks, bedrooms and carriage rides while other spaces such as churches, Parliament, the Assembly Rooms and the army camp are often the location of the public sphere. The distinction can however be blurred; for example, the public house or the village street can often be found at the border between the private and the public. It is not the author’s literature itself that is Lynch’s ‘site of national historic formation’, but the author’s portrayal of that private sphere within the author’s work.

Two widely differing authors and their works will now be considered: Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and Lady Montagu’s *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Shakespeare was a commercially successful professional author, writing for a mostly public audience. In 1590s Elizabethan London, in a single day, more than a thousand people a day might experience a play such as *Julius Caesar* in 'a socially mixed audience' at the Rose Theatre (Astington, 2001, p. 111-112). Therefore, Shakespeare carefully selected his themes and subject material to meet the 'demands of a playgoing public and compete for an audience with material offered by rival playing companies' (p. 112). On the other hand, Montagu's epistolary work is a collection of personal correspondence ‘with other aristocratic women in England and with a number of prominent literary men’ (Heffernan and O’Quinn, 2013, p. 13). Montagu on the other hand, wrote for a narrow social stratum with no intent of financial gain, and her work was only published more widely after her death. Montagu and Shakespeare, therefore, have

entirely different authorial motivations. However, their character's private spheres both provide us with considerable illumination of the historical concerns of their times.

During this period, the literature of social comment was very much the currency of polite culture and the society of the powerful and the wealthy. Much of Lady Montagu's letters are relevant to the role of the female, not only within the public institution of marriage and family but also within sexual relationships, a supposedly private act laden with public meaning. Her letters provide a discourse that is initially private (or at least limited to a small set of friends and correspondents) but is eventually made public after her death and which illuminates her personal views of the public issues of ownership of women within social structures such as marriage, consent, misogyny and freedom.

In letter 36, in May 1717, Montagu writes to the Abbe Conti and discusses two Turkish religious practices which she finds 'so odd to me I could not believe it' (p. 143). The first relates to divorce:

Yet 'tis certainly true that when a man has divorced his wife in the most solemn manner, he can take her again upon no other terms than permitting another man to pass a night with her, and there are some examples of those that have submitted to this law rather than not have back their beloved. (p. 144)

This is not the full story, as there are at least three types of divorce in Islamic law. However, Montagu, chooses to describe only the most sensational option, where the divorced wife must sleep with another man, so insulting the original husband, should the original husband wish her back (Rycaut, 1668, quoted in Hall, Sagal and Zold, 2017, p. 2). Although her writing style is often factual, descriptive and apparently authoritative, it should be remembered that Montagu is using her editorial judgement in selectively describing the private and public spaces she experiences.

Montagu further notes that ‘any woman that dies unmarried is looked upon to die in a state of reprobation’ (Heffernan and O’Quinn, 2013, p. 144). The oriental view is that ‘the creation of woman is to increase and multiply, and she is only properly employed in the works of her calling when she is bringing children or taking care of them, which are all the virtues that God expects from her’ (p. 144). Here, Montagu is providing her readers and indeed future generations significant anthropological value. She shows how belief systems affect customs such as marriage and social responses to death. The elderly spinster or widow is a valid social and religious position in Montagu's western world, but in the Oriental women, ‘many ... will not remain widows ten days for fear of dying in the reprobate state of a useless creature’ (p. 144). Montagu also states:

Our vulgar notion that they do not own women to have any souls is a mistake. ’Tis true they say they are not of so elevated a kind and therefore must not hope to be admitted into the paradise appointed for the men, who are to be entertained by celestial beauties; but there is a place of happiness destined for souls of the inferior order, where all good women are to be in eternal bliss. (p. 144)

Montagu is correct in disagreeing with the westerner’s perception of the oriental view of soulless women. This is confirmed by the Qur’an which states that women and not just men will enter Paradise: ‘I will deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labours. You are the offspring of one another’ (The Qur’an, 2021, 3:195) and ‘Enter Paradise, you and your spouses, in all delight’ (43:70).

Montagu emphasises her detailed appreciation of the difference between the two societies saying: ‘This is a piece of theology very different from that which teaches nothing to be more acceptable to God than a vow of perpetual virginity’. She graciously allows the Abbot to reach his own conclusions about this practice, saying, ‘Which divinity is most rational I leave you to determine’ (Heffernan and O’Quinn, 2013, p. 144).

In these early examples of travel writing, Montagu thus reports and corrects established opinions, although in this case she simplifies (or perhaps is not fully aware) the

rules; she adds her personal opinions and evaluations and even acts as a humorous raconteur, joking about her reluctance to teach divinity to her friend, the Abbot.

