

THE FOLLOWER

[A N O N Y M O U S]

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To one who drifteth with opinion's tide
Things on the firm shore seem to shift and glide,
While he, his fantasy's unwitting thrall,
Seems the sole thing that moveth not at all.



EDITOR'S NOTE

In the early 1800s, the view of opinion was moving away from individual personal bias towards a broader idea of “public opinion” and its powers. In a letter to Lafayette in 1823 Thomas Jefferson stated that, “the force of public opinion cannot be resisted, when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to” (3). This falls in line with the rise of print culture for the time, as it facilitated free speech and the potential spreading of “public opinion”. Furthermore, many writers of the time believed it to be a great societal normalizer, such as E D Barber and the author of “Public Opinion in the North”, who both saw the growing opposition to slavery as the correcting power that would influence both the South and the Supreme Court to eliminate slavery in the United States. However, not everyone had such a positive view of opinion.

In “Mr. Webster on Peace”, Erasmus quotