

Spring 5-9-2017

# William Hazlitt: On the Silencing Effect of Public Opinion in Nineteenth-Century England

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## Recommended Citation

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William Hazlitt: On the Silencing Effect of Public Opinion in Nineteenth-Century England

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Literature, Language, and Theory, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor: Kelvin Black

May 9, 2017

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May 9, 2017

Dow Robbins

Signature of Second Reader

**DEDICATION**

*To Ellie & Anthony*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Professor Kelvin Black of Hunter College of The City University of New York. Professor Black enabled me to find my voice and make this thesis my own while still providing feedback when I needed it. He also agreed to work with me despite unbelievably tight deadlines, which he deserves acknowledgment for alone.

I would also like to thank Dr. Dow Robbins of Hunter College of The City University of New York as the second reader of this thesis. He agreed to work with me despite being away on sabbatical and was extremely flexible throughout this process, for which I will be eternally grateful.

I want to acknowledge the two English Department graduate advisors at Hunter College of The City University of New York who I worked with as well: Professor Amy Moorman Robbins and Professor Janet Neary. Their guidance at the beginning and at the end made this thesis possible.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family for always encouraging and supporting my education throughout my academic career. Lastly, thank you to all of my friends for being my family away from home.

J. M. Tessa Freeman

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## Introduction

William Hazlitt published "On Public Opinion" in 1828, during what is now known as the Romantic period. The Romantic period was also influenced by the French Revolution (1789) and the Scottish Enlightenment. The turbulent years following the French Revolution (1789), created political writing, which questioned tyranny, religion, and the role of the monarchy, among others. Francis Hutcheson's *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* (1728) heavily shaped the Scottish Enlightenment. The Scottish Enlightenment also fostered writing which examined intellectual reasoning and sentiments or feelings as well as human nature and how humans interact and relate with one another, especially in terms of morality and God. As a pre-Romantic writer, Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) significantly impacted the Romantic period. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith discusses "sympathetic identification," or the role of one's imagination in creating fellow feelings between individuals. Hazlitt himself was an influential Romantic writer and his essays were essential in shaping work that came later in the period.

William Hazlitt discusses the tendency of friends and the public to distance themselves when one became the subject of gossip in nineteenth-century England in "On Public Opinion." Hazlitt also analyzes how gossip was labeled and spread with an endorsement of truth, even though some privately disagreed. He describes a disconcerting public where many only accepted information that confirmed their beliefs and dismissed any that did not, despite tangible proof. The public was also motivated and silenced by fear since once uttered, rumors were uncontrollable and could shift their focus suddenly and unpredictably to another person. Hazlitt expresses disappointment that friends were only

willing to remain loyal until their own reputations were in danger of being dragged down through association with the rumor tainted person. Hazlitt is not only critical of the public, but is actually judgmental with his disdain and calls for the entire public to be held accountable for the circulation of misinformation. Even those whom he views as silenced by the threat of ostracism were not absolved from blame—they helped perpetuate their position by remaining silent since imposing silence on others was not natural, but also allowing silence to be imposed was not natural either. Both the imagery and words he uses depict the environment as illogical. By portraying nineteenth-century English society as unnatural and immoral, he provokes readers to question the definition of human nature and morality as was done during the Scottish Enlightenment. Similar to Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), in William Hazlitt's *An Essay on the Principals of Human Action: Being an Argument in Favor of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind* (1805), he discusses the role of sympathy and the imagination. However, unlike in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Hazlitt is particularly interested in the role of the imagination when identifying with one's future self. While Smith examines consequences for behaving improperly in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), in "On Public Opinion," (1828) Hazlitt depicts a forced conformity from the threat of overly harsh punishments for misbehavior in nineteenth century-English society—such as ostracization. I propose that William Hazlitt's argument in "On Public Opinion" (1828) demonstrates the silencing effect of nineteenth-century English society when misinformation was able to circulate. The work also demonstrates the threat of ostracism from questioning or challenging false beliefs stemmed from the inability to tolerate uncertainty. These factors in unison produced a

public that Hazlitt asserts was illogical and counter to human nature, as well as manipulated by those in power to maintain that power.

As a political writer, Hazlitt wrote about public opinion in essays throughout his career—some examples of which are: “What is the People?” (1817), “On the Pleasure of Hating” (1821), and “On Court Influence” (1818). Claire Brock states in “William Hazlitt, on Being Brilliant” (2005) that, “William Hazlitt...was obsessed throughout his career with the politics of public opinion” (499). However, while some of Hazlitt’s political essays discussing public opinion have garnered attention from scholars and are somewhat discussed in scholarly articles, “On Public Opinion” (1828) has only been occasionally and briefly mentioned. It has primarily been used to reference a personal scandal of Hazlitt’s involving Mr. Blackwood’s magazine, which published an article in 1818 containing false and defamatory information about Hazlitt (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 385). Kevin Gilmartin in *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (2015) notes this as well and claims that, “there is a persistent tendency to devalue his [Hazlitt’s] political prose by comparison with his writing on literature, theater, and metaphysics” (1). Yet, despite acknowledging that Hazlitt’s political writing is frequently overlooked, Gilmartin also fails to mention “On Public Opinion” (1828) as more than a reference to Mr. Blackwood’s Magazine—further illustrating why this thesis’ focus on it is necessary (Gilmartin 213). As the victim of scandal and rumor throughout his life, “On Public Opinion” (1828) is both a political essay, and an expression of anger derived from his personal experience and observation.

