



Individualism and Community in Robert Bage's *Hermesprong*

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Abstract

This paper explores the tension between individualism and community in Robert Bage's Jacobin novel, *Hermesprong: or, Man As He is Not* (1796). Published in the midst of the heated French Revolution debates, the novel responds to the view that, by positing the individual as the agent of political, economic, and moral authority, individualism threatened the dissolution of the ties between the individual, the community, and the state. The critical work of J. Hillis Miller, which incorporates various community theories into literary criticism, is used as a guideline for this analysis. This study argues that Bage drew attention to the exclusionary and self-destructive nature of traditional communities by depicting individualistic characters in conflict with the legal, religious, and social apparatus of the community they inhabit and that the novel presents three possible solutions to this conflict: the formation of subcommunities, the shift to a more contract-based social model, and emigration.

Keywords: Eighteenth-century fiction, Jacobin fiction, Community, Individualism.

الفردانية والجماعة في رواية هرمسبرونج لروبرت بيج

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ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث لدراسة العلاقة بين الفردانية والجماعة في رواية روبرت بيج اليعقوبية، هرمسبرونج، والتي نشرت في أوج سجلات الثورة الفرنسية التي اجتاحت إنجلترا وأوروبا. وتستجيب الرواية للرأي الزاعم بأن الفردانية فلسفة معادية للمجتمع ومتلفة للروابط بين الفرد والجماعة والدولة بجعلها للفرد مركزاً للسلطة السياسية والاقتصادية والأخلاقية. تتم هذه الدراسة استناداً على العمل النقدي لجوزيف هيليس ميلر والذي يدمج مع النقد الأدبي عدداً من نظريات المجتمع. ويبرز بيج في روايته الطبيعة الإقصائية والدمرة للذات للجماعات التقليدية يرسمه لشخصيات تتسم بالفردانية في نزاع مع الهياكل القانونية والدينية والاجتماعية لذلك النمط من الجماعات. وتوضح هذه الدراسة ثلاث مسارات أو حلول تطرحها الرواية لهذا النزاع والتي تتمثل في تشكيل جماعات فرعية، أو التشبه بنموذج اجتماعي قائم على العقود، أو الهجرة.

كلمات مفتاحية: أدب القرن الثامن عشر، الأدب اليعقوبي، الفردانية، الجماعة.

Introduction

From Aristotle to Ibn Khaldun to Rousseau and to the present moment as part of 21st century identity politics, the notion of "community" has, despite its slipperiness, endured and allowed for the exploration of a type of social setting where the notions of solidarity, identity, and shared spaces are particularly pronounced. The combined forces of postmodernism, neoliberalism, globalization, digitalization, and global migration have simultaneously challenged traditional understandings of community and renewed interest in the topic (Jansen 2). Community, along with the traditional categories of nation, class, race, and gender, has been called into question; but, as noted by Gerard Delanty, this is also “an insecure age which, in calling into question the assumptions of modernity, has made the problem of belonging more and more acute.” (Delanty 103)

Despite this renewed contemporary search for belonging, the “dark side” of community continues to present challenges to the way the term is approached and understood. Moral and intellectual homogeneity, bigotry, and exclusion often go hand-in-hand with community, as observed, for instance, in the reinvigoration of ethnocentrism in contemporary world politics (Jansen 3). Deeply entangled with the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, the boundaries that define the identity of a particular community have historically generated discriminatory and violent tendencies and have thus led some communities to commit atrocities against other communities or against minorities within those communities that are deemed dangerous outsiders.

The increasing significance of community has also led to its migration into literary studies. Two critical works which have emphasized the notion of community and its portrayal in fiction are J. Hillis Miller’s *The Conflagration of Community* (2011) and *Communities in Fiction* (2014). Miller examines several literary texts through the lens of community theories outlined by philosophers and critics such as Raymond Williams, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy, who approach the topic from different and even clashing ideological backgrounds. His aim is, first, to explore how community or its lack is depicted in each text, and secondly, to demonstrate how the self-destructive tendencies operating within community are manifested in both the literary and the real worlds and thus have great relevance to our understanding of contemporary social and political events.

Using this approach as a guideline, the present study explores the clash between individualistic and communal outlooks in Robert Bage’s Jacobin novel, *Hermesprong: or, Man As He is Not* (1796). Written during the tumultuous decade of the French Revolution, the novel reflects and engages with debates where the relationship between the individual, the community, and the state was being enthusiastically reassessed as part of what has been called the Revolution Controversy. The eponymous protagonist of the novel, Charles Hermesprong, finds himself an outsider to every community he encounters due to the fluidity of his national identity, the unorthodoxy of his opinions, and the oddness of his habits. Raised among the Native Americans by an English father and a French mother, he moved to France at the age of sixteen, where he began to ail from the confinement of European life. Over the course of seven years, he travels over much of Europe, returning finally to his father’s native Cornish village of Grondale to consider whether he would

finally settle in England. His insistence on independence of mind and movement—the result of his American upbringing and the revolutionary philosophical and political discourses of the day—causes him to incur the displeasure of Lord Grondale and two sycophantic representatives of the church and the law: Dr. Blick and Mr. Corrow. Conspiring to drive Hermsprong out of the country, they bring him to a trial on false charges near the end of the novel. While *Hermsprong* engages with the social, political, and religious debates of the 1790s, there is a broader significance to the portrayal of community in the novel. Countering the exclusionary and close-minded tendency of many traditional communities, Bage's novel, as Pamela Perkins has observed, far from being restricted to eighteenth-century struggles for reform, suggests that “wit, tolerance, and the free play of intelligence are not merely tools for political change, but the human qualities that any political system worth endorsing must foster.” (Perkins, “Introduction” 9).

Sociopolitical Context

Individualism, which refers to “vast complex of interdependent factors” (Watt 59), is a term originating in nineteenth-century France. Almost from the outset, the word was used in a derogatory sense, already tainted with its connection to the anarchy and egoism unleashed by the Enlightenment *philosophes* and by the French Revolution. Conservatives viewed individualism as an abnormality in the social fabric, for “society is the union of minds and interests, and individualism is division carried to the infinite degree” (qtd. in Lukes 5). Ian Watt, who identified individualism as one of the formative values of the realist novel, had defined it as a philosophical view which “posits a whole society mainly governed by the idea of every individual's intrinsic independence both from other individuals and from that multifarious allegiance to past modes of thought and action denoted by the word 'tradition' – a force that is always social, not individual” (Watt 57).

Hermsprong was numbered among a group of novels published throughout the 1790s by the so-called British Jacobins—political radicals who sympathized with the aims of the French Revolution and who aimed to bring about the reconfiguration of the political system “away from the subjecthood of monarchy toward citizenship in a social contract” (Johnson 6) as supported by “a body of laws and a legislative system” (Johnson 2). To that end, they extolled the primacy of private judgment as an essential virtue in their vision of the new citizen and celebrated the philosophy of the rights of man, which affirmed that all human beings were born free and equal in the possession of certain rights which were not annulled upon entrance into civil society. Political conservatives, on the other hand, “adopted the political tradition of formal patriarchalism in which private obedience and domestic order were thought to be necessary for public peace and the fostering of loyal subjecthood” (Johnson 6). Edmund Burke had thus famously contended that “[w]e are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that the stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages” (Burke 76). Jacobin fiction is thus, like the pervasive criminal narratives of the eighteenth century, concerned with the notion that, “in choosing to live out a singular, self-authored history, the individual willfully breaks with the sanctioned and self-effacing narratives of identity which were the common cultural inheritance of the period” (Gladfelder 6).

Theoretical Background

In his influential book, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (1887), Ferdinand Tönnies set the important distinction between two types of social arrangements usually translated as ‘community’ and ‘society’, respectively—a distinction which has determined the course of most later discussions on the topic. *Gemeinschaft* represents the traditional, feudal, often rural type of community, which is based on a shared space that members of the community rarely leave behind. Social bonds are steadfast, intimate, emotionally intense, and often based on kinship ties. As opposed to a *Gesellschaft*, which approximates market societies, “*Gemeinschaft* relations were maintained in the context of private sentiment and loyalty rather than simply through productivity in the marketplace” (Waters 1). A *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, is associated with modern urban settings and is based on rational, pragmatic exchange, making social bonds impersonal, contractual, and short-lived. In a *Gesellschaft*, it is contract law—a monopoly of the state—that upholds order rather than tradition (Deflem 206). Indeed, the law often flouts the traditions of a particular community. Tönnies believed that *Gesellschaft* qualities would, due to the processes of industrialization and urbanization, slowly replace *Gemeinschaft*-type communities.

