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Patriotism and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Ode

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Patriotism and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Ode

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Historical Context

In the eighteenth century, British politics and poetry were closely connected as poets, writers and literary critics became more involved in the political discourse of their country.

According to Christine Gerrard, artists began to feel more confident and empowered to express their political opinions as the hierarchal structures of society loosened after the seventeenth-century Civil Wars (“Poetry” 7-8). During the reign of Charles II (1630-1685), the role of poets shifted to that of political commentator, satirist and panegyrist, whose work not only influenced the rise of party politics but changed the direction of politics (ibid.).

Consequently, poets considered themselves “agents of political change” (ibid.). Abigail Williams states that both poets and critics thought the relationship between art and politics to be “fundamentally interdependent” as the language of literary criticism found its way into political discourse, and, in turn, political idiom marked poetic diction and influenced poetic form (444-5). As poetry became the vehicle for critical debate, however, the emotional world of the individual artist became of marginal importance, as poets were morally bound to serve a higher societal goal. Consequently, poetry appears to be void of personal elements.

In the mid-eighteenth century, a change can be denoted in the attitude of artists with regard to their role in society. As the political climate in Britain changed, poets became more hesitant about their engagement in political issues. Gerrard states that especially in the period after Walpole’s resignation in 1742, poets became less confident expressing their political ideas and opinions (“Poetry” 18). In addition, the Jacobite Uprising of 1745 and its violent aftermath proved to be “more problematic” for artists than national conflicts in earlier decades (ibid.). Conceivably as a reflection of the uneasy times, poetry appears to be more contemplative and introspective as poets moved away from the frontline of political debate to focus more on the emotional and imaginative elements of their art. In the introduction to his

“Odes on Various Subjects” (1746) Joseph Warton warns his public that his work may appear to be “too fanciful and descriptive” as he believes that the most important qualities of a poet are “invention and imagination” (par. 1). However, he states “the fashion of moralizing [poetry] has been carried to far,” and, as a result, negatively influenced poetry by reducing its imaginative elements. His odes are, therefore, an attempt “to bring back Poetry into its right channel” (ibid.).

1.2 Patriotism

One of the key terms of the eighteenth century is patriotism. Poets in particular played a large role in “forging the mythology and iconography of nationalism” (Kaul 33). Surveying the poetry written in this period, Bonamy Bobrée believes that poets felt a definite necessity in “express[ing] the emotion of patriotism” (qtd in Kaul 27). Through a variety of notions “Liberty,” “Peace,” “Pride in Literary Achievement,” this notion thus surfaces in their work. Especially the glorification of British commerce, which surpassed all other British achievements in imagination and magnificence, was considered an important part of the “poetic project,” namely “the projection of English ‘civilization’” (ibid.). British commerce was considered more liberal and humane, and hence superior to that of other nations, and especially to those outside of Europe (ibid.). During the Walpole era, a rise can be denoted in the general application of the notion of patriotism in political context. As a political credo, Gerrard states, patriotism was related to party politics, although the notion is generally associated with national unity (“Poetry” 13). Political patriotism arose from “the growth of faction and party, and the concomitant disagreement about who truly represents the nation’s interests” (ibid.). Moreover, she states that it entailed “constant vigilance, a suspicion anything that threatened the independence of the Commons, and particularly corruption” (ibid.). Although patriotism in Walpole era seems quite straightforward, as a clear opposition could be denoted between the two political parties, Gerrard says that the political situation

was “infinitely more complicated” (“Poetry” 19). In her study *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, Gerrard claims the opposition to Walpole was a “hybrid opposition,” consisting not only of Tories but also of “independents” and dissident Whigs (19). The latter category became a consistent element in the opposition to Walpole only after he achieved a virtual monopoly on power in the early 1720s (ibid.).

Where patriotism was valorised in the early eighteenth century, the term becomes downgraded in the mid-century. After Walpole’s resignation, many Tories, Oppositional Whigs and outsiders believed that a revolution would occur in the government, which would make an end to the widespread corruption in Britain (“United Kingdom”). However, this change did not happen (ibid.). Instead, a reorganisation was made in the state employment in favour of the upper-class Whigs (ibid.). The reorganisation created a wave of outrage and disillusionment in Britain, especially amongst the followers of the oppositional leader William Pulteney, who had in their eyes betrayed the Patriot cause by exchanging his former political demands for the title Earl of Bath (Dix 139). Samuel Johnson, a fervent Tory in his younger years, was one of the first people who reacted to these events. In his dictionary, he critically defined a patriot as “One whose ruling passion is the love of his country” (“Patriot”). Political patriotism, since long associated with the Whig cause, became aligned with corruption as the decennia following Walpole’s leave proved to be little change for the better. In his article “The Patriot,” written in 1774, Johnson states: “A patriot is he whose publick conduct is regulated by one single motive, the love of his country; who, as an agent in parliament, has, for himself, neither hope nor fear, neither kindness nor resentment, but refers every thing to the common interest” (par. 5). As stated before, many artists were ambivalent about the changing political climate and their role in the political discourse. This is evident in their reserved attitude towards “conventional expressions of patriotic emotions” which could give impression of political disinterest (Gerrard, “Poetry” 18). Gerrard, therefore, has

difficulty speaking of an “untroubled patriotism” as patriotism was not void of conflicting emotions (“Poetry” 19).

1.3 Contemporary Research

Contemporary research of eighteenth-century British literature has focussed on the different viewpoints through which the history of the British Isles can be seen. In *Poetry and Jacobite Politics*, Murray Pittock states that he in his study intended to move away from “incremental” or Whig historicizing, and instead has tried to “uncover the language through which the metropolis, the centre, the imperial state, makes sense of its achievements” (1). His research is interesting as it provides a balanced view of Jacobite culture and politics in Britain.

In the last two decades, the subject of patriotism has been given much attention in research of literary and political history. Studies with the eighteenth century as focal point, centred predominantly on the Walpole era and its literary masters, such as Pope and Swift. An important researcher in the area is Christine Gerrard. In her study *Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, she sheds light on dominant political and cultural features of the Patriot campaign in this period. Moreover, she pays attention to the poetry produced in this era while exploring what she calls “the distinctive hallmark of the Patriot literary programme – its imaginative engagement with British myth and legend” (99). The mid and late eighteenth century has not received much attention with regard to patriotism. Moreover, as many artists in this period have been labelled apolitical, little is known about their political views and ideology. Research is, therefore, needed to give a complete picture of both patriotism in this period and the views of individual artists. Moreover, little research has been done to investigate the general constructs of odes in this period. However, interpretative studies on individual odes or sets of odes have been undertaken.