“On Public Opinion” (1828) exhibits a pronounced change in Hazlitt’s writing and views on public opinion. Previously, while he had still been critical of the public, his writing had also been more hopeful for the possibility of societal changes (*William Hazlitt Selected*



*Writings* 3). John Cook, the editor of *William Hazlitt Selected Writings*, notes that, “On Public Opinion” “presents a marked contrast to the account of public opinion Hazlitt had given in his writings on the French Revolution” (384). As an essay published about two years before his death, “On Public Opinion” is an accumulation of his life experiences and insights, which Hazlitt claims change over time. In “On Consistency of Opinion” (1821) Hazlitt writes that, “I remember once saying to...[a] gentleman, a great while ago, that I did not seem to have altered any of my ideas since I was sixteen years old. ‘Why then,’ said he, ‘you are no wiser now than you were then!’ I might make the same confession, and the same retort would apply still” (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 30). Given that the essay was published at a later date than many which have been more closely studied and given that he maintained the belief that insights develop and vary over the course of one’s life, “On Public Opinion” is a more complete synthesis of his life experiences, and therefore also a more complete synthesis of his beliefs than earlier writing. This is not to discount his earlier political writing, as much can be gleaned from his insights both earlier and later on in life.

Hazlitt attempted to avoid aligning himself with a particular political party, and instead took a stance against tyranny, which explains why he critiques the entire nineteenth-century English social environment in “On Public Opinion” (1828) as opposed to a single political party. Gilmartin quotes Hazlitt’s claim that, “I am no politician, and still less can I be said to be a party-man: but I have a hatred of tyranny, and a contempt for its tools; and this feeling I have expressed as often and as strongly as I could” (95). In the essay, Hazlitt is against the silencing of truth, by a majority or by fear. Also, he views political division as fueling tyranny as opposed to fighting it, again supporting why he would criticize the entire environment as opposed to one point of view (89). Hazlitt views

all members of the public as contributing to the social environment and subsequently views all as responsible for circulating false information (96).

## **Section I: The Groups Within the Silenced Nineteenth-Century English Society**

Hazlitt describes three different groups who comprised the public, the first of which was silenced by the threat of being ostracized by society and who pretended to agree with public opinion. He labeled them, “[T]he candid and well-disposed,” and describes them as knowing the misinformation was wrong, yet still voicing agreement with it publicly (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 145). The name Hazlitt bestowed upon them illustrates their role in the public, since “candid” means speaking honestly, which they pretended to do when they publicly agreed with the misinformation. Also, “well-disposed” means to be agreeable, which they were perceived as by others since they publicly agreed with public opinion, despite their private beliefs. However, their public silence about their real beliefs enabled the circulation of misinformation and this thesis will discuss the reasons for and the consequences of their silence. Since they were silenced by fear and did not speak the truth publicly, I will refer to them as the *silenced group*.

Another group within the public were those who found rumors to be exciting and sought to hear all rumors, without any discrimination against fact or fiction. Hazlitt named them, “the malicious and idle” and describes them as people “who...[were] eager to believe all the ill they can hear of everyone” (145-6). They were so ravenous for gossip that they did not discriminate between who they would or would not believe rumors about, as they looked for gossip about the entire public. Additionally, they did not discriminate between rumors based on validity, as they listened for all of the rumors in circulation. Hazlitt highlights a correlation between being “malicious and idle,” or having cruel intentions and being lazy or bored since they very much wanted to believe rumors, which served as a distraction from monotony. This thesis will also address Hazlitt’s belief that, for the public,

rumors served to stave off boredom, and the effect he believed this had on creating an unnatural public, which ultimately helped those in power to be able to manipulate the public. I will refer to them as the *non-discriminating group* since they would believe anything, about anyone.

The final group determined the validity of rumors based on if they supported their beliefs, instead of fact. Hazlitt labeled them, “the prejudiced and interested” and describes them as those “who...[were] determined to credit all the ill they hear against those who are not of their own side” (146). Their name also describes their role within the public since “prejudiced” means biased and “interested” means invested, implying they cared and were “interested” in rumors, but this “interest” was simultaneously skewed by a bias, which they used rumors to confirm. I will refer to them as the *intolerant group* as they were unable to tolerate uncertainty and because they were unable to tolerate evidence that proved their beliefs wrong. Both of these attributes in “On Public Opinion” perpetuated the circulation of misinformation and will be discussed in this thesis.

## Section II: The Intolerant Group & Imposing Silence to Prevent Uncertainty

Hazlitt argues that the *intolerant group* avoided uncertainty by stubbornly refusing to consider any information that would have caused them to question their beliefs. He asserts that:

“[I]t is only requisite to be understood that the butt of ridicule or slander is of an opposite party [than the *intolerant group*], and they presently give you *carte blanche* to say what you please of him. Do they know that it is true? No; but they believe what all the world says, till they have evidence to the contrary. Do you prove that it is false? They dare say, that if not, that something worse remains behind; and they retain the same opinion as before, for the honour of their party” (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146).

Hazlitt illustrates that even certain, infallible proof did not inspire thinking and instead the *intolerant group* ignorantly clung to their beliefs. They claimed that another scandal existed, subsequently justifying their beliefs and calming any uncertainties—especially since the other scandal was supposedly more corrupt than the original, which had been proven to be a lie. Hazlitt lambasts them for needing their beliefs confirmed and for being unable to stomach the uncertainty that could arise from questioning one’s beliefs and even states that they had gall to deny proof.

Hazlitt uses the *intolerant group’s* irrational dedication to Mr. Blackwood to illustrate that not even evidence they personally experienced would provoke questioning of their beliefs and that this inability to question allowed public opinion to dictate their beliefs. He argues that, “The gentleman would be obliged to disbelieve his senses rather than give Mr. Blackwood the lie, who is read and believed by the whole world” (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 147-8). Hazlitt disgustedly states that a member of the *intolerant group* would mistrust evidence they personally experienced instead of believing that Mr. Blackwood was wrong and instead of questioning their beliefs. Hazlitt illustrates that this

inability to question and tolerate uncertainty was the reason for their conformity and agreement with public opinion since nothing would change or challenge their beliefs—not even their own experience. This subsequently allowed the *intolerant group* to be completely controlled by public opinion, which, as Hazlitt has made abundantly clear, was often wrong.