Despite their connotations of warmth and solidarity, communities rely on identity-forming narratives and a logic of inclusion and exclusion which often give rise to a discriminatory outlook. In *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Anthony Cohen argued that community has a *relational* nature (12), meaning that its identity is established by the culturally constructed symbolic boundaries that demarcate it from other groups. This dynamic of similarity and difference, embodied by the idea of a boundary, “encapsulates the identity of the community [which,] like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction” (Cohen 12). The identity of the group is bolstered through the clear demarcation of those within the group and those without, a dynamic which has often led to hostility toward outsiders or even members of the community who display some form of difference or unorthodoxy. Indeed, unity and social harmony in traditional communities were maintained through moral and intellectual conformity, and often a strict moral code was enforced which punished unorthodox behavior (Bell and Newby 24); “[t]he moral custodians of a community, the family and the church, are strong, their code clear, and their injunctions well-internalized” (Bell and Newby 24). Such an outlook, which “render[s] heterodoxy a serious crime” (Bell and Newby 24), is at odds with modernity, which celebrates individualism and encourages the incessant questioning of existing values (Blackshaw 11).

Tönnies’s seminal distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is also an important starting point in Miller’s *Communities in Fiction*, as Miller first navigates the positions of different figures toward community in relation to this distinction. Raymond Williams’s nuanced discussion of community throughout his extensive oeuvre offers many observations which Miller incorporates in his analysis of fictional works. While Miller suggests that Williams is an unambiguous proponent of the sort of community represented by *Gemeinschaft*, his writings on community are actually more ambivalent than Miller gives him credit for. His fond memories of the Welsh community where he was brought up demonstrate what he describes as “a level of social obligation which was conferred by the fact of seeming to live in the same place and in that sense to have a common identity. And from this sense there were acts of kindness beyond

calculation” (Williams, “Importance of Community” 114), a description which reinforces Miller’s assertion that Williams’s understanding of an ideal community resembles a *Gemeinschaft*. Nonetheless, Williams found himself repeatedly torn between his appreciation of the importance of living in a community and his awareness of the oppressive structures of power which are implicit in the notion. He remained deeply suspicious of nostalgic, organicist approaches toward community, affirming, in *Politics and Letters* (1979), that he was writing against such a streak. He attacked the conservatism of such an approach and especially condemned its resistance to industrialization and the struggle for workers’ rights which accompanied it, affirming that “[i]n many thousands of cases, there is more community in the *modern* [emphasis mine] village, as a result of this process of new legal and democratic rights, than at any point in the recorded or imagined past.” (Williams, *The Country and the City* 104).

Community, as Williams affirmed in *Politics and Letters*, can take on an oppressive role in terms of class relations and national identity. Repeatedly, Williams had observed a significant pattern where claims to the interest of the community over the interests of groups of striking workers, for instance, would be made (Williams, *Politics and Letters*). In this sense, the community becomes an entity in the name of which the strikers could be censured, standing above individual needs and impeding the struggle toward egalitarianism. Miller traces in Williams’s thought an underlying assumption that class distinctions distort the exercise of communal virtues, and he imagines him wondering: “What true sharing, or having in common, or mutuality, or neighborliness, or kindness can there be between the rich landlord and the tenant farmers he rack-rents and oppresses?” (Miller, *Communities in Fiction* 6). In *The Country and the City* (1973), Williams traced how communal acts of solidarity had withered throughout the eighteenth century with the rise of agrarian capitalism and the class distinctions which it had fostered, and with the replacement of communal solidarity with a callous state intervention: the “friendly and comparatively informal relief of an earlier period gave way, under just this pressure, to the cold and harsh treatment of a separate class of ‘the poor’.” (Williams, *The Country and the City* 104). In addition, his understanding of community is based on his upbringing in Wales; “[b]ut the Welsh experience was also precisely one of subjection to English expansion and assimilation historically. That is what ought to have most alerted me to the dangers of a persuasive type of definition of community, which is at once dominant and exclusive.” (Williams, *Politics and Letters*).

