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Remember the Ladies: Individuality, Community, and Equality of Early and Modern Women

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What is history, and how should it be expressed or depicted? How can we, thrust into the twenty-first century, employ the historical events of the past in a way that redirects our more “contemporary” efforts towards achieving utopia? Indeed, today’s members of society are pressured to make his or her own mark in the world, accomplish good, and inspire change. Ingrained in all of these immutable clichés is the coalition of understanding one’s role as an individual, how that role benefits to and connects within the larger function of society, and how to maintain a sense of impartiality amidst the dog-eat-dog modern society that the twenty-first century demands. However, brilliant historians challenge the presumed independence of these entities, asserting instead that their merging is essential to demonstrating independent self-eminence in a world with nearly seven billion inhabitants. Therefore, though the authors discover these ideals in contrasting locales—from industry to confusion of identity—and eras—from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries—they contend that their societal union (whether unified or sundered) catalyzes an all-encompassing comprehension of modernity. Further, these writers validate how the “ideal” community is one that promotes individualism while hindering hierarchies. Is this even possible? Though these ideas conflict, they are reconciled in the feminine sphere via contribution. As elementary as this theory may initially appear, historians have validated that an outlet for independent support bolsters the ties between the individual and the community, eradicating hierarchies in favor of developing overall equality.

Individuality is more than a separate existence from a larger whole, but rather is rooted in the freedom to be distinctively independent. Individuality, further, catalyzes creativity, self-sufficiency, and politically, emotionally, and intellectually free. Indeed, in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, novelist Natalie Zemon Davis explores the realism and stubborn independence of the sixteenth-century peasant woman living in rural France, who is depicted as a stark cry from the cookie-cutter, submissive interpretation of the “inferior” sex. Rather, protagonist Bertrande de Rols is portrayed as having passionate independence, a concern of womanly honor, and virtue—even at the tender age when she becomes Martin Guerre’s bride. Yet, the societal environment of Léze Valley situates a woman in the

role of successful home management in two important spheres: family and economy. Thus, trusted with children supervision and a shrewd authority of family finances, sixteenth-century women are offset by an immense void of a voice, a position, and any abstraction of authority in the public sphere—instead, they have limited access to property ownership coupled with an unsettling legal presence. Though the reader cannot sincerely perceive Bertrande as a rebel—for she is committed to the village values of “living virtuously and honorably” during her husband’s disappearance—she devalues the supposed inferiority of the societal constraints placed upon her sex (Davis, 28). This shrewd pragmatism and remarkable independence from pre-teen Bertrande, therefore, foreshadows her fierce individuality amidst a community of sixteenth-century homology. Further, Bertrande cunningly utilizes pastoral France’s traditional ideals to her advantage, weaving them into her independence when originally challenged by her husband’s impotence (Davis, 28). Though coerced by her kinfolk to annul the marriage, Bertrande *independently* decides to remain married to Martin, though, admittedly, “she was relieved not to have to have sexual intercourse for a while” (Davis, 28). Fixed between the spheres of child and woman, Bertrande establishes her own independence in the early stages of her marriage to Martin, setting the stage for her “rebellious” individuality.

Bertrande’s character development ultimately progresses under the tenets of individuality that coexists with traditional values. Indeed, at the climax of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Bertrande must testify in defense of her imposter-husband. Here, she sustains her refusal against her parents’ debilitating pressures, showcasing her stubborn independence in the constraints of family politics and Arnaud du Tilh’s “full dazzling power of deception” upon his arrival in the village of Artigat (Davis, 50, 109). While the modern reader may be incredulous at Bertrande’s naivety at her willingness to become, in a very direct sense, Arnaud’s co-conspirator, one must note how the novel’s heroine made her own *independent* decision—which, in fact, was not ignorant at all—without guidance or direction from her community: “Whatever doubts people had, they silenced or even buried them for a while” (Davis, 43). Rather, Bertrande cunningly positions herself as an amenable accomplice, catalyzed by

her deceptive role's social and economic benefits. When her "husband" (imposter Arnaud) is later subjected to a formal trial, Bertrande does not abandon him, instead executing her two-faced role seamlessly, maintaining her own position while validating Arnaud's testimony. In the picturesque countryside of Léze Valley, then, our protagonist discovers her own sense of individuality—asserting herself as a competent woman—amidst a hierarchal society void of gender equality, while proving to be a willing member of her community—devoting herself to the village's ideals of honor and character (Davis, 26, 78). Further, Bertrande's character testifies the capability of a stable community that can amicably—if not positively—coexist with a celebration of individuality. For Davis, then, individuality can prevail within a community that allows for independent interpretation of its codes and values.