Hazlitt argues that the public in nineteenth-century England not only refused to question their beliefs, but contrary information was so threatening that they became irrationally angry when evidence contested their views and refused to admit they could be wrong. He writes that, “Instead of apologizing for the mistake, and, from finding one aspersion false, doubting all the rest, they are only more confirmed in the remainder from being deprived of one handle against you, and resent their disappointment, instead of being ashamed of their credulity” (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146). It is explicitly clear that the *intolerant group* reacted inconsistently with what would have been expected in polite society, since instead of asking for forgiveness, the *intolerant group* would become angry. It is noteworthy that Hazlitt used “apologizing” as it implies self-reflection and acknowledgment of wrongdoing and by stating that they were incapable of “apologizing,” he implies they were incapable of self-reflection and challenging their beliefs. He further illustrates this by stating that instead of feeling embarrassed for having been so gullible, they were furious at having been made to momentarily feel uncertain. Hazlitt’s word choice demonstrates that the *intolerant group* interpreted contrary information as so threatening that it “deprived” or removed their essential needs, in this case the comfort of confirmed beliefs. By representing this group as irreconcilable with what would be expected, especially given nineteenth-century English society’s insistence on proper behavior, it is

evident that the environment described by Hazlitt was not natural nor logical. This supports his assertion that false information could easily spread, especially since the environment was already not conducive to reality or logic.

In *An Essay on the Principals of Human Action: Being an Argument in Favor of the Natural Disinterestedness of the Human Mind* (1805), William Hazlitt contends that each person has a core, stable sense of self, which should have allowed the *intolerant group* to be able to tolerate uncertainty. Hazlitt does concede that parts of the self do change over time, however this core sense of self does not—otherwise one would be a different person each time they awoke from sleep. Hazlitt writes that:

He is the same conscious being now that he will be in the next moment, or the next hour, or a month or a year hence. His interests as an individual as well as his being must therefore be the same. At least this must be the case as long as he retains the consciousness of his past impressions connecting them together in one uniform or regular train of feeling: for the interruption of this sense of continued identity by sleep, inattention or otherwise seems from it's being afterwards renewed to prove the point more clearly, as it seems to shew that there is some deep inward principle which remains the same in spite of all particular accidental changes. (*An Essay on the Principals of Human Action* 83)

Thus, while the *intolerant group* questioning their beliefs *could* have caused parts of their self to change, their core sense of self would have remained certain and stable. This means that there was no logical reason for why the *intolerant group* could not stomach feeling uncertain about their beliefs. By depicting this group as irrational and without a stable sense of self that would have allowed them to tolerate uncertainty, Hazlitt demonstrates the pervasiveness of the unnatural and problematic social environment. He even implies that the *intolerant group* was not grounded in reality since they needed their beliefs reinforced to the extent of circulating misinformation and silencing others.

### **Section III: The Silenced Group & Fear of Ostracization**

#### **Part A: The Creation of Fear of Ostracization & Silencing**

Hazlitt asserts that the victim of a rumor was ostracized by their friends who did so in order to protect their own reputation. He states that, "Our friends, indeed, are more apt than a mere stranger to join in with, or be silent under, any imputation thrown out against us, because they are apprehensive they may be indirectly implicated in it, and they are bound to betray us to save their own credit" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 142). Hazlitt illustrates that fear of having their reputation tarnished through guilt by association was the reason why victims of a rumor were deserted by everyone in their lives, including those closest to them. It is noteworthy that the concern for those closest to the victim of a rumor was specifically to protect their name or "credit," as that insinuates that one's reputation was extremely valued at that time—it was valued even more highly than close relationships with others. This is further confirmed since those closest to the victim of a rumor were the most likely to denounce the victim. Given that a reputation was so extremely valued, the threat of it being ruined by becoming the victim of a rumor or being associated with the victim of a rumor was even more pronounced.

Hazlitt consents that the public in the nineteenth century had a good reason for ostracizing the victim at the epicenter of a scandal, since it was unjustifiable to defend the improper behavior of others. He argues that, "People will not fail to observe, that a man may have his reasons for his faults or vices; but that for another to volunteer a defense of them, is without excuse" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 143). Hazlitt claims that the public could occasionally acknowledge that there were causes for the victim of a rumor's supposed scandalous behavior, yet nineteenth-century English society believed that it was



not acceptable for others to attempt to justify the behavior. The fear of becoming a public scandal was fueled by the possibility of being perceived as worse than the victim for attempting to vindicate the victim, especially since the punishment was being disavowed and ostracized by the entire public.

Hazlitt explains that public opinion was volatile and randomly moved from person to person, which made it possible for anyone to become the next victim of it and ostracization. He claims that, "It [public opinion] is like the wind, that 'no man knoweth whence it cometh, or whither it goeth'" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 144). Hazlitt's reference to the line from John 3:8 about the "wind" illustrates the infeasibility of knowing when public opinion would shift focus onto a new victim (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 385). Comparing public opinion to the "wind," demonstrates the utter unpredictability and uncontrollability of public opinion in nineteenth-century England as the "wind" can shift direction, appear, or disappear without notice. Hazlitt explains that this unpredictability created a social environment riddled with fear, since it was impossible to know who would be the next victim of a rumor and the subsequent ostracism. The unpredictability was also what made one afraid to defend a friend, as public opinion could suddenly shift to the defender without any warning, especially since, as he argues, the public found it inexcusable to defend another person's flaws.

Hazlitt alleges that rumors were amoral as they were not created accidentally and were not circulated because they were valid, but instead because many were outraged by them, which made it possible for anyone to be illogically ostracized. He asserts that, "[T]he universality of the outcry is often the only ground of the opinion; and that it is purposely raised upon this principle, that all other proof or evidence against the person meant to be

run down is wanting" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 144). Hazlitt is explicit that truth was not an important aspect of rumors since he used "opinion," which means that subjectivity was privileged over fact. This is further confirmed since how angrily the public reacted to the rumor determined how frequently it was repeated, not truth. Hazlitt's use of "principle" implies morality was considered when rumors were circulated, however he is explicit that morality was not a component since validity was not important. He further denotes that rumors were immoral by using "principles" sarcastically which implies that rumors were spread maliciously and were not lacking truth accidentally. Hazlitt conveys that this disregard for truth when circulating rumors at that time intensified the fear of becoming the subject of one, since anyone could be accused of anything and be ostracized.