The notion of autoimmune logic, which Derrida discussed at length in “Faith and Knowledge” (1996) and in the interview *Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides* (2001), also forms an important part of Miller’s analysis of fictional and actual communities. Miller affirms that Derrida meant the metaphor to illuminate “an absolutely universal condition of any political order or community.” (Miller, “Autoimmunity” 221) In “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida had argued that there is “no community that would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection (that of maintaining its self-integrity intact)” (87). Whenever one part of a community turns against an element within it deemed foreign or dangerous, it partakes of the logic of autoimmunity: “[t]he communities’ immune system, developed to keep the community [...] immune from invasion by dangerous outsiders, turns against itself in suicidal self-destruction” (Miller, *Communities in Fiction* 272).

Miller cites Thomas Pynchon's short story "The Secret Integration" as a fictional illustration of this tendency in its depiction of racism against a black family moving into a white neighborhood. The desire to maintain the integrity of the white neighborhood, or the white nation by implication, means that such a community "has acted like a body that develops antibodies, destroying its own organs or tissues" (Miller, *Communities in Fiction* 273). Indeed, the notion that "this self-destructive community behavior is not just a fiction [but] operates, alas, with dismaying force, in the real social and political worlds" (Miller, *Communities in Fiction* 308) is one of the central points that Miller put forward in his study of fictional communities.

Community and Transgressive Individualism in *Hermesprong*

When Hermesprong is first introduced in the novel, as he is about to rescue Caroline Campinet, Lord Grondale's daughter, from a nearly fatal accident on the road, the narrator refers to him only as 'the stranger'—indicating already the pervasive aura of foreignness he carries about him and which is brought about by his staunch individualism. In response to Lord Grondale's asking him who he was in expectation of becoming "better acquainted with [his] rank and fortune" (Bage 82), Hermesprong defiantly answers, "I am a man, Sir," (Bage 81) without further explanation. Later, Lord Grondale would dwell on the scandalizing fact that "though I told him I was Lord Grondale, he still spoke to me with the appellation of Sir; and had the impudence to tell me he did not mind my rank" (Bage 82). When Caroline finally becomes acquainted with the stranger's name (which, as it happens, is later revealed to be an assumed one), her friend Maria Fluart describes it as sounding "monstrous Germanish" (Bage 89), adding another layer of foreignness to his identity and compounding the impression of his "evanescent, cosmopolitan citizenship" (Nersessian 647) which is at odds with the stasis usually demanded by communal life. The reader's first encounter with Hermesprong thus discloses the conflict between the forces that structure communal life and make it comprehensible for its inhabitants and an individualist ethos unmoored from the conventional sources of authority and rather gains legitimacy from the individual self.

A brief sketch of the social setting depicted in the novel with reference to the *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* continuum shows it to approximate a *Gemeinschaft* in its attachment to locale and tradition, the prevalence of subjective, face-to-face relationships, its hierarchical arrangement, and the homogeneity of its moral and intellectual life. It is structured by the triad of aristocracy, church, and law—institutions that simultaneously exert a stabilizing and homogenizing effect in the community. Having been raised in what he describes as a more tolerant atmosphere in America, Hermesprong, in the position of outsider, is able to observe and critique the dogmatism of Grondale and, indeed, of England at large. He mocks this dogmatism when he likens loyalty to church and king to the articles of the Anglican faith: "[I]n England I believe in church and king, the first article of faith; which, if a man does not do, he cannot be saved" (Bage 105). In the realm of political opinion, he complains that "you can bear no deviations from your own opinions" and that "[t]o your polite hatred for opinion, generally [the Americans] are strangers", ascribing this more tolerant atmosphere to the diversity of religious and political life in America (Bage 328). In Grondale, on the other hand, Dr. Blick is appointed rector because he "was an approved man, orthodox in church and state; such a man as these bad times want" (Bage 108). Accordingly, he becomes furious when Hermesprong refuses to

conform to his views in a debate, accusing him of having “imbibed some of the abominable doctrines of the French philosophers” (Bage 105) and later branding him an “infidel” (Bage 136). As a continuation of the same episode, Blick turns the curate out of work for refusing to take his part against Hermsprong, an attitude which proves him to be “a man whose divinity is unsound, and his loyalty questionable!” (Hermsprong 110)