1.4 Thesis

The general consensus is that the mid-century poets turned away from public debate to focus more on private sensibilities. It is believed that poets were less interested in the political discourse than artists in previous decennia. As mentioned before, however, poets were influenced by the political events which followed Walpole's resignation such as the reorganisation of the state employment among the elite Whigs and the Jacobite Uprising of 1745. Arguably, their poetry was a reaction to the shifting political climate in Britain and reflected their political ambivalence about their position as a poet in the public debate. The goal of this thesis is, therefore, to give a more balanced account of the relationship between political ideology and the aesthetics of the poets in the period. The main objective is to discover to which degree the political events in Britain affected the artists and their poetry, and, moreover, if their political ambivalence affected their love for Britain. The hypothesis is that in the mid-eighteenth century, the ode, as opposed to other literary forms, enabled poets to express their conflicting patriotic sentiments as it provided a new context through which the changing social and political climate could be discussed.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, attention will be paid to the form, metre and the general constructive principles of the midcentury ode. Special attention will be paid to the poetic devices that the poets use to convey their emotions and ideas, and particularly their feelings with regard to Britain and British politics. In the second chapter, Mark Akenside's ode "On Leaving Holland" will be analysed. Akenside, who was the first poet to release his collection of odes in the 1740s, was politically active throughout his career, and considered it the duty of a poet to be involved in the public discourse of Britain (Gilfillan 3). In the third chapter, a closer look will be taken at "Ode to Liberty," one of four patriotic poems by William Collins from his collection "Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects," published in 1746. Lastly, in light of contemporary research aiming to

uncover the margins of literary history, the final chapter will discuss the Celtic consciousness of Thomas Gray in his Pindaric ode “The Bard,” written between 1754 and 55, and published under the title “Ode II” in his 1757 edition of *Odes*.

Chapter 2: The Mid-Eighteenth-Century Ode

2.1 Historical Context

In the eighteenth century, the ode was a much-practised poetic form in Britain. Based in part on classical models, the ode embodied the century's fascination with the Greco-Roman era as well as its ability to transform these ancient models to fit the new sensibilities of the times. From the Restoration period to the late eighteenth century, many changes can be signalled both in the form and content of the ode. To provide an accurate description of the midcentury ode, it is thus important to understand how eighteenth-century critics and poets viewed this poetic form in previous decades. According to Douglas Patey, many Augustan poets believed their period to be "*the lyric age*" because they saw the "greater ode" as "one of the greatest inventions of the age" (588, italics Patey's). Interestingly, Margaret Koehler has a slightly different opinion about the significance of the ode in this period. She claims that although the ode was considered to be more important than comedy, satire and lesser lyrics, epic and tragedy held a higher position in "the hierarchy of poetic genres" (388). John Sitter has yet another view of the status of ode in this period. He states that the ode, as early as the seventeenth century, was associated with "loftiness and obscurity," and remained to have this status until the beginning of the nineteenth century (266).

Moreover, many eighteenth-century critics and poets were divided about what constituted the definition of ode. In his dictionary, Johnson classified the ode as "a Lyric Poem," consisting of long or short verses which are separated into stanzas or strophes ("Ode"). He saw "sweetness," however, as the distinguishing characteristic of an ode. According to Johnson, "sweetness" depends on the poet's ability to "sooth the mind of the reader by the variety of the verse, and the delicacy of words, the beauty of numbers, and the description of things most beautiful in themselves" ("Ode"). While Johnson categorizes the ode as a lyric poem, many critics and poets were confused about the relationship between ode

and lyric, because the latter could be applied to sublime odes, classical poetry accompanied by a lyre, and modern songs and arias (Chambers qtd. in Cohen 207). Moreover, under the definition of ode, various poetic genres could be categorized. As a result, many critics distinguished “lesser odes” from “greater” or “sublime odes” (Cohen 204). However, as lesser odes could equally consist of a large variety of poetic genres, the division between these two odes was not merely based on the different aims, ideas and subject matter of the poet. In his “Lectures on Poetry” (1912/13), Joseph Trapp argues that lesser odes could consist of both “jocose” and “serious” poems, and thus range from parodies, to elegies, and poems celebrating the victories of a national hero (qtd. in Cohen 208).

2.2 Midcentury Ode

The mid-eighteenth century was a transitional period for poetry, marking the boundaries of both the Augustan and Romantic era. In the 1740s, the ode, and more specifically, the sublime ode was rediscovered by educated poets, such as Warton, Collins, Akenside, and Gray. Like many poets, Warton was frustrated by the state of the ode, and, in particular, with the irregular ode practised by poets in previous decades. (Patey 588). In his “Essay on the Genius and Writing of Pope,” Warton, who nevertheless believed that the lyric was the truest form of poetry, claims: “The moderns have, perhaps, practised no species of poetry with so little success, and with such indisputable inferiority to the ancients as the Ode” (qtd. in Patey 588). Interestingly, Warton as well as Gray, Akenside, and Johnson were not convinced that the English language was suitable for the ode (Cohen 217). He believed that “the harshness and untuneableness of modern languages,” and especially English, was to count for this (ibid.). Their uncertainty, however, did not withhold them from practising this poetic form. Rather, they made it their quest to “to bring back Poetry into its right channel” (Warton “Advertisement,” par. 1).

Their quest to revive the English ode was, as mentioned in the previous chapter, fuelled by the changing social and political climate in Britain. In addition, Gerrard believes that many poets in this period were suffering from “a kind of identity crisis,” due to literary and political anxiety concerning their social position and audience (*Patriot* 148). Arguably, the ode, with its ties to the Greco-Roman times, served to provide the poets with a cultural heritage while, at the same time, offering them an unity through which these feelings of anxiety could be expressed. Cohen, moreover, believes that the ode enabled poets to move away from the moralising principles of earlier decades, which did not correspond with their social, political and aesthetic ideas (206). Especially after Pope’s death in 1744, many poets felt a need to produce poetry in a form that was different than the couplets and quatrains standardized by Pope and his contemporaries (*ibid.*).