Hazlitt maintains that the *silenced group* in nineteenth-century England was bound by societal norms which enabled the circulation of misinformation, since disobeying those norms could result in ostracization. He writes that, "[E]veryone in such circumstances [the social environment] keeps his own opinion to himself, and only attends to or acts upon that which he conceives to be the opinion of everyone but himself" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 145). Privately the *silenced group* had beliefs that were different from what they stated publicly. Hazlitt stresses that the belief was "his" or the individual's and not the public's, emphasizing that there was a difference between privately and publicly stated beliefs. Hazlitt explains that the pressure to adhere to societal norms dictated the publicly voiced beliefs since the only ones expressed were those which supposedly the rest of the public held as well. While conforming to society in the nineteenth century would prevent ostracization, it also facilitated the circulation of misinformation since no one countered the public beliefs out of fear. Hazlitt writes that, "[O]ne man takes up what he believes

another *will* think and which the latter professes only because he believes it held by the first!" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 145). The *silenced group* repeated what they imagined the public thought, indicating it was dangerous to go against public opinion. The problematic circular thinking described by Hazlitt, where each person repeated public opinion because it was what they assumed the other thought and then the other repeated it as well for the same reasons, required being able to imagine what the other person was thinking.

Hazlitt argues that not only was the imagination used to conceive what another believed in order to be able to voice that publicly, but it was also used to comprehend how heinous the experience of those who were ostracized was, which subsequently generated the *silenced group's* fear of ostracization. He writes that:

There is no communication between my nerves, and another's brain, by means of which he can be affected with my sensations as I am myself. The only notice or perception which another can have of this sensation in me or which I can have of a similar sensation in another is by means of the imagination. (*An Essay on the Principals of Human Action* 111)

The *silenced group* watched the victim of a rumor endure humiliation and betrayal by friends and then imagined how they would feel under those same circumstances (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146). Upon imagining the feelings they personally would experience, the *silenced group* made every effort to avoid being the victim of a rumor in the future. Hazlitt contends that:

The true impulse to voluntary action can only exist in the mind of a being capable of foreseeing the consequences of things, of being interested in them from the imaginary impression thus made upon his mind, and of making choice of the means necessary to produce, or prevent what he desires or dreads. (*An Essay on the Principals of Human Action* 22-3)

People care about the outcomes for the future self and this affects decisions in the moment. The *silenced group* was motivated to monitor their public statements in order to protect their future self, especially from ostracization and ridicule. Thus, while the *silenced group* was aware that the beliefs of others were false, they still repeated those publicly in order to avoid disrupting public opinion.

### **Section III: The Silenced Group & Fear of Ostracization**

#### **Part B: The Imagination, Fear of Ostracization & Silencing**

Using one's imagination in order to identify with others was not a new concept. The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers in the eighteenth century described sympathy as requiring imagination and their writing both preceded and influenced Hazlitt as a Romantic writer in the nineteenth century. Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) focuses on the development of sympathy and provides the definition for the concept of "sympathetic identification." He argues that sympathy is developed by one imagining removing themselves from their body, placing themselves in the other's situation, imagining how they would feel in that situation, and then internalizing those feelings. When explaining the process, Smith asserts that, "His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels" (9). According to Smith, the imagination allowed the listener to place themselves in the other's situation and then transport those feelings back to the self and internalize them. He emphasizes this with "brought," "adopted," and "own," since those denote that the listener was translating the experience of the person sharing back on to the self so that the listener could understand or at least attempt to understand the feelings of the person sharing.

While both Hazlitt and Smith agree that using the imagination can create sympathy for others, Hazlitt also argues in *An Essay on the Principals of Human Action* (1805) that the imagination allows one to relate to their future self. He asserts that:

If I wish to anticipate my own future feelings, whatever these may be, I must do so by means of the same faculty [imagination], by which I conceive of those of others whether past or future. I have no distinct or separate faculty

on which the events and feelings of my future being are impressed beforehand, and which shews as in an enchanted mirror to me and me alone the reversed picture of my future life. (*An Essay on the Principals of Human Action* 113)

While Smith's "sympathetic identification" prescribes how to sympathize with another person, Hazlitt's expansion on this idea to include identifying with the future self explains an essential aspect of human behavior and what motivates action in the present. Fear becomes a decisive factor in the present to prevent an undesirable future, such as the victim of a rumor's future.

Hazlitt explains that fear of ostracization motivated the *silenced group* to repeat the majority opinion despite not believing or agreeing with it. He writes that, "[O]ur own eyes, but must 'wink and shut our apprehension up', that we may be able to agree to the report of others, as a piece of good manners and point of established etiquette" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 148). The need to silence one's fears, implies self-regulation or that the person was regulating their public vocalizations in accordance with societal norms and expectations. This is also supported by "good manners" and "established etiquette," since both mean there was a need to act appropriately and that there was an acute awareness of the importance of proper behavior, conducting oneself appropriately and acting in harmony with public opinion. While the imagination would allow a member of the public to be aware that disagreeing with public opinion could lead to ostracization, this regulation of behavior also would have required having learned how to behave in accordance with societal norms.

Ildiko Csengei in *Sympathy, Sensibility, and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (2012), argues in the eighteenth century fear *could* be transferred between members of the public and Hazlitt expands upon this eighteenth-century idea to contend

that fear was *always* being transferred among the *silenced group* since their imagination was continuously identifying with the victim of a rumor. Csengei asserts that:

[S]ympathy is not simply a form of sentiment that holds communities together. It is also a kind of sentiment that travels quickly from person to person—a concept that makes frequent appearance in a variety of discourses throughout the period. ‘Dangerous’ passions, such as enthusiasm, are described in these terms, but so are other-regarding sentiments, like sympathy. (40)

Csengei maintains that emotions could be transferred between people and used to spark an emotional reaction. While this transfer of emotion is crucial to Hazlitt’s argument about how fear of ostracization was spread, Hazlitt also maintains that sympathy is continuously occurring, which is how the fear was able to permeate nineteenth-century English society. Thus, the *silenced group* was constantly identifying with the victim of a rumor and was motivated to avoid the same fate. In “Negative Capability,” (1963) Walter Jackson Bate states that:

In his *Principles of Human Action*, Hazlitt went much further than Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. His hope was to show that imaginative sympathy was not a mere escape hatch from the prison of egocentricity, but something thoroughgoing, something indigenous and inseparable from all activities of the mind. Sympathetic identification takes place constantly—even if only with ourselves and our own desired future. (24)

The *silenced group* identified with the victim of a rumor, by imagining how it would feel to be the victim, and then was motivated to avoid a similar fate. The fear was always being spread among the *silenced group*, whether they were conscious of it, and was continuously inciting the need to behave appropriately and voice agreeable, non-disruptive opinions. Witnessing the victim be betrayed by friends, become the subject of ridicule, as well as the ease with which rumors shifted focus fueled fear of speaking out against public opinion.

Imagining how it would feel to be the victim of a rumor and being motivated to avoid that fate, was not enough to prevent one from becoming the victim of a rumor: It was also necessary to understand why the victim was targeted and subsequently avoid engaging in that behavior. Evelyn Forget in “Evocations of Sympathy: Sympathetic Imagery in Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Physiology,” (2003) claims that sympathy or using imagination can be used to exert control over those not in power. She states that, “[S]ometimes sympathy is not a symmetric relationship between the minds of two equals but suggests rather the influence of those of greater mental powers over weaker individuals” (Forget 288). Hazlitt has repeatedly demonstrated that the *silenced group* was silenced by the need to agree with public opinion. As the *silenced group* had to use their imagination to imagine the consequences of disagreeing with public opinion and imagining the correct public response that agreed with public opinion—even though the *silenced group* was not conscious of using their imagination—the imagination clearly exerted the *intolerant group’s* beliefs over the *silenced group’s*. However, Forget does not provide an explanation for how the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* taught the *silenced group* behavior that was acceptable and how the *silenced group* could avoid becoming the victim of a rumor. Thus it is now necessary to comprehend how societal etiquette was imparted and reinforced in order to understand how the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* were able to maintain their position of power over the *silenced group* and subsequently perpetuate the problematic nineteenth-century English society.

Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) clarifies how the imagination taught the public to mirror societally acceptable behavior and subsequently became a regulating factor for behavior. He asserts that, “We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own



behavior, and endeavor to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct” (Smith 105). In this instance the imagination was used to step into the mind of a member of society to reflect on oneself, instead of stepping into an injured person’s position to reflect on their experience. Imagining how a member of society would judge one’s behavior provided the opportunity to be self-critical and understand how the behavior was experienced by others. Smith describes this practice further and explains how it was a regulating factor for behavior. He writes that:

We become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause, and whether to them we must necessarily appear...agreeable or disagreeable...We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them, by considering how they would appear to us if in their situation. (Smith 105)

The motivation to learn how to behave appropriately was inspired by an individual’s desire to be praised instead of reprimanded by society, or those whom the individual has been taught to look to for approval. Society, according to Smith, had an explicit influence on behavior since individuals were nervous about breaking rules, and were motivated to adjust their behavior according to if society praised their behavior or reprimanded it.

Like Smith, Hazlitt describes the public having learned socially acceptable behavior, however he asserts that there were significantly greater consequences for not following social etiquette and that these consequences forced compliance with public opinion. Hazlitt claims that:

What then is it that gives it [the rumor] its confident circulation and its irresistible force? It is the loudness of the organ with which it is pronounced...the number of voices that take it [the rumor] up and repeat it, because others have done so...Thus everyone joins in asserting, propagating, and in outwardly approving what everyone, in his private and unbiassed

judgment, believes and knows to be scandalous and untrue. (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 144-5)

While Smith describes society teaching and influencing behavior with verbal encouragement or chastisement, Hazlitt describes society as both forcing obedience to an unnatural environment and threatening harsher punishments that would completely devastate the victim's life. Depicting the entire public as aggressively stating and spreading beliefs implies that there was both a fear of being ostracized and a pressure to conform to society since there was an explicitly clear and harsh message about how to behave with propriety. Additionally, Hazlitt insinuates that the public would repeat what the rest of the public had repeated, simply because that was public opinion, which is an example of both pressure in nineteenth-century England to conform to society and the motivation created by fear. If there were no consequences for not regurgitating public opinion, there would be no need to force it upon others and there would not be such precise recitation of public opinion. Hazlitt suggests that there was a difference between what was declared in "private" versus in public, by describing "private" statements as factual and public statements as dictated by opinion.

#### Section IV: The Effect of Silence

It could erroneously seem that if the *silenced group* were to simply speak the truth, the circulation of misinformation would be halted, however in nineteenth-century English society only public opinion was audible. Hazlitt states that, “[T]he deafening buzz or loosened roar of laughter or of indignation, renders it impossible for the still small voice of reason to be heard, and leaves no other course to honesty or prudence than to fall flat on the face before it” (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 145). Hazlitt is explicit that the truth was too quiet to even be audible and that the loudness of public opinion completely silenced it. His use of “small” is noteworthy since it implies the truth was too quiet to be heard and that the number of people who vocalized the truth was so “small” or so few in number, that it was hardly perceptible. Thus, even if the *silenced group* were to speak, it would not be loud enough to effectively challenge public opinion. Hazlitt also insinuates this in other instances, as he claims that only unconventional people publically contradicted public opinion (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 144). Thus, the *silenced group* members who attempted to speak would do so in vain, since they would not be able to overturn public opinion and instead would only place themselves at risk for being the victim of the rumor. Hazlitt also implies that the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* were not listening to logic or truth since it was inaudible, which supports his previous claims that the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* wanted public opinion to provide comfort and entertainment, not truth.

For the truth to even be heard, Hazlitt argues that the *silenced group* would need to verbally combat the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* in every social interaction.