Disdain and fear of strangers or of whatever carries foreign or unorthodox associations is another feature of *Gemeinschaft*-type communities which is present to a great degree in the community of Grondale. Dr. Blick is taken aback by Hermsprong’s direct rebuff of his prying questions because “Sir, — I — I — am — am rector of this parish — Sir, — and we think ourselves intitled, Sir, to make certain enquiries, Sir, when strangers come into it” (Bage 84). As Lord Grondale seethes at Hermsprong’s growing popularity in the community, he begins to wonder whether he is a French refugee (Bage 143), and Perkins notes in her annotations to the novel that such refugees had been received with suspicion in England, foreshadowing how, later on in the novel, the judge presiding over Hermsprong’s trial must acquire a clearer identification of Hermsprong because “[in] these suspicious times we think circumspection, with regard to strangers, necessary” (Bage 315). As Johnson argues, one of the reasons why Hermsprong is taken to trial is the fact that, prior to revealing that he is actually the son of Lord Grondale’s long-estranged and by then deceased brother, “he has no clear parentage in which to submerge his individual identity.” (98) At a broader level, this tendency manifests in the unthinking absorption of national stereotypes. It is in that vein that a conventional middle-class woman like Mrs. Sumelin, describing the people of France, asks Hermsprong whether they “[a]re not [...] all atheists?” [...] “And have not they robbed the nobility and the parsons? and don’t they hate kings?” (Bage 90). Similarly, Mr. Sumelin, somewhat sarcastically, relates to his wife a fantastical scenario where the fifty “wives” or “female stock” of the Ottoman emperor all give birth on the same day and which is replete with tropes evoking the compromised chastity of the seraglio and a “silent country” where an oration of twenty-five minutes is a rarity (Bage 206).

Significantly, this is also a community that believes its identity-forming narratives to be under threat of subversion due to the influence of revolutionary philosophies from abroad. The novel illustrates the way this throws the community into what can be identified as a moral panic, a condition in which a particular group is framed as a source of danger, and “the panic is amplified by false and exaggerated distortions of the threat [...] self-appointed crusaders [...] campaign for increased social control; and the authorities respond, typically by strengthening the judicial apparatus” (Davis 223). Mr. Corrow, Lord Grondale’s lawyer, vocalizes this sense of threat in a hyperbolic manner by which Bage meant to lampoon the conservative discourse of the time. He describes the prevailing mood of the community when, in the trial scene, he affirms that Hermsprong must be apprehended because this is “a time when the nation is so greatly, excessively, and alarmingly alarmed, agitated, and convulsed; when danger is so clearly and evidently to be feared, dreaded, and apprehended, from enemies both exterior and interior” (Bage 308). In such “bad times” (Bage 108), difference is easily construed as a sign of deviance.

The conflict between the “self-effacing” (Gladfelder 6) narratives of community and an individualist outlook manifest at a broad social level in the novel, as well as in instances related to specific characters.

Of the former type is the sermon delivered by Dr. Blick on the anniversary of the Birmingham Riots of 1791 which exemplifies Derridean autoimmunitary logic. The riots were a real event in which the homes, chapels, and meeting-places of dissenters were attacked and burned down by reactionary groups who were angered by dissenters' celebration of the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, indicating their sympathy with revolutionary ideologies. Rather than incriminating the violence of the rioters, however, Dr. Blick condemns the "inflammatory complaints" (Bage 164) made by dissenters, and laments how "liberty had grown into licentiousness, and almost into rebellion" (Bage 164). To uphold the notion of the rights of man is to contradict the belief that the laws of nature dictated a hierarchy that was at the core of an ordered and harmonious social and political life (Bage 165). They are, therefore, perceived as a threat to the narratives upholding order in the community; their opinions "threaten the overthrow of all religion, all government, all that is just and equitable upon earth" (Bage 165). The rioters, fearful that the integrity of the community was being compromised by the infiltration of foreign social, religious, and political beliefs, attempt to preserve the purity of its identity through the perpetration of acts of violence, which only serve to create ruptures within the community. As Derrida has observed, this is a self-destructive logic, for, rather than preserving social harmony, it distorts the communal virtues of neighborliness and solidarity and creates social outcasts and an overall atmosphere of hostility and fear. By failing to condemn the aggression of the rioters and pointing the finger of blame at nonconformists, Dr. Blick facilitates the repetition of this exclusionary logic.