2.3 Constructive Principles of the Midcentury Ode

In the introduction to his collection of odes (1764), Richard Shepherd lists a variety of different poetic notions and concepts which separates the midcentury ode from the earlier Augustan ode. He states that the midcentury ode is “built intirely [*sic*] upon Fancy, and Ease and Simplicity of Diction whereas the latter has its foundation in Fact and Reality.” He claims, moreover, that the midcentury ode tends to be “descriptive, allegorical, reliant upon ‘Fancy,’” and “less difficult than the earlier Pindaric” (qtd. in Koehler 395-6). To understand the midcentury interpretation of the ode, it is thus important to get familiar with these different rhetorical terms.

As Shepherd denotes, midcentury poets use many allegorical aspects in their poetry, predominantly personification. In the eighteenth century, personification becomes a powerful mode of representation in poetry. Eric Rothstein states that for British society they were considered “powerful stimulants to sensory experience” (qtd in Keith 131). Personification becomes a poetic device that enables poets to express emotion in a period where reason and

common sense are valued over sensibility and imagination. Jennifer Keith stresses the importance of personification by claiming that “personification *is* sensibility” as it enabled a connection between the images of people and the central notions which lived in society (132, *italics* Keith). In the mid-eighteenth century, personification is increasingly associated with the ode as personified abstractions take up a more central position in the text (Koehler 386). In Collins’ “Ode to Mercy,” for instance, Mercy is the addressee and main subject of the text. She is constructed as a female allegorical figure with many visual characteristics; she is a “maid,” (23) the “Gentelest of sky-born forms and best adorned” (2). Shepherd, moreover, argues that midcentury odes are descriptive as well as allegorical because poets are primarily interested in the portrayal of the visual and “intangible qualities” of their abstractions (qtd in Koehler 396). In the opening lines, Collins gives a lengthy description of Mercy’s appearance as she sits next to Valour, another personified abstraction, like a “smiling bride” (1). By personifying Mercy, the poet is able to represent Mercy as a human subject, and, in turn, this will enable readers to identify themselves more easily with the character Mercy. Furthermore, personification could invoke feelings of compassion in readers as they are more likely to project those feeling on themselves.

Another term that Shepherd uses is fancy. Fancy or, in Warton’s vocabulary, imagination is the “internal act of the poet’s mind,” which replaces the action of an external subject, common in earlier poetry (Koehler 397). Where in previous decades the poet or speaker was passive, a witness to an external event unable to “absorb any aspects of the personification,” the poet of the midcentury ode is active, and has the ability to not only address the abstraction but become a part of the it (Koehler 386-7). Through the power of imagination, the poet is able to invoke an imaginary vision and be changed by it. “In fact,” Koehler states, “a poet is a poet by virtue of this imaginative vision that allows him to invoke personified abstractions and be transformed by the encounter.” In “Ode to Mercy,” for

instance, the speaker uses an apostrophe to address Mercy directly. Mercy has become a subject with human qualities and an understanding of its own. Consequently, the speaker is able to empower Mercy, this otherwise powerless abstraction, and reduce his own feelings of anguish and despair.

2.4 Patriotism and the Ode

Throughout the eighteenth century, a connection can be found between patriotism and the ode. In the Restoration, the excessiveness of the Pindaric ode served the poet's need to honour the re-establishment of the monarch while the ode in later decades enabled poets to discuss minor topics in larger social, political or moral spectrums (Koehler 389-93). According to Kaul, the relationship between patriotism and the ode, which can be traced back to its original classical sources,¹ was intentional because the ode made a "topical and urgent contribution to the civic discourse of the nation" (qtd. Koehler 401). Over the course of the eighteenth century, the ode gradually becomes more "self-consciously British" (Koehler 400). This self-consciousness was not only expressed through the subject matter of the poems but also through the poet's need to discover native traditions (ibid.). Their search for poetic (and national) heritage was due to their insecurity over their position in the public discourse, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs. In addition, however, David Fairer believes that the midcentury poets were driven by a need "to hear poetry again – to be surprised by its rhythms and harmonies" (179). By restoring and perhaps re-evaluating the link between modern literature and the poetry of the past, the poets laid their emphasis on "the recovery of the past, rather than its loss" (ibid.).

After this general description of the midcentury ode, more concrete examples of the ode will be given in the next four chapters, based on the views, descriptions and ideas laid out in this chapter.

¹ In his article "Lyric and Iambic," Stephen Harrison discusses the lyrical poetry of the Roman poet Horace. He claims that in Horace's work contemporary politics played a large role as well as ethics and moralizing. In his fourth book of *Odes*, Horace honours upcoming Roman celebrities, and celebrates the military achievements of his stepsons in his fourth book of *Odes*. In the same collection, Horace, moreover, wrote an panegyric to Augustus (qtd. in Harrison 197-8).

Chapter 3: Mark Akenside and His Zeal For British Liberty

3.1 Introduction

Mark Akenside (1721-1770) was the first midcentury poet to publish his collection of odes.² Although his work was discredited and largely overlooked by many critics in the nineteenth and twentieth century, who believed him to be a lesser poet than Collins and Gray, his *Odes on Several Subjects* (1745) did not only inspire his contemporaries Collins, Warton, and Gray, but influenced the progress of the ode tradition in later decades by emphasising the interrelatedness of the thematically diverse poems (Dix 153). Through the distinct style and arrangement of the volume, moreover, the odes contrast and elaborate on each other, creating a unified and coherent whole (Dix 153). In the advertisement to his collection, Akenside denotes that the odes were written “at very different intervals, and with a view to very different manners of expression and versification” (xxxix). While Akenside indeed helped to steer poetry into a new direction through his innovative style of verse, he did not make the same radical break as Collins and Warton did with the aesthetic principles and precepts of the Augustans (Koehler 397).