However, this would require the *silenced group* to not only risk ostracization, but to also go against the ingrained societal expectations of acceptable behavior. Hazlitt asserts that:

[H]ow shall we expect our feeble voices not to be drowned in the general clamour?...how shall we animate the great mass of indifference or distrust with our private enthusiasm?...It is a thing not to be thought of, unless we would enter into a crusade against prejudice and malignity, devote ourselves as martyrs to friendship, raise a controversy in every company we go into, quarrel with every person we meet, and after making ourselves and everyone else uncomfortable, leave off, not by clearing our friend's reputation, but by involving our own pretensions to decency and common sense. (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 143)

Hazlitt proves that the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* were who would need to be combated in each social interaction by using “prejudice and malignity,” since the labels he had bestowed upon the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* were the “prejudiced and interested” and the “malicious and idle,” respectively (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146). In order to argue in every social encounter to contest the false public opinion, all social pleasantries would need to be discarded by the *silenced group* and they would need to resign themselves to being uneasy in all social interactions as they railed against social etiquette in an effort to halt the misinformation. While this would be possible, the acquaintance's name would not be saved and as stated earlier by Hazlitt, the truth would always be silenced by public opinion, rendering this a fruitless and exhausting endeavor (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 145). Given the hopelessness of the task, Hazlitt does defend the *silenced group* for not speaking, however he does still subtly suggest that they were not free of blame for the problematic social environment—they abandoned and betrayed acquaintances in the midst of scandal to protect themselves and tacitly allowed misinformation to circulate. Hazlitt views all as responsible for the environment and is

sympathetic to the position of each group, while simultaneously holding them accountable (Gilmartin 96).

Csengei explains that the eighteenth-century rules for proper behavior were so deeply ingrained and enforced that the *silenced group* would feel intense embarrassment for knowingly breaking the rules. He asserts that, “[O]ne can blush for the rudeness and imprudence of someone who has no sense of the impropriety of his behaviour” (Csengei 59). All involved in a combative interaction would feel extreme discomfort, especially the *silenced group* since they knowingly disregarded social etiquette. Csengei goes on to explain why the public would react so negatively to the *silenced group* and why the *silenced group* would feel so hesitant to speak. He writes that, “[t]he so-called ‘unsocial passions’—such as hatred, anger and resentment—do not carry the benefit of any pleasurable bodily sensation, and affect the onlooker with feelings of dissonance, cacophony and disagreeable bodily sensations” (Csengei 55). Going against ineradicable societal norms would be uncomfortable for all involved however the *silenced group* would feel the consequences of the action most deeply. They would be the ones met with extremely negative reactions—both because they would be breaking the etiquette of being agreeable and would feel the embarrassment of that and because they would cause the *intolerant group* to feel momentarily uncertain and would face that subsequent wrath. While the *intolerant group* would quickly be able to reinforce their old beliefs, the *silenced group* member would be at risk for becoming the victim of a rumor and having their life destroyed (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146).

## Section V: The Unnatural Public & The Silencing Effect

Hazlitt contends that any information capable of creating feelings of uncertainty for the *intolerant group* would never be allowed to be broadcast in a manner that could effectively counter public opinion. He writes that:

All therefore that is necessary, to control public opinion is, to gain possession of some organ loud and lofty enough to make yourself heard, that has power and interest on its side; and then, no sooner do you blow a blast in this trump of *ill-fame*, like the horn hung up by an old castle-wall, then you are answered, echoed, and accredited on all sides: the gates are thrown open to receive you, and you are admitted into the very heart of the fortress of public opinion, and can assail from the ramparts with every engine of abuse, and with privileged impunity, all those who may come forward to vindicate the truth, or to rescue their good name from the unprincipled keeping of authority, servility, sophistry and venal falsehood! (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 145)

Altering public opinion required support of the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups*, who dictated it at the time, however the *intolerant group* would never allow public opinion to disperse any information that would cause them to question their beliefs. Since the *intolerant group* also had the ability to safely attack anyone who spoke against public opinion, if the *silenced group* were to speak, they would immediately be re-silenced and potentially be made the subject of a rumor and ostracized. The static and immutable nature of public opinion in nineteenth-century England enabled a social environment where fact and fiction became interchangeable. While this benefited some, it allowed misinformation to circulate freely and unchallenged.

Hazlitt argues that given the powerlessness of the *silenced group*, any member who wanted to counter the false information would have had to have been an unconventional person, like him, who was not deterred by the pressure to conform to societal expectations. He writes that:

[H]e who is proof against it [misinformation], must either be armed with a love of truth, or contempt for mankind, which place him out of the reach of ordinary rules and calculations. For myself, I do not shrink from defending a cause or a friend *under a cloud*; though in neither case will cheap or common efforts suffice. (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 144)

The person who chose to combat the misinformation would have to go to war against public opinion and risk being ostracized and losing their reputation because they cared more about verity than social convention. Or they would have to be someone who had little regard for what those in nineteenth-century English society thought of them and this convention had to be strong enough to overcome any hesitancy about breaking social convention. Referring to himself perfectly illustrates his argument since Hazlitt was the victim of rumors over the course of his lifetime and was most definitely ostracized by society—also, his ability to see the complex dynamics between each societal group and hold all accountable, marked him as a unique person. His use of “ordinary” is noteworthy since it should not have required an unconventional person to counter the circulation of misinformation. That should have been a joint effort made by all of the public, yet it explicitly was not, illustrating that nineteenth-century English society was decidedly unnatural.