A similar episode, according to Williams's suspicion of organic communities and his observation that the good of the community is held over the interest of individuals or groups within it, is the episode of the miners' riot. Despite its criticism of the various ills attendant upon the social hierarchy, the novel ultimately vilifies the miners' demand for assistance by linking it to revolutionary mob violence. Suffering from a lack of provisions, the miners are angered by Lord Grondale's apathy when he had "gotten rich by the sweat of their brows, and for any good he had ever done, they had never heard of it." (Bage 307). Immediately, their demands are linked to French revolutionary terror and the rupture of the harmonious fabric of the community. A report circulated that the riot was infiltrated by French agents and that the workers were intent on destroying the property of aristocrats (Bage 307). Even Hermsprong, supposedly the radical center of the novel, denies that egalitarianism is an achievable ideal and equates their protest with the total disruption of social harmony; "to revile your *King*, is to weaken the *concord* that ought to subsist betwixt him and all his *subjects*, and overthrow all civil order" (Bage 314). The miners must suppress their demands, for the pursuit of them against the public welfare would lead to nothing but widespread criminality; "you must wade through such scenes of guilt and horror to obtain it, as you would tremble to think of. You must finish the horrid conflict by destroying each other" (Bage 314).

At an individual level, the same tendency is reflected in the attempt to incriminate Hermsprong for his disdain of undue deference to rank and title. His refusal to "suppress the sentiments of a free-born mind, from any fear, religious or political" (Bage 140) is due to his belief in the dignity of the individual and the value of private judgment, which he encapsulates in the following assertion: "I have energies, and I feel them; as a man, I have rights, and will support them; and in acting according to principles I believe to be

just, I have not yet learned to fear” (Bage 171). As a proponent of the rights of man, Hermsprong’s radical discourse and his brazen disregard of having incurred Lord Grondale’s enmity infuse disempowered characters with a sense of the worthiness of the individual; Gregory Glen, the bastard son of a squire who could thus lay no claim to property or social standing, affirms that “I, Gregory Glen, the son of nobody, felt myself raised, exalted by it. I almost began to think myself a man” (Bage 171).

Aside from his refusal to display deference toward Lord Grondale or to address him using his proper title, Hermsprong bids for and purchases a house lying close to Lord Grondale’s estate even though “every body else had politely given up the contest” (Bage 146). Compounding the audacity of his “crimes”, Hermsprong had in fact purchased the house as a residence for Lord Grondale’s aunt, Mrs. Garnet—a woman who had been cast out of the family for the grave offense of having married a merchant. By marrying a man beneath her rank, Mrs. Garnet had violated the principle of self-effacement demanded by traditional communities by flouting the conventions of aristocratic families with regard to marriage and lineage, as well as the notion that “[d]aughters had no rights but the rights of obedience” (Bage 245). As a result, she is ostracized so completely by the family that Caroline is barely aware of the existence of her relative—suggesting again the truth of Williams’s claim that class distinctions contribute to erode communal bonds. Hermsprong empowers her against Lord Grondale, not only by purchasing the house but also by convincing her that she ought not to be fearful of encountering him because, without his wealth and title, he was nothing more than a feeble and narrow-minded man. She ought, rather than to shrink from him, to “oppose him with the manly spirit of conscious rectitude” (Bage 170). Later on, this incident would be put forward by Mr. Corrow as legally valid evidence that Hermsprong had purchased the house “out of a bravado to the noble lord” (Bage 310) and that he was thus enacting a “civil crime” against him.

In fact, Lord Grondale would enact a similar scene in his tyrannical attitude toward his timid and dutiful daughter Caroline for refusing to marry Philip Chestum, a foolish baronet. Referring to the radical notion of the rights of man, he frames her as “a daughter who knows the rights of women, who stipulates conditions with her father” (Bage 304). Torn between duty to a father who believes that total submission is necessary on the part of children and averse to being forcibly married, Caroline realizes the impossibility of enacting her individual will without disobeying traditional notions of filial duty: “The English language did not supply words to express what she meant, without conveying at the same time, a sort of intention to have a will of her own; an offence she feared her father would be little inclined to pardon” (Bage 236). Hermsprong and Ms. Fluart flout one of the essential tenets of conservative thought in arguing that deference was due only to individuals who had merited it (Johnson 98), in opposition to the belief that parents merited the utmost degree of reverence regardless of their behavior (Bage 305). Ms. Fluart teases Caroline for her unthinking attachment to a stifling interpretation of filial duty; simply to be her biological father is almost to “sanctify” (Bage 155) Lord Grondale and to bind Caroline to a “high transcendent duty” (Bage 155), and she immediately connects this dynamic to the political scene, asking her, “did you ever hear, or see in the dictionary, the word reciprocity? I assure you; the politicians make great rout about it.” (Bage 155)