Throughout his career, Akenside had openly expressed his interest and involvement in politics because he believed, much like the poets in previous decades, that it was the poet’s duty to be actively engaged in the public discourse of the country, as a patriot (Griffin 19). The *Monthly Review* in 1772 notes that Akenside had from the beginning of his career applied his intellect “to the interest of truth, of morals, or civil and religious liberty” (qtd in Dustin 29). During the 1740s, Akenside’s politics centred primarily on the preservation and celebration of British liberties (Griffin 24). As a midcentury liberal Whig, he argued for the restriction of the powers of the monarchy, and tried in his work to explain the political significance of his beliefs (Jump 214). According to Dustin Griffin, Akenside believed that

²Dix denotes two later published versions of *Odes on Several Subjects*. The 1760 edition of *Odes* was heavily revised by Akenside. The other edition was published posthumously by Jeremiah Dyson in 1772. This edition contained more revisions and was expanded with 11 more odes, divided into two books (*Poetical* 48).

“liberty should always be on the poets mind” (29). In *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson criticises Akenside for the fervour with which he professed his political creed. He states that Akenside “retained an unnecessary and outrageous zeal for what he called and thought liberty” (107). As the political corruption in this period threatened to jeopardize the establishment of British liberties, however, Johnson’s accusation may have been ungrounded. While Akenside had already at the age of sixteen asserted his interest in politics through his poem “A British Philippic,” his belief in the British political system was deeply affected by the corruption and political rush following Walpole’s resignation. In his letter of June 18, 1742 to the Scottish philosopher David Fordyce, Akenside expresses his disillusionment with politics and the patriot program, by claiming: “I am quite sick of Politics; our present Politics, I mean” (qtd. in Dix 139).

Two years after these events, Akenside addressed these issues once more, in his satirical poem “Epistle to Curio.”³ The subject of the poem is William Pulteney, the former leader of the Whig dissidents (1726-1742), who had been ridiculed in the media after casting aside his extensive liberal beliefs for the title Earl of Bath (Dix 139). According to Dix, the key irony of the poem lies in Akenside’s portrayal of Pulteney as the long-standing opponent of Walpole and his corrupt administration, who, at length, had come to resemble his rival in his political deceit (142-3). Although the content of the poem recalls earlier Augustan satire, the tone of the poem is more solemn and reflective as it focuses in a large part on the conflicting emotions of the poet-speaker. The speaker, which is in all likelihood Akenside himself, expresses both his feelings of compassion and loathing for Pulteney, who had been a former hero of him (Dix 151). In the poem, he reveals his sympathies for Whig politics and the Patriot cause. He maintains to have supported Pulteney and his former liberal beliefs, and

³ Under the title “Ode IX: To Curio,” this poem was included, though extensively revised, in the 1772 edition of *Odes on Several Subjects*, and thus provides a good example of the different poetic genres constituting the definition of ode in the eighteenth century, as mentioned in chapter 2. Where “Epistle to Curio” focuses primarily on the troubled feelings of the speaker, Ode IX. To Curio discusses the importance of preserving liberty and the evils of self-interest and luxury, and is thus a more general political poem. Moreover, the latter was shortened from 348 to 160 lines, and contains far less information about Pulteney, his betrayal, and the political background of 1740s.

had even considered writing a panegyric, a Pindaric ode of praise, to him after his political victory over Walpole. The speaker of the poem affirms to have been hesitant to discuss his criticism of Curio, which is evident by the two year distance between the actual events and the completion of the poem. He states:

Yet long reluctant I forebore thy name,
 Long watch'd thy virtue like a dying flame,
 Hung o'er each glimmering spark with anxious eyes,
 And wish'd and hop'd the light again would rise. (25-28)

Moreover, Dix denotes that Akenside had difficulty expressing his profound disappointment over Pulteney's betrayal in the poem, and, therefore, resorted to employ rhetorical questions to avoid discussing his feelings directly (145). He asks, for instance: "Is this the man in Freedom's cause approv'd/ The man so great, so honour'd, so beloved (161-2) /.../ This Curio, hated and despised by all/ Who fell himself to work his country's fall?" (165-6). The poet closes his poem by exclaiming that he hopes his verse might give entry to liberty's heart, and "rouse her smothering flame" (242-3). More importantly, he wishes that his poetry will "snatch the fainting patriot back to fame" (244). The poet believes that patriotism is thus at the heart of liberty, and hopes that Curio's former patriotic flame will burn again in his heart. This wish, however, could also apply to the needs of the poet. Arguably, the speaker hopes that his verse will restore his former trust in politics and the patriot cause.

3.1 "An Ode on Leaving Holland"

Akenside's deep-seated belief in British Liberty is also expressed in his ode "On Leaving Holland." The ode discusses the national characteristics of Holland and Britain, and contrasts the countries different cultural and political conceptions and ideologies (65-66). "On Leaving Holland" is one of three Pindaric Odes in *Odes on Several Subjects*. It is polystrophic in form, and contains lines in both iambic tetrameter and pentameter. The ode was, in all probability,

written in Leiden, in 1744, whilst Akenside was ready to depart for Britain after completing his MD at the University of Leiden (Dix 152). Akenside did not look favourably on Holland, and expressed these feelings on multiple occasions in his letters to his close friend Jeremiah Dyson. In his letter of April 21, Akenside claims: “The more I see of Holland ... the more I love and honour my native country” (xxxii-xxxiii). Akenside opens his ode by introducing Leiden’s muse. She is a covetous and power-hungry woman who does not care for her subjects but merely gives “frugal gifts” to “her favourites,” while she is feeding her “body’s bulky frame for passive, persevering toils/ And lest, for some ambitious aim” (3-7). The difference between Holland and Britain becomes even more scathing through the contrast between Britain’s “blue-ey’d sisters of the stream,” (39) and the frosty-looking “nymphs” who live in the soiled muddy floods of Holland (20). At first glance, the patriotic sentiments that Akenside expresses toward Britain seem to oppose his negative view on political patriotism, articulated in “Epistle to Curio.” Arguable, however, this poem should primarily be seen as an ode celebrating liberty as Britain’s highest established principle. In line 65, for instance, the poet-speaker uses an apostrophe to address “Freedom,” (65) and, subsequently, connects this notion, through an additional apostrophe, to the “Great Citizen of Albion” (66). The poet-speaker thus hails “Freedom” as the “Great Citizen of Albion.” Moreover, the strong patriotic beliefs in liberty should be balanced by his severe criticism of Holland, which is expressed in the almost caricatural representation that Akenside has created of the country. According to Dix, Akenside believed that the political system of Holland was flawed because the republic was governed by a small well-established elite who was primarily interested in self-preservation of power and wealth. Moreover, Akenside believed the Hollander to be apathetic and indifferent because of their unwillingness to be involved in the British military efforts against Spain (169-70). In the poem, the speaker rejects the political power of Holland because it lies by “the sloe-ey’d fathers of the land,” and is, as a result, “unown’d, undignify’d

by public choice (23-25). The people are thus not free. The poet-speaker states that in Britain, on the other hand, the monarch is subjected to “freedom,” which could either denote “the voice” of the people or refer to liberty as a higher concept (Griffin 22). Consequently, the narrator believes that the British political system is less prone to corruption than the political system of Holland.