Once an individual can flourish—intellectually, spiritually, and physically—he or she must be joined with a larger whole in order to eventually contribute communally. Thus, what images does the term "community" evoke? Does this term hold a nostalgic "Mayberry-like" quality as one that is associated with backyard barbecues, neighborhood associations, and regular play dates? Maybe the contemporary notion of community may be embedded in social networking, e-mail, and online blogging. Or, perhaps, community extends much deeper—into the very soul of the self that feels a connection with fellow members of a larger, collective whole. Regardless of its progressive connotation in today's society, the very *concept* of community has spanned for centuries. Indeed, as historians and anthropologists have attested to for generations, a collective environment that reinforces social bonds pacifies the opposition between individualism and community. It is in the balance, however, that determines whether this coalition is stable, and ultimately, enduring. Further, American poet Ishmael Reed certainly contests to this fine line, asserting that the spectrums of marginalization and consumption are what essentially define the self: "I am outside of history . . . it looks hungry there in that cage. i am outside of history, its hungrier than i thot [sp]" (Reed, 371). The two versions of the self, therefore, juxtapose the "complex I"—who, though ostracized, is kept unharmed from the ravenous elephant of history—and the "simple I"—who, though communally connected, is eventually

consumed by history. Thus, the reader notes, from the elementary spelling and inconsistent capitalization, that the speaker experiences a degeneration of self that is coupled with his connection to community—or lack thereof. Yet, according to Reed’s protagonist, one must fervently maintain his or her sense of individuality, for fear of becoming consumed, annihilated, and eventually forgotten. However, in today’s modern world of conformity, Reed contends that individuality is all too often exchanged for compliant consistency. Though being an asset to a collective whole is undoubtedly empowering, one must realize the importance of individuality prevails—lest one mirrors the fate of “little i.”

Community demands a strict balance, then, between individuality and the development and flourishing of progress. Otherwise, these ideals can be in fierce opposition, wrecking the possibility for either to flourish. Therefore, how can the modern individual—Reed’s “complex I”—make a mark for himself or herself in the world via reasonable advancement while maintaining a stable community? Twentieth-century historian Gordon Wood tackles this quandary, recalling the expansion in 1750s early America that “loosen[ed] the band of society. . .in this truncated republicanized monarchical society” (Wood, 124). Indeed, he notes that this “basic fact of early American history” which yielded to a disruption of community was merely “the grown and movement of people” (Wood, 125). Existing as an important source of the late-eighteenth-century democratic revolution, these “extraordinary demographic and economic developments” essentially “reshaped the contours of the society” (Wood, 126). This modification to community, then, stemming from the “growth and movement of people [which] strained and broke apart households, churches, and neighborhoods” challenged people to embrace a new definition of *community*. Therefore, what did it mean to an integral part of a larger, collective whole? As early colonists, indeed, were uprooting their traditions and family histories, they were thrust into imagined communities in lieu of face-to-face interaction. Yet, as families disintegrated, there was an impact of between the nuclear unit’s relationship to a larger society. Triggered by lessened involvement with the community, the family’s focus had shifted –to where their

relatives (usually, children) had migrated. However, is Wood in total disapproval of progress, finding oneself, and spreading one's wings? On the contrary, he celebrates this dynamic changes and their capacity to embrace new communities and societies. Wood further synthesizes these modifications to encompass a *new* type of community—one that is fostered, nurtured, and cared for: “In some places, people moved so rapidly and in such numbers that society as people had known it was not easily recreated” (Wood, 130). This “melting pot of European peoples” of blended cultural, historical, familial, and economic backgrounds and social circumstances, that a recreation was certainly not black and white (Bailyn, 34). Rather, this created community would be void of hierarchy—quite different from the nostalgic paternal system of the past (Bailyn, 8-9). Indeed, as an alternative to the conventional model, these citizens embraced a new and urbanized ideal, which favored less established hierarchies to create a more stable community via a raw frontier cultural prototype.

the communal sense amongst early American women regarding their deteriorating equality resulted in dramatic change. Similarly, a reassertion of a community is one void of hierarchies and inequality—the society becomes more stable. Evidently, for historians Wood and Bailyn, a stable community must embrace progress and development. A society that fails to support new directions or alternative efforts is at risk of being entirely redefined in order to best meet the needs of the individual.

Research investigating how to establish the most stable and enduring community has spanned for centuries. Rooted in the inevitable solution, however, is a dominant sense of equality. Indeed, historian Mary Beth Norton contends that early American women, when cognizant of their initial social status of inferiority, repurposed society's expectations, redirecting household presumptions in an entirely new light. When these colonial feminists strove to eradicate the social hierarchy of their society, they campaigned under the umbrella of *equality*. While women were initially deemed in the more “private” societal sphere of community, they remained well aware that, in order to gain respect amongst their husbands and other male aristocracy, they must validate their position in society. Thus, these radically thinking women reasserted themselves as they dared to redefine their own idea of

“community” to embrace gender equality, yielding to a “re-evaluation of domesticity” via “traditional denigrating attitudes” (Norton, 155). This movement stemmed from a new perspective on their domestic obligations—they took housework politically. Rooted in a stable community is cooperation and contribution—from each any every member. When establishing a newer, more innovative community in early America via feminine involvement through “ideological showcases” of domesticity: “. . .[T]hey (the spinning bees) were intended to convince American women that they could render essential contributions to the struggle against Britain” (Norton, 168). No longer socially viewed in the solely the privacy of the home, these Daughters of Liberty “contribute[d] to the defense of colonial liberties” (Norton, 169). Thus, early American women discovered their own senses of individuality within a society that respected independence and sanctioned the reassertion of feminine involvement, ultimately catalyzing gender equality. By using their household resources in a public, communal context, women realized their advanced societal positions were coupled with a reassertion of power, attempting to eliminate *all* inequality amongst the sexes: “. . .[W]omen’s domestic roles took on political significances” (Norton, 155). For Norton, then, the union between the individual and the community—via direct contribution—stimulated overall equality.