Caroline is only able to escape and assert her individual will because of the assistance of a group of individuals who are willing to flout the community’s norms of behavior. Maria Fluart disguises herself as

Caroline on the morning of the wedding long enough for her friend to escape, but once the trick is revealed, she is threatened by Dr. Blick, Mr. Corrow, and Lord Grondale with the force of law. While regarding Maria as no more than a frivolous character, Dr. Blick emphasizes the subversive nature of her disrespect to Lord Grondale: “If these things are to be suffered, my lord, farewell to all religion and morality” (Bage 299). Their plan fails, however, because Maria is, like Hermsprong, brazen in her defiance of tradition and aristocratic power; she defends herself with a pistol and dares anyone to attempt to hinder her from leaving the estate, after which she rejoins Hermsprong and Glen.

While Glen is empowered by Hermsprong’s individualistic philosophy, he also notes its potential dangers and foreshadows the attempt to incriminate Hermsprong: “[k]ings like it not; parsons preach it down; and justices of the peace send out their warrants to apprehend it” (Bage 171). Because social relationships in a *Gemeinschaft* are evaluated on subjective grounds of kinship or group loyalty rather than on an objective, contractual basis, there is a dangerous conflation between social and legal transgressions in the community of Grondale. As the narrator declares, in such a community, “an affront is more unpardonable than a crime” (Bage 198). The many affronts which Hermsprong commits throughout the novel, “though not directly penal, might, in the present temper of the times, be made something of” (Bage 289), and he is accordingly accused of rioting, French espionage, the seduction of the affections of Caroline Campinet, as well as a number of civil injuries against Lord Grondale. While he is ultimately able to prove his innocence of all charges, the attempt to form a case against Hermsprong on the basis of nothing more substantial than “little circumstances” (Bage 289) illustrates the dangerous condition of being an individual who transgresses against a community’s identity-forming narratives.

Hermsprong’s acquittal is partly the result of his and the presiding judge’s willingness to distinguish between social and legal transgressions. In this and other instances in the novel, Bage seems to suggest that the shift to a type of social arrangement which resembles a *Gesellschaft* represents one possible solution to the conflict between individualistic and communal outlooks. In response to Mr. Corrow’s accusation that Hermsprong has acted disrespectfully toward Lord Grondale, “a nobleman of the first consequence” (Bage 309), Hermsprong openly admits that he bears no respect for Lord Grondale and that this was not a punishable offense: “If this be a crime in the English jurisprudence, I must be content to suffer the penalty” (Bage 311). When confronted with the ‘crime’ of having entered the bid against Lord Grondale, he reminds the court that “[i]n this, I offended not against law, I presume, but courtesy.” (Bage 311)

On a similar basis, Mr. Sumelin is able to reintegrate his daughter Harriet into her family and community after her attempted elopement by affirming the distinction between social and legal transgressions. Her elopement causes a stir in the household and in the conservative community of Grondale; Ms. Fluart jocularly recounts how she “has so tainted her fame, that I do not believe she will be consulted this month, even about a new cap” (Bage 87)—a light-hearted comment that emphasizes by force of contrast the more serious repercussions which other women in the novel face as a result of similar transgressions. But rather than imprison, disinherit, or shame his daughter, Mr. Sumelin’s insistence that Harriet had done nothing against the law enables him to finally silence her mother’s continued reproaches. He explains to his wife that “[t]he law does not call [her elopement] an offence at all. [...] She was going out of England, that she

might not sin against the law” (Bage 117). At the same time, he affirms that “the law also allows fathers to dispose of their acquired property as they please” (Bage 117); if the marriage had taken place, Mr. Sumelin would have continued to provide financially for his daughter, but her husband would receive no dowry. The novel thus upholds Mr. Sumelin’s rational attitude toward the attempted elopement of one of his daughters as a more positive alternative to the other tyrannical fathers in the novel.