Akenside was a political poet, who, in his work, did not shun to discuss his believe in civil liberties and the right of the people. Rather “Epistle to Curio” and “An Ode on Leaving Holland” are evidence of his interest and involvement in British politics. In the next chapters, the poetry of Collins and Gray will be discussed. In comparison to Akenside, they were less explicit about their political ideas and standpoints in their work and private life.

Chapter 4: The Patriotic Ambiguity of William Collins

4.1 Introduction

The mid-eighteenth century poet William Collins (1721-1759) became an important figure for artists in the Romantic Era, earning him the title of pre-romantic poet. While his work was originally misunderstood in his own time, it contributed to the rise of a more introspective poetry. His collection *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects*, which was published one year after Akenside's work in 1746, shows indeed more emotional and imaginative elements than the works of his peers. Consequently, many critics of Collin's work have focussed on the more Romantic aspects of his work, and disregarded the idea that Collins may have had an interest in or could have been preoccupied with the social and political issues of his time, like many of his Augustan peers. According to Richard Wendorf, critics produced a poet whose work was manifested by the "expression of the irrational voice, the product of an imaginative vitality whose visions lay beyond the traditional limitations of nature and reason" (qtd in Bergstrom 36).

In recent years, however, several critics have argued that Collins' work, and especially, his use of personification should be re-evaluated because they believe most critics do not understand how Collins may have translated or transformed his midcentury view of the world into poetic language and imagery. Carson Bergstrom disputes, for instance, that modern critics do not possess enough knowledge of metaphors to understand eighteenth-century uses of personifications, and, as a result, dismiss figurative language as "mere linguistic ornamentation" or "rhetorical excess" (32). In short, he argues that, from a cognitive linguistic point of view, metaphors can be understood and used because they are based in the "physical experience of the world" (33). Hence, the eighteenth-century reader could have related to Collins' personifications, and thus understand the different political and social dimensions that make up his work. It is in the same view, Sandro Jung argues that Collins

employed personification to create a feeling of “communality” in the reader, instead of moving them toward “some disembodied fantasy world” (qtd in Bergstrom 36). John Butt, furthermore, argues that Collins purposefully presented his subjects in a different way to “awaken the minds of others to social and moral virtues” (qtd in Bergstrom 36).

Consequently, it could be argued that Collins’ work does revolve around social and political issues because his poetic imagery and use of personification are based on his experience of the world.

4.2 “Ode to Liberty”

In the previous chapter, attention was paid to Akenside and his political standpoints. While Akenside was deeply affected by the political turmoil of 1740s, he continued to support the Whiggish principle of Liberty, as can be seen in “Epistle to Curio.” Collins, on the other hand, had more difficulty asserting his belief in the values of Liberty in 1746 because he was afflicted by the recent violent retributions against the Scottish leaders of the Jacobite Uprising of 1745 (Gerrard 92). Moreover, he was troubled by the domestic and international political crises that followed Britain, and had reservations about the country’s role in the War of the Austrian Succession (Levine 554). He addresses these uncertainties in his Pindaric progress piece “Ode to Liberty.” To understand exactly how Collins translated his political doubts into this poem, it is important to get familiar with the eighteenth-century notion of progress.

As stated in the introduction, many poets used notions as Liberty and Peace to express their strong patriotic sentiments. As “denominators of Progress,” however, their larger aim was to symbolize Britain's cultural advancements (Kaul 27). Kaul states that poets developed a model of progression that enabled them to state that Britain and British citizens were “the latest and most worthy beneficiaries of the historical rise and fall of empires” (27). The model they created was based on a medieval theory of cultural movement (*translation studii*), and interlaced with the conception that empires progress westward (*translation imperii*) (ibid.).

Important in their theory was the idea that Britain's dedication to Liberty would withhold the country from drifting into a state of decline, caused by corruption, self-interest, and degeneration, which had destroyed the mighty empires of the past (ibid.). Collins' version of the Progress piece differs, however, from the traditional early-eighteenth-century models because it does not trace a direct line of continuity between the establishment of Liberty in ancient Rome, and the formation of the constitutional law in Britain, but rather presents a contradictory and gap-filled account of the progress of Liberty that moves between ancient Rome, Renaissance Europe and past and present-day Britain. According to William Levine, many midcentury poets had difficulty with progress pieces because they saw limitations and inconsistencies in this representation of world history. They assumed that England could only for a restricted period of time profit from Liberty, "before the spirit moves further westward." Moreover, they understood that cultural advancement could negatively affect British creativity or "foundational energy," such as the visionary power of the Druids (553). Levine believes that Collins recognized these problems, and, therefore, transformed the progress piece to fit a different set of political concerns. Instead of signalling out corruption or self-interest as the biggest threat to Britain, he holds the whole country accountable for the crises that plague the country (ibid.).

Time plays an important role in Collin's poem because it enable him to create an ambiguous representation of liberty's progression. Instead of portraying time in a linear motion, he seems to have created a cyclical conception of the progress of time. At first glance, the poem seems to begin with the destruction of liberty in Ancient Rome, and end in latter-day Britain. However, in the last epode the speaker does not only relay Liberty's 'final' progression on the British Isles, but rather begins by portraying the ruins of a Druidic "shrine in some religious wood," creating the allusion that Britain may have already experienced the rise and fall of freedom (91). The destruction of the shrine, moreover, could have been the

result of the Roman conquest of Britain, and thus underlines the idea that time moves in a cyclical pattern. The structure of the ode helps to enhance the complex timeframe of “Ode to Liberty” because the narrative elements of the poem are reduced by the sudden changes in tone and meaning in the different stanzas. According to Koehler, the abrupt shifts are characteristic of the Pindaric ode, which depends structurally on “sudden transitions and digressions” (Koehler 394). In addition, Levine argues that the structure of the Pindaric ode enabled Collins “to counterpoint the traditional, continuous accounts of progress with mythological tales about England’s past,” and thus create a more complex and suggestive progress piece (56).