Montagu's letters challenge previous masculine descriptions of the Orient and form a 'critical space for feminism' thereby indirectly advocating increased freedom, autonomy and rights for women in her own Western society (Dadabhoy, 2014, p. 53). In doing so, Montagu takes the role of educator; for example, when writing to Lady Rich:

Your whole letter is full of mistakes... taken your ideas of Turkey from that worthy author Dumont, who has writ with equal ignorance and confidence. They never fail giving you an account of the women, which 'tis certain they never saw, and talking very wisely of the genius of the men, into whose company they are never admitted...

(Heffernan and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 148).

Indeed, as Melman suggests, Montagu has better access and certainly has more feminine empathy with the female Orient. Her work must be seen as more authentic than her male contemporaries (Melman, 1995, p. 129). In her visit to the Turkish bath at Sophia Montagu notes that the "veiled daughters of the Prophet enjoyed some privileges denied their Christian sisters ... In short, 'tis the Women's Coffee house where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented etc" (Hufstader, 1978, p. 44 cited in Ozdalga and Amanat, 2015, p. 7). The conflation of the oriental feminine bathhouse with the exclusively male western coffee house is a subtle criticism of the non-existence of a similar public place for British women.

Montagu retains her Western clothes which are seen by the naked Oriental ladies to be a 'cage imposed on her by her husband' (Paston, 1907, p. 261). The Turkish ladies are puzzled, telling Montagu: 'you need boast indeed of the superior liberties allowed you, when they lock you thus up in a box.' (ibid). There is wry humour here, and this is a genuine exchange between East and West, where the members of both cultures try better to understand each other.

Turning now to *Julius Caesar*, a very different work by a very different author, we will see how a writer once again uses the private and public spaces of one society to illuminate the nature of another. At its heart, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* examines whether we should transgress the laws of democracy to preserve it. The play shows how those who should do most to guard and preserve democracy in their public life, allow their private motivations to override their public duty. In a world where appearances are everything (Miles, 1989, pp. 259–61, 280–1) their actions will result in significant personal reward or untimely death. This is no different to the stresses placed on the courtiers, aristocracy and monarchy of the Tudor court. And just as the members of the Elizabethan court must keep their private thoughts and allegiances to themselves, Shakespeare's Roman characters also can only show the weakness of anxiety, fear, distrust, and jealousy in their interior lives, a place 'that Roman public life leaves no room for' (King, 2015, p. 159).

Renaissance writers took the view that the function of history was 'to teach political lessons' (Ribner, 1957, p. 10) and that in the finest specimens of historical drama, the dramatist assumed the serious role of historian. Ancient Rome permeated Elizabethan and Jacobean social imagination as 'a supreme ideal of military, political, artistic, and cultural excellence toward [to] which the present invariably moved in an unflagging striving for emulation' (Lovascio, 2017). *Julius Caesar* is just one in a sequence of Shakespeare's plays with strong concerns about the nature of monarch and the political debates of a society that had a keen interest in republican history. The year 1599 saw Shakespeare not only write *Julius Caesar* but also complete *Henry V*, *As You Like It* and draft *Hamlet*. Clearly, *Hamlet* and *Henry V* focus on the nature and means of succession. An argument can also be put forward that even *As You Like It* considered the question to what extent women could inherit kingdoms or transmit inheritance to their descendants (Hopkins, 2016, p. 155) - a highly relevant question in Elizabethan times. In the 1590s, Shakespeare was thus intensely

interested in power, corruption and succession – and consequently, we can undoubtedly deduce his Elizabethan audience were equally absorbed by these topics.

While Elizabeth's heir was undoubtedly a subject of discussion in the private sphere, the public debate about the question of succession was utterly forbidden. In February 1593, Elizabeth imprisoned the puritan MP Peter Wentworth in the Tower after he had petitioned her to name a successor. As her reign drew toward its close, the situation intensified as 'the publication of any discussion of the succession had been declared an act of treason by Parliament' (de Lisle, 2006, p. 29).

How then does Shakespeare use the example of Ancient Rome, some 1700 years in the distant past to examine the constitutional questions of succession and how and on what principles the constituent countries of Britain should be ruled? Clearly, there is not a direct one to one mapping between the consuls and generals of Julius Caesar's time and the nobility and monarchy of Elizabeth I. Nevertheless, many indirect parallels would be of interest to Elizabethan audiences. For example, the question of how Caesar might seed his own dynasty of emperors given Calpurnia's infertility resonates with Shakespeare's audience's concerns about the childless Elizabeth I.

The language chosen by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* also provides crosslinks between the Roman story inside the play and the public Elizabethan space outside. For example, Elizabeth I used the symbol of the sun when writing to the Scottish Ambassador to England:

How they ever mislike the present government and has [sic] their eyes fixed upon that person that is next to succeed; and naturally men be so disposed: Plures adorant solem orientem quam occidentem [More people adore the rising sun than the setting one].