Likewise, Hermsprong and Maria Fluart achieve a degree of independence from the old communal order because their wealth is partly accrued from commerce and not inheritance alone. Hermsprong’s father, who was wrongfully cast out of the family, was able to live independently because of his commercial success in America. As a representative of the traditional forms of power, Lord Grondale ascribes Ms. Fluart’s ‘impertinence’, or rather her refusal to abide by artificial forms of politeness, to her wealth: “This girl is a child of commerce, and thinks, to be young, to be a hoyden, and to have a fortune, excuses every thing” (Bage 153). Commerce in the novel is thus depicted as “a viable alternative to the machinations of the corrupt aristocracy and the abuses of the control of property through familial inheritance” (Johnson 95). *Gesellschaft*-type relations in the novel provide a means to circumvent attempts to control or punish individuals who transgress against a community’s norms. Thus, while Bage is aware of the possible abuses of the law, the representation of a market-based economy and the separation between social and legal transgressions is a development which the novel largely celebrates.

The second solution, which the novel suggests, is emigration. After his trial, Hermsprong realizes the difficulty of remaining in Britain and becoming accustomed to the conformity of manners and the stifled intellectual atmosphere which he finds around him. He reveals that he has an extensive tract of land in America, which he might consider occupying with the circle of friends he had made in Grondale—all of whom are looked upon as transgressors in one capacity or the other. His dream of having “a society of friends within a two-mile ring; and [...] a mode of making it happy” (Bage 329) is a reference to pantisocracy, the fantasy of emigration founded on Godwinian principles outlined by Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and “only the most famous example of schemes for blissful colonies of radical emigrants” (Perkins, “Introduction” 36) circulating at the time. Although emigration ultimately proves unnecessary, in this episode, the novel suggests that forming a harmonious community of individuals who share the same outlook and values can, in some instances, only be actualized by leaving behind one’s native land.

The final solution for the conflict between individualism and community is the formation of subcommunities of like-minded individuals who nonetheless allow one another to exercise individual agency. While tied by romantic affection to one another, neither the headstrong Hermsprong nor the usually sweet-tempered Caroline will give up their convictions or the course of action they believe to be right to appease one another. In a letter explaining her reasons for returning to nurse Lord Grondale, Caroline affirms that, if she was mistaken in her behavior, she had at least acted on a genuine conviction that this was the correct course of action: “I have done what I thought to be right” (Bage 330). Hermsprong also acts precisely according to his ‘first principle of action’ in his refusal of a conciliation between himself and Lord Grondale because “my principles [...] must be in my own keeping. I must not forfeit them, — even for

Caroline Campinet” (Bage 332). Despite his belief that Caroline is mistaken in her behavior, neither he nor Ms. Fluart interferes in such a way that they obstruct her agency. In the same manner, rather than simply place Mrs. Garnet in direct confrontation with Lord Grondale, he convinces her through rational argument that he is unworthy of her consideration and depicts his relationship with Mrs. Garnet as one of mutual instruction and benefit: “[Y]ou must permit me to invert the order of things, and become your preceptor, as in all things else you must be mine” (Bage 170). Ultimately, this circle of like-minded individuals “neither change the world nor fall victim to ‘things as they are’; instead, they form happy communities of the redeemed, living a more politically correct version of the cozy life of the country gentry” (Perkins, “Playfulness of the Pen” 13)—residing within the broader community, and partly in tension with it, but without forfeiting their responsibility toward it.

Conclusion

While seemingly steeped in the particularities of eighteenth-century political, social, and religious debates, *Hermesprong* presents at its core an exploration of the basic principles underlying the interaction between individuals and the communities they inhabit. Bage draws attention to how the narratives which bring the identity of a community into being rely on an exclusionary logic which must purge or punish whatever is foreign to the community’s understanding of itself. By acting against the “self-effacing narratives of identity which were the common cultural inheritance of the period” (Gladfelder 6), those exercising individual agency and private judgment transgress against and undermine the narratives which uphold the identity of the community. Such expressions of individuality translate, in the sort of homogenous and self-enclosed traditional community depicted by Bage, into a punishable offense. By criminalizing the exercise of individual agency and private judgment in an attempt to preserve the purity of its identity, the community creates ruptures within its own social fabric by expelling or behaving with hostility toward its own members and distorting the virtues of warmth, mutuality, and solidarity which distinguish it from other social arrangements. Bage presents three possible resolutions to this conflict, namely, the shift to a contract-based society which protects individual agency, emigration, and the formation of subcommunities of harmonious individuals. In an age where community is regaining significance and appearing in unfamiliar forms, but where there is simultaneously a return to patriotism and ethnocentrism, such an exploration allows for a deeper understanding of contemporary cultural and political events.

Conflicts of interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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