The poem opens with the invocation of the poet-speaker, who laments over the fall of ancient Rome, one of the many reincarnations of Goddess Liberty. The poet refuses to relay how Rome fell, but, nevertheless, states that the “Northern Sons of Spoils” had violently pushed “a Giant statue,” a metaphor for Rome, of its base, and, consequently, “all the blended Work of Strength and Grace” was broken into a “thousand Fragments” (25). In the epode that follows, the poet traces Liberty’s journey west and northward through different cities and empires that have vanished after experiencing a height of prosperity during the Renaissance. Like Rome, the poet does not reveal exactly why or how the places were destroyed but hints at: commercial dominance (Venice), religious persecution (Holland), and warfare (Austria’s battle of succession), all the result of international pressure or interference. Levine states that all the representations of Liberty in the poem are connected with images of violence, and, consequently, Liberty’s personification is always hiding or trying to escape destruction (559). The poet ends his journey in Britain where he witnesses the latest reincarnation of liberty. He states:

The magic works, Thou feel’st the Strains

One holier Name alone remains

The perfect Spell shall then avail.

Hail Nymph, ador'd by Britain, Hail! (60-63).

Arguably the poet's words of celebration and praise are also filled with a sense of dread because he understands that Britain could, after a period of prosperity, follow the same destructive progression as other European states. In line 60, for instance, the poet denotes that Liberty feels "the strains" of magic. This could either denote to the native lineage of Liberty or to a feeling of tension or constraint because liberty is ultimately connected to violence ("strain," OED).

In the antistrophe, the poet relays a different progression, namely the creation of Britain. While the poet created a relatively realistic narrative of the rise and fall of Liberty in Europe, his historical account of Britain is interlaced with lore and myth. He claims, for instance, that Britain was separated from the main land by "a wide wild Storm even Nature's self confounding," which enabled the creation of Liberty's "last Abode" (88). According to Mircea Eliade, the creation of an a-historical perspective, which is set down in the beginning of time by supernatural or mythical beings, is "aimed at abolishing or erasing the basic psychological terror that [the passage of] time inspires in man,"⁴ including a terrible fear of history (538). Arguably, the poet has thus created a pseudo-history of the creation of Britain to escape his own feelings of anxiety and fear, the result of his belief that Britain might follow the same progression as the other European nations.

In the last epode, the poet envisions a new Temple of Liberty, built in different architectural styles, which could substitute the Druidic ruin described earlier. He states: "Gothic Pride" and "Graecia's graceful Orders join/ Majestic through the mix'd Design" (118-20). Gerrard notes that a connection exists between Gothic architecture and Whiggish

⁴ While Eliade's theory applies archaic and traditional societies, and the poetry that these societies brought forth, Vaira Vikis-Freiberg shows that the model could also be relevant to the solemnly subjective experience of time, and, more particularly, to "the linear and cyclic conceptions of time in corresponding poetic imagery in modern and traditional society" (538). She states: "a modern poet may use the same parallels between natural cycles and the evolution of the individual ... even the very same imagery; yet through it all there will be a faint ring of sadness, a trace of anxiety, the first signs of a modern consciousness losing touch with its archetypal roots" (ibid.).

ideology, and, in particular the notion of Liberty (*Patriot* 122). She claims that Whig Patriots praised: “the ‘Gothick’ constitution” for its “mixed order of king, Lords, and Commons: constitutional balance under the rule of law” (*Patriot* 123). When Collins’ wrote “Ode to Liberty” in 1746, this representation of a Gothic Temple of Liberty was well-known as it had surfaced in the poetry of Akenside, West and Thomson amongst others (Gerrard, *Patriot* 122). Like the old Druid shrine, the poet’s new temple is an altar to celebrate Liberty. The poet hopes that the new temple could inspire new feelings of patriotism, which were lost after the destruction of the old shrine.

At the end of the poem, Paul Sherwin argues, the poet substitutes Liberty for Concord, in an attempt to end the insecurity he feels, the result from the “instability of Liberty” (qtd in Levine 560). While the poet does indeed wishes to see a more stable form of freedom, which can guarantee a state of peace among the European nations, he does not want to substitute Liberty. Arguably, he wants to transform her by cloaking her in “Concord’s social form” (132). As stated before, Liberty was a very powerful notion in the eighteenth century for both Whig and Tory adherents. The poet may have had doubts about the stability of Liberty and recognized problems with an ideal representation of the notion, which is indeed expressed in this poem, but it is unlikely that he rejects the concept on the whole by substituting it for Concord. His vision of a Gothic temple of Liberty, which could reawaken his feelings of patriotism, underlines his adherence to liberal Whig politics. Debatably, the poet suggests that only in “Concord’s social form,” Liberty is able to transcend the basic cyclical pattern of time, so that she can reach a higher level of development with each repetition.

While Collins may have had doubts about politics and patriotism in 1740s, his work does show his concern with the contemporary social and political issues of the country. In “Ode to Liberty,” he translates his doubt about British freedom through a model of progression, commonly associated with the patriotic ideals of Whig politics.

Chapter 5: The Celtic Consciousness of Thomas Gray

5.1 Introduction

Whereas poets had celebrated Britain's growth and cultural advancement in the early eighteenth century, they became more hesitant about the established representation of progress as the century advanced. The domestic and international political crises, which became a recurrent feature of daily life, threatened "the bright dream of empire" by "the nightmare of its dissolution" (Kaul 30). As stated in the previous chapter, for many poets, the established representation of progress did not comply anymore with their view of the world because they saw limitations and contradictions with this model of world history. They believed that progress could ultimately affect the "native foundational energy," such as the visionary Druidic power of Britain (Levine 553). Poets thus suspected that Britain's high culture, which was grounded in rationalism, might not be "the place to find the Muses" (Williams 452). From the 1750s onwards, poets began to discard foreign history and the established lineage with Greece and Rome, and focused their attention on their native heritage and past (Weinbrot 386). They became especially interested in "the art of 'ancient' cultures" in an attempt to comprehend and revitalise "the most primal sources of poetic power" (Williams 452). According to Gerrard Carruthers and Alex Rawes: "the Celtic-speaking parts of Britain were an ideal site of revival for an imaginative sensibility which had become tarnished elsewhere in Britain under the cultural, economic and doctrinal pressures during the previous century "(2-3). Moreover, Celticism became an escape from the ideological conflicts that have been plaguing Britain from the Civil Wars to the Jacobite rebellions (Carruthers and Rawes 2-3).