Smith offers an explanation for why the *silenced group* would remain silent and also why someone would choose to take the stance that Hazlitt did. Smith writes that:

Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is however, the natural and proper object of praise. (107)

Thus, not only was the *silenced group* motivated not to become the victim of a rumor in order to protect their future selves, but they also had an innate desire to be approved of by

society and an aversion to being extremely disliked, which arguably the victim of a rumor was or at least felt (*An Essay on the Principals of Human Action* 22-3). Also, since the nineteenth-century English social environment described by Hazlitt made it seem impossible to sway public opinion, it is understandable why many would choose not to pursue a fruitless, thankless venture which could lead to one losing their reputation and being ostracized. However, Smith does also offer an explanation for why Hazlitt would choose to speak out against public opinion, despite the consequences: Hazlitt wanted to be deserving of esteem, even if no one else deemed him so. Hazlitt was very much not esteemed for asserting the truth in the face of public lies, and instead he was ridiculed and ostracized (Smith 107, *William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146). However, Hazlitt's aspiration to be worthy of admiration, even if it were not bestowed, motivated him to take a stance against public opinion instead of remaining silent. Hazlitt believed that the *silenced group* in nineteenth-century English society had to make a choice between two instinctive human motivations—to be liked by one's fellows or to be worthy of esteem. Being forced to choose between two innate human needs insinuates that the social environment described by Hazlitt was not "natural" and was counter to reason, as has been Hazlitt's argument.

Hazlitt contends that not only were the rumors and opinions that were circulated false, but also all information circulating in the nineteenth-century English environment was altered and adjusted to fit the *intolerant group's* biased narrative that prevented uncertainty. He asserts that, "It is not a single breath of rumour or opinion; but the whole atmosphere is infected with a sort of agueish taint of anger and suspicion, that relaxes the nerves of fidelity, and makes our most sanguine resolutions sicken and turn pale" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 144). Hazlitt is explicit that not just rumors were falsely



circulated, but all information was subjected to alteration dependent on the *intolerant group's* beliefs. By using terms which denote illness, such as "infected," "sicken," "agueish," and "pale" to describe nineteenth-century English society, he illustrates that altering information in order to make it fit the comfort of the *intolerant group* made the information toxic or "infected," and consequently this toxicity spread into the rest of society and information. Hazlitt's imagery and word use illustrates that the misinformation and the fear of ostracization permeated every aspect of nineteenth-century English societal beliefs and it could not have been avoided any more easily than the air that was breathed, since "the whole atmosphere is infected." The *intolerant group's* tyrannical control of public opinion completely silenced the *silenced group* since even their most determined resolutions to counter public opinion were defeated and deserted by the circulation of misinformation. By depicting the entire nineteenth-century English social environment as contaminated by misinformation, Hazlitt again insinuates that an erroneous public opinion completely dictating the social environment was counter to nature and logic.

Hazlitt maintains that the circulation of misinformation, altered for the benefit and comfort of the *intolerant group*, not only silenced the *silenced group*, but also muddled the *intolerant group's* judgment and rendered them incapable of forming beliefs from their personal experiences. He states that, "Seeing is believing, it is said. Lying is believing, say I. We do not even see with our own eyes" (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 148). Hazlitt implies that the public no longer relied on their personal beliefs, experiences, or thoughts for information, only public opinion, which meant that there was no thinking involved, just compliance with public opinion. There are two different meanings which can be derived from the statement that "[l]ying is believing:" It can mean that one was "lying" to

themselves and therefore “believing,” or it can also mean that one believed a falsity, both of which the *intolerant group* was guilty of since they blindly and unquestioningly agreed with public opinion. Additionally, thinking is different than knowing and it was extremely easy to have a belief that was not true, especially if there was no thinking involved, as was the case for the *intolerant group*. As Hazlitt has argued and illustrated, not thinking for oneself was illogical and concerning as it allowed one’s beliefs to be completely prescribed by public opinion since there was no contemplation of if those thoughts were correct as there was no thinking.

## Section VI: The Manipulation & Silencing of the Public

Hazlitt argues that the circulation of misinformation not only prevented any uncertainty for the *intolerant group*, but also fulfilled the *non-discriminating group's* need for entertainment. He writes that:

[A] dozen or score of my countrymen, with their faces fixed, and their eyes glued to a newspaper, a magazine, a review—reading, swallowing, profoundly ruminating on the lie, the cant, the sophism of the day! Why? It saves them the trouble of thinking; it gratifies their ill-humour, and keeps off the *ennui*! Does any gleam of doubt, an air of ridicule or a glance of impatience pass across their features at the shallow and monstrous things they find? No, it is all the passive faith and dull security; they cannot take their eyes from the page, they cannot live without it. (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146-7)

Although “reading” is typically associated with digesting and processing information, Hazlitt proves that there was no thought process occurring since “swallowing,” implies simply taking something in without chewing it or thinking about it and actually digesting it. This also insinuates that reading with the intention of confirming beliefs was problematic since it was then possible to fool oneself into thinking that one was reading and therefore questioning, when one was in fact not. Hazlitt illustrates that there was no thinking involved, which would have been expected if they were processing the information, especially since Hazlitt states that the information was shocking enough that it should have provoked some sort of reaction. It is explicitly clear that this misinformation played a specific and important role in the nineteenth-century English society where it served as entertainment for the *non-discriminating group*—explaining why they would want the social environment to persist. Additionally, the *intolerant group* found it pleasurable to take in information that confirmed their beliefs since there was no need for uncertainty and because it was also entertaining.

Hazlitt explains that defending the victim of a rumor or any attempt to halt misinformation was interpreted as a personal attack to remove the entertainment from the lives of the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups*. He writes that, “It [defending the victim of a rumor] is, in fact, an attempt to deprive them [the public] of the great and only benefit they derive from the supposed errors of their neighbours and contemporaries—the pleasure of backbiting and railing at them, which they call *seeing justice done*” (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 143-4). Hazlitt insinuates that the item being taken away from the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* was something completely vital, like food or water, with his use of “deprive.” However, only the chance to revel in someone else’s misery was being taken away and since their enjoyment came from other’s suffering, Hazlitt insinuates both a sick sadism and that this was an essential source of their amusement and entertainment.