(Booth, 2013, p, 82)

The Latin quotation is from Plutarch's *Life of Pompey*, a work both Elizabeth I and Shakespeare knew. Like Elizabeth, Shakespeare used the sun image, but in this case, as a

metaphor of the ending of power. 'Oh setting sun, as in thy red rays thou dost sink to night, / So in his red blood Cassius' day is set' (5.3.67-68). Contrast this with the celestial imagery in Caesar's declamation of his superiority in Act 3.

In this superbly arrogant diatribe (Shakespeare, 1998, 3.1.60-76), Caesar uses a different celestial metaphor: 'I am Constant as the Northern Star' (3.3.60). The opening line's regular iambic pentameter reinforces Caesar's assertion he is steady, reliable fixed place of control in a world that whirls around him. The metrical regularity of the speech is temporarily broken in 'If I could pray to move, prayers would move me' (l. 62) because Caesar is suggesting that if things were different, then 'prayers would move me'. The uncertainty of speculating about a different circumstance is enhanced by the irregularity of this line's meter. Caesar then immediately reinforces his immovability by an almost exact repetition of the opening line (3.1.63). Shakespeare uses the celestial objects of the night: even though there are other 'stars' (men) in the 'sky' (Rome), 'there's but one in all doth hold his place' (3.1.68). This night-time imagery foreshadows the assassination of Caesar when his light is extinguished and indeed the darkness that is to shortly envelope Rome. At this moment, Caesar declares himself not only the brightest but most 'constant' because he cannot be swayed by the appeals of other men. This is supremely ironic as shortly afterwards the 'unshakeable' Caesar is assassinated. Throughout this speech, as in much of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare draws on the classical techniques of rhetoric and poetry, not only for dramatic emphasis, but also as interesting wordplay entertainment for his audience. These techniques include alliteration ('constant Cimber', (3.1.75) 'fellow in the firmament (3.1.65.), epistrophe (I could be well moved, . . . , / If I could pray to move, prayers would move me; (3.1.61-62)) and personification as Caesar strengthens his argument by saying he has more common with the star than he does with other people.

In contrast to the poetic and emotional speech of Caesar above, Shakespeare makes Brutus's words (3.2.12-35) after Caesar's death as rhetorical and contrived as possible. Brutus argues for control and order and distances himself from Caesar's fixed star imagery by speaking in prose rather than blank verse. In

...hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear.  
 Believe me for mine honor, and have respect to mine honor that you  
 may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake  
 your senses that you may the better judge' (3.2.14-17).

Shakespeare uses both epanalepsis and epiphora to drive home Brutus's position. In 'There is tears for his love, joy for his fortune, honor for his valor, and death for his ambition' (3.2.27-28) Shakespeare pairs 'tears' with 'love', 'joy' with 'fortune', 'honor' with 'valor' and 'death' with 'ambition' to produce a taxis, with the effect of building the power of his argument incrementally to the climax of a sequence of rhetorical questions, that effectively bully the listeners into silence. But Brutus forbids an answer: 'Who is here so rude that would not be Roman?' (3.2.30-31). No one dares reply. Brutus is trying to present an argument to say that his actions were good and honourable, with his powerful rhetoric. Still, it is a speech aimed at domination rather than consensus.

Another concern of Elizabethan public interest that is explored by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* is the Puritan belief that originates from a social body and not a dictator. The religious 'feast of Lupercal (1. 1.67) is taken over by Caesar's followers to 'rejoice in his triumph' (1.1.31). Flavius says Caesar would 'keep us in all servile fearfulness' (1.1.80) and thus undermine the manly virtues of Roman democracy. Caesar's growing power is emphasised by the use of 'trophies' and 'images' (1.1.69,70) and the conflict between Caesar's metaphorical body and the laws of Roman democracy is reinforced by images that contrast Caesar's animalistic 'feathers' with the 'view of men' that he 'soar[s] above' (1.1.73-80). Christie states, 'Shakespeare's analogy reflects how concerns surrounding the legitimacy of Caesar's authority in relation to Roman values is manifest in the relationship constructed

between body, soul and law as components of Roman identity' (Christie, 2020). Christie further argues that we see in Brutus's valuation of the idea of Rome over his love for Caesar the body, soul and law as conflicting components of Roman identity in the play. In a key line in the play, Brutus declares, 'not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more' (3.2.21-21). Thus, Brutus chooses Roman law to direct his action and govern his body and soul. Shakespeare emphasises this with Mark Anthony's judgement of Brutus after his suicide: '[t]his was the noblest Roman of them all' (5.5.69).

In her introduction to *Persuasion*, Lynch proposed that the private sphere is 'a site of national historical formation' that illuminates the broader historical context inhabited by an author's characters. This essay concurs with this view and has suggested that any author must inevitably place their characters in a social, economic, religious or political context. By doing so, the author equally inevitably documents a broader view of the historical concerns of that context. This has been shown to be true in the case of authors as diverse as Shakespeare and Lady Montagu. By extension, this thesis can similarly be applied to any era.

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