One of the leading English poets of the mid-eighteenth century, Thomas Gray (1716-1771), became an important figure in Britain's midcentury reassessment of the past. Gray viewed the Celts and their language as "radically poetic and free," and understood that Celtic

verse had had a major influence on English poetry (Weinbrot 397). He was very modern in his belief that not only Greece and Rome but all nations had their artistic distinction, and believed that Celtic culture could help enrich the poetic history of Britain. In a letter to Mr. Brown on 17 February, 1763, Gray claims:

Imagination dwelt many years ago, in all her pomp, on the cold and barren mountains of Scotland. The truth (I believe) is, that without any respect of climates, she reigns in all nascent societies of men, where the necessities of life, force every one to think and act much for himself. (qtd in Agrawal 103)

While his own poetic output was small, Gray's extensive knowledge of Celtic history influenced many artists and scholars of the mid and late eighteenth century. Moreover, he played an important role in the Welsh Revival⁵ as he co-wrote, edited and translated many Welsh-English literary and scholarly works (Snyder 4). His focal contribution to the literary movement was his Pindaric poem "The Bard," written between 1754 and 1757 (Gerrard 148). The poem, which investigates the native literary history, was based on a Welsh tradition that Edward I had murdered all the Bards in Wales after conquering the country. According to Sarah Prescott, the tradition, which focused on the loss of a nation through imperial invasion, "invigorate[d] the recuperative efforts of Welsh antiquarians such as [Evan] Evans⁶ to reaffirm the resilience and richness of their cultural and historical heritage" (74).

However, Gray's interest in the Celticism and his investigation into the native literary history was not "free of political implications" (Gerrard 148). Like many midcentury poets, Gray was suffering from an identity crisis, which was both literary and political in origin (Gerrard 148). According to Gerrard: "when Gray and Collins [in "An Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland"] tried to imagine themselves in the role of inspired bards and spokesmen for the people, they were writing in a period where 'opposition'

⁵ According to R. Agrawal, the Celtic Revival consisted of the Gaelic Revival, which centred on the history and mythology of the Gaels, and the Welsh Revival, which focused on the tales and legends on the Britons (63).

⁶ "The Bard" helped influence the work of Welsh patriotic Antiquarian Evan Evans, whose subsequent publication *Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards*⁶ (1764) heralded the beginning of the revival (Agrawal 103).

could not be clearly defined as it had for the Patriot poets of the Walpole period” (148).

Written on the eve of the Seven-Year War and the imperial victories of William Pitt, “The Bard,” discusses Gray’s insecurity and anxiety about national identity and poetry, and toils with the question which role the poet should play in the public discourse.

5.2 “The Bard: A Pindarick Ode”

As stated in the previous chapter, Collins translated his doubts about the values of British liberty in his Pindaric progress poem “Ode to Liberty.” Unlike early-eighteenth-century models, Collins’ account of the progression of liberty is contradictory and inconsistent, signaling the poet’s doubt about the pseudo-literary-historian representation of world history. In the poem, the speaker seems to have created a subjective account of time to escape or maybe even erase the psychological terror of the passage of time, including his fear of history (Varis-Freiberg 538). Like Collins, Gray created an ahistorical account of time in “The Bard,” which enabled him to discuss his insecurity and anxiety about national identity and poetry. Instead of focusing on the contemporary political tension between the Celtic-speaking parts of Britain and England, which in part resulted from the ideological strife that the increasing Anglicization of these parts of the country brought it, Gray tried to discover the native literary history by reinventing a Welsh literary-historian tradition, namely the alleged bardicide in Wales by Edward I.

The poem focuses on the last bard of Wales, who not only harmonizes his verse but foretells the future of Britain and British poetry. He is depicted as an almost god-like figure with his long beard and hair flowing “like a meteor, to the troubled air” (21). The bard seems frozen in time as he stands on the highest mountain of Wales, Snowdon, striking “the deep sorrows of his lyre” with a “a master’s hand, and a prophet’s fire,” (21-2). According to Mark Booth, the bard figure, which is commonly associated with the midcentury reflection on history, is portrayed as “standing outside the alienating trap that seemed to have been set for

mid-century writers by history and by writing itself” (395). By resembling the bard to the image of a divine being, Gray was inspired by Raphael’s *Vision of Ezekiel* (1518) and Parmigiano’s *Moses Breaking the Tables*, he has created the illusion that the bard cannot be touched by the passage of time, and is thus free from any connection to history (Booth 405). Booth argues that this freedom implies a sense of “immediacy” because he is “free from separating stretches of time, exempt from belatedness” (Booth 395). Moreover, immediacy could imply that the bard and his poetry will not fade from memory. Arguably, this was a real fear for Gray because he questioned his place in the lyric tradition and his position in the public discourse like many midcentury poets

Moreover, Gray’s anxiety about poetic identity and the role of the poet is underlined by the content, form and subject matter of the poem. In the poem, Gray turned the established eighteenth-century poetic conventions around by merging different classical and native literary-historian traditions. On one hand, however, Gray alludes to the fascination of eighteenth-century Britain with the classical times via the Pindaric form, style and conventions of his poem. On the other hand, however, he focuses on the establishment of a native literary history by depicting the Celtic bards as the first real British poets, and by incorporating Welsh harmonies into his English verse. Gray has strictly followed the triadic structure of the Pindaric ode⁷ in “The Bard” because the poem is divided into three sets of strophes, antistrophes and epodes. Like a regular Pindaric ode, the strophes and antistrophes are metrically identical or “homostrophic in structure,” whereas, the epodes have a different metrical structure (Fry 214). According to Mary Oates, Gray insisted on following the rules of the Pindaric ode strictly because it enabled him to communicate that British poetry was as refined as that of Pindar. Moreover, she claims that Gray expressed a hope that classical and