Yet, the middle of the eighteenth-century was a period in which the coalition between the individual and the community was bolstered—the larger society positively recognized the acts of the early American woman. Equality for early feminists, therefore, could only occur following a union between the woman and her community, which has recognized her developmental progress: “. . .[The very fact that women embarked upon such an ambitious, unprecedented venture revealed the extent to which their lives had been reshaped during the preceding years” (Norton, 156). Thus, when a larger whole recognized individual achievements, the women repurposed those tasks to benefit and ennoble society. Indeed, women participated in the sewing frenzy of producing homespun in lieu of consuming English cloth, catalyzing a communal response for though this feminine cooperation allowed “one of the most common, and indeed most tedious, household tasks [to take] on a high social and political

value for the first time” (Norton, 165). Further, the feminine symbol of spinning—in contexts of both skill and industry—was blanketed under a shift of equality that encompassed the needs of wants of the fairer sex whose “domestic sphere had been previously devalued” (Norton, 167). This declaration of perspective coupled with the repurposing of “mundane” tasks into valuable undertakings in a greater social context, catalyzing the empowerment of the early American woman to take control of herself within her environment: “But once the context had changed, so too did women’s understanding of the meaning of their traditional role” (Norton, 163). Thus, with a successful union between the woman and her community, groundwork for gender equality was laid—the earliest effect being in the political domain. Indeed, this innovative new role that women had assumed came into opposition with an initial limitation of the fairer sex: political involvement. Coupled with this reassertion of femininity within a larger society, then, triggered political independence and capacity for the early American woman: “Men began to change their minds about women’s political capacities” (Norton, 171). Further, Samuel Adams’ correspondence to his political partners challenged the traditional frontiers of the feminine domain: “I see no [r]eason why a [m]an may not communicate his political opinions to his wife, if he pleases,” forging new connections between the two sexes, and ultimately, the groundwork for the early twentieth-century movement for women’s voting votes (Norton, 171). For early American women, equality was the third step in a meticulous process that joined the individual female with a community that realized her efforts, capabilities, and capacities.

So, how can we, as modern researchers and readers the twenty-first century, reach a place of equality? Eighteenth-century historian Antoine-Nicholas Condorcet aspires that the “future condition of the human race” is within these three tenets of progress: “the abolition of inequality between nations; the progress of equality within each nation; and the true perfection of mankind” (Condorcet, 7). Thus, Condorcet believes that in order to achieve a sincere state of utopia, we must eradicate *all* degrees of inequality to “ultimately make way of a real equality” (Condorcet, 8). His sentiments echo

those of Norton—both historians recognize individual achievement as a method of actual, *measurable* progress:

. . .[E]veryone will have the knowledge necessary to conduct himself in the ordinary affairs, of life, according to the light of his own reason, to preserve his mind free from prejudice, to understand his rights and to exercise them in accordance with his conscience and his creed; In which everyone will become able, through the development of his faculties, to find the means of providing for his needs (Condorcet, 8).

Condorcet, therefore, contends that a stable and successful community is one in which *every* individual exhibits his or her own capacity—behaviorally, economically, intellectually, and spiritually. This time, he boldly asserts, “will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free men who know no other master but their reason” (Condorcet, 10). Intellectual, physical, and spiritual freedom will catalyze and ultimately, sustain a viable and abiding society. For Condorcet, then, this “ideal” can only be reached when equality is established and retained so the individual is free of expression and conduct in his or her community. Yet, this union is able to favorably prevail when the community steps back into the wings, allowing the individual’s efforts, achievements, and rights to shine.

Indeed, how we understand the past is our key to best understanding the future. What better way to live as vibrantly as possible in the present than to learn from the mistakes, conflicts, and struggles of the past? This cliché holds tremendous influence in the scope of societal and historical progress. As historians have asserted, an amicable union between the individual and the community has the potential to strengthen that society and rid it of any inequality. This theory prevails in the twenty-first century, as well, as the modern woman, in hopes of discovering her true place in her community, must first fasten herself to a larger whole via direct contribution. Therefore, if the modern woman understands her initial position in the developmental progress of history, she is better able to function as a valuable asset in today’s society. This reassertion and redefinition is essential to

becoming the best societal contributors we can be in this age. When we constantly challenge our values, our beliefs, and our ideals, juxtaposing them with the progress of history in a larger context, we grow stronger as individuals, as well as integral elements in today's society. In today's age of promoting the modern working mother, who juggles PTA meetings, the kids' soccer schedule, the family checkbook, and next week's agenda in the corporate boardroom, the drive of early feminists has contemporary relevance in supporting the fortitude of today's woman.

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