Hazlitt maintains that not only was the circulation of misinformation useful to the *intolerant* and *non-discriminating groups* to stave off uncertainty and boredom, but it was also useful to those who had power and could use public opinion to help maintain that power. He states that:

[I]t [rumors] gave him a personal advantage over one he did not like—and who will give up what tends to strengthen his aversion against another? To Tory prejudice, sore as it is—to English imagination, morbid as it is, a nickname, a ludicrous epithet, a malignant falsehood (when it has once been propagated and taken to bosoms as a welcome consolation) becomes a precious property, a vested right; and people would as soon give up a sinecure. (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 148)

Hazlitt insinuates that this environment benefited a select few individuals, such as those in power. It is noteworthy that he uses “personal advantage,” as this implies that some were able to manipulate public opinion in order to benefit specifically themselves, not

nineteenth-century English society. Hazlitt illustrates that public opinion helped destroy anyone who disagreed or impeded the personal agenda of someone in power, indicating that it was a useful political maneuver that could be used to permanently damage a person's name and credibility and subsequently silence them. Hazlitt confirms that rumors were used politically by mentioning "Tory," which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was the conservative English party who supported "upholding the constituted authority and order in Church and State" and was against "concessions in the direction of greater religious liberty" ("Tory, n. and adj." 3.a.). While rumors did not always proliferate into those which had the ability to ruin someone's name completely and permanently, when they did, those rumors were extremely valuable for destroying a political opponent. Hazlitt compares public opinion to the wind, so while a rumor could be started, there was relatively little control over where it went from there, explaining why rumors did not always completely ruin the victim's life (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 144). Instead, rumors could cause varying degrees of embarrassment or loss of reputation as opposed to complete ostracization. Since rumors were used politically to destroy a dissenter from public opinion, the rumors that did successfully destroy someone were considered the most valuable to those in power.

## Conclusion

Hazlitt proves that the silencing effect perpetuated by the *intolerant group's* inability to tolerate uncertainty, allowed misinformation to circulate freely in nineteenth-century English society. His example of Mr. Blackwood's followers disbelieving their own experiences in order to maintain their beliefs, depicts an uncanny inability to question, think about, or even process information (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 147-8). Hazlitt's argument in *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* illustrates how irrational the *intolerant group's* inability to tolerate uncertainty was, as there is a stable, core sense of self—otherwise each time a person awoke they would be an entirely new person (83). Yet the allure of the entertainment, pleasure, and comfort the *intolerant group* derived from confirming and not questioning their beliefs led to a tyrannical silencing of anyone who attempted to challenge those beliefs, which made them highly susceptible to disbelieving fact (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146-7).

The consequences of ostracism were so costly that the *silenced group* knowingly enabled the circulation of misinformation by publicly repeating the erroneous public opinion, despite not agreeing with or believing it (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 145). This threat of ostracism also forced the *silenced group* to choose between the natural want to be worthy of respect and to be liked (Smith 107). In nineteenth-century England, it was impossible to fulfill both innate desires since being worthy of esteem would require publicly contradicting public opinion and being liked would require publicly remaining silent. Thus, while Hazlitt chose to be honorable by speaking against the tyranny of the *intolerant group*, he also chose the far less appealing option of being ostracized, ridiculed, and ruined (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146). The *silenced group*, with no good option

available, chose to protect their future selves, which Hazlitt argues influences behavior in the present (*An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* 22-3). Those with power in nineteenth-century England chose to not only protect their future selves, but to also benefit their future selves, by manipulating public opinion in order to maintain their power. The allure of the power available to those who had the ability to control and profit from the nearly always erroneous public opinion was too tempting to resist (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 148).

At the beginning of the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, in *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* (1728), Francis Hutcheson anticipated the problematic social environment Hazlitt describes in nineteenth-century England by cautioning that beauty can conceal truth. Hutcheson states that in society there, “must be *Conformity to Reason: Truth* discovered by our *Reason* is certain and invariable: *That* then alone is the Original Idea of Virtue, *Agreement with Reason*. But in like manner our *Sight* and *Sense of Beauty* is deceitful, and does not always represent the true *Forms* of Objects” (230-1). The society described by Hazlitt was completely deceived by more attractive choices—the *silenced group* found the option of protecting their future selves more appealing, the *intolerant group* found the pleasure of their certainty more appealing than questioning or thinking, and those in power found their power more appealing than being moral. Hazlitt has repeatedly demonstrated how the social environment was counter to human nature or “[r]eason,” since misinformation circulated, people were silenced, and innate human drives were repressed. Additionally, the *intolerant group* dictating what information circulated in the nineteenth-century English social environment according to whether or not it confirmed their beliefs

and not fact was counter to rationality. Silencing the *silenced group* when they attempted to speak reason with threats of ostracization, depicted a society that was severely lacking in integrity. Additionally, those who controlled public opinion used it to their advantage to keep power, confirm beliefs, and for entertainment, which were clearly not virtuous reasons to manipulate public opinion. Furthermore, those who immorally used public opinion for their own gain were respected, while those who attempted to be honorable were silenced or mocked. Hazlitt himself acknowledges the ridicule, slander, and public embarrassment he endured as the victim of rumors (*William Hazlitt Selected Writings* 146). As Hutcheson had warned in 1728, the nineteenth-century social environment described by Hazlitt had lost the ability to be rational and the cost was an unnatural society where a public opinion not based on fact was able to circulate.

Hazlitt argues that appealing options misled the entire public, although some groups had access to far more attractive options than others. This deception was ultimately detrimental to nineteenth-century English society as misinformation was able to circulate and the resulting social environment was counter to human nature. Hazlitt illustrates how each group interacted with the others to result in the problematic social environment. He simultaneously holds the *silenced group* accountable for remaining silent, yet acknowledges that their other option was to risk losing the favor of public opinion and to potentially lose their reputation, friends, and community. While Hazlitt does lambaste the *intolerant group* for needing gossip to allay their boredom, he also acknowledges that there was comfort and pleasure, albeit a sick one, in denying the truth and blindly accepting public opinion. Hazlitt even acknowledges that most in a position of power would use it to manipulate public opinion to maintain that power.



Hazlitt's ability in "On Public Opinion" to hold all accountable and demonstrate each group's contribution to nineteenth-century English society, depicts the complex entanglement of the groups and illustrates why it was able to persist. He also proves that this social environment was ironic as the natural inclinations of humans were exploited to create an unnatural society. The desire to be loved by others, praised by others, not be ostracized and betrayed by friends were all human drives that nearly everyone could relate to.

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