⁷ According to Weinbrot, both poems are among the few regular Pindaric odes in the Restoration and eighteenth-century period because many poets in this period were not familiar with the intrinsic metrical rules of Pindar’s odes (384). A famous example of an irregular Pindaric Ode is the Cowleyan ode. This ode was based on a loose (or faulty) translation of Pindar’s odes by Abraham Cowley. According to Faverio, Cowley discarded the intrinsic metrical structure of Pindar’s ode because he followed “the spirit rather than the letter of his original,” which resulted in a “bombastic Pindaric ode” with many extravagant conceits (par. 6-10).

native poetry could be combined to create “a new kind of poetry” (403). An example of this new kind of poetry can be found in the opening line of the second strophe: “Weave the warp, and weave the woof” (49). According to Snyder, this line, which is connected to the previous line by means of alliteration, is “an almost perfect example” of “Cynghanedd,” a form of Welsh consonantal harmony that Gray has tried to emulate in English even though a satisfactory translation in English is not possible (ibid.) On multiple occasions in the poem, moreover, Gray uses alliteration more freely than in his other works “to suggest a metrical system foreign to English poetry” (35). Much like the bard, thus Gray has tried to weave a new poetic lineage of Britain, by incorporating Welsh harmonies into his English verse.

The poem opens with invocation of the bard, who curses Edward I after the latter conquered Wales and murdered all bards in the country. He states: “Ruin seize thee, ruthless king!” (1). According to Prescott, bards had an public role in the history of Wales, much like the poets in the early-eighteenth century (75). In a country where liberty has yet to be established, Edward’s actions could thus have been the result of his fear that poets were a danger to his political order as they could undermine his authority. As the bard stands on Mt. Snowdon, he sees the ghostly remains of the others bards, who are willing to avenge their native land with him. He states:

I see them sit, they linger yet,
 Avengers of their native land:
 With me in dreadful harmony they join,
 And weave with bloody hands the tissue of thy line. (45-8)

Although, the poet mourns the loss of his native culture and fellow bards, he is aware that it is in vain. Both his country and the role of poet are forever changed by the events. The poet is no longer the soother and calmer of the monarch, but has become a prophet and avenger of his country (Weinbrot 394). According to Weinbrot, in comparison to the odes of Pindar, Gray’s

poem does not try to celebrate or legitimise political power but rather tries to separate the poet from illegitimate political power (385). In the second strophe, antistrophe and epode, the bard together with his bards prophesies that Edward's royal power will not last but end in ruin. However, in the last strophe the poet foresees that Britain's glory will be restored again as Edward's illegitimate lineage will be replaced by a legitimate royal line. He claims: "No more our long-lost Arthur we bewail/ All-hail, ye genuine kings, Britannia's issue, hail! (109-10). The poet refers to Elizabeth and her Tudor lineage, which originated in Wales. While the English king Edward I usurped Wales in his quest to expand his kingdom England, the Tudors will reign over Britain under the establishment of the British constitutional law. Moreover, they will restore the poetic power of the country, and foster a new group of poets. According to Mulholland, the figure of the bard had important political implications for Gray because he believed that the Celtic culture preserved political liberty, and thus "guaranteed artistic vibrancy" (Mulholland 127). In the last epode, the poet cannot see past the Tudor dynasty. He states: "the distant warbling less on [his] ear/ That lost in long futurity expire" (134-5). Consequently, in the bard vision only the English poets Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton are named, Gray as well as other Restoration and eighteenth century writers are curiously absent. Booth argues: "where his successors the Romantic poets did intermittently claim the role of visionaries, Gray dramatizes only a vision of a vision, of which the core is a historical perspective with himself doubtfully placed at its problematic last stage (404). As the bard plunges to his death in the last line, he takes with him many questions which are left unanswered about the future of British poetry, and the role poets are to play. Arguably, for Gray the future was still filled with many literary and political doubts.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

As stated in chapter 1, the main objective of this thesis was to determine to which degree the political turmoil of the 1740s had affected British artists and their poetry. An additional question was if the poets' devotion to their country was affected by their political insecurities. In chapter 3, attention was paid to political interests and ideas of Mark Akenside. Although Akenside believed that a poet should play a role in the public discourse, the political crises in this period, and especially the betrayal of his former hero Pulteney, had upset his belief in the British political system. In spite of the political situation of the country, he continued to openly support British liberty, which he believed to be the highest established principle of his country. Chapter 4 has illustrated that William Collins, on the other hand, was more reserved expressing his political ideas and standpoints as the Jacobite Uprising of 1745, which ended in the trail and execution of the Scottish leaders of the rebellion, and the British domestic and international political crises had made a deep impact on his life, and, subsequently, made him question his beliefs in the values of British liberty. However, his poetry written in this period does reveal that he was concerned with the contemporary political and social issues of his country. In the fifth chapter, a closer look was taken at Thomas Gray's involvement in the midcentury re-examination of history. In particular, his consciousness of Britain's Celtic past and interest in the role of the bard in Welsh culture had a political dimension. He was apprehensive about national identity and poetry under influence of the political situation in Britain. Consequently, despite mutual differences, all aforementioned poets were clearly affected by the political situation in their country. While their political ambiguity signalled their difficulty with political patriotism, their general concern for the well-being of the country and its people was not diminished.

The hypothesis was that the ode interested the poets because it provided them with a new context to express their political and patriotic uncertainties. Chapter 2 has shown that the

ode, with its close connection to patriotism, did indeed allow the poets to express their own voice while discussing the new social, political or moral concerns of the country. Moreover, the ode served to provide the poets with a cultural heritage as it linked them to the Greco-Roman times. For Akenside, the ode enabled him to express his deep-seated belief in British Liberty, while, at the same time, articulate his negative view on political patriotism. Collins, on the other hand, used the stanzaic structure of the ode to create an ahistorical perspective of time, and thus suggest a contradictory and inconsistent progression of liberty. Lastly, Gray, who believed that it was important to establish a native literary history, signaled through the ode that British poetry was as refined as that of the Classics. Moreover, he hoped that his ode would help create a new kind of poetry, which featured both classical as well as native literary traditions. Consequently, the political implications of the ode and its connection to history played a large role in the renewed interest in the ode in the midcentury. While the poets each utilized the structure, style and poetic devices of the ode in their own way, the ode provide all the writers with a model to express the new sensibilities of the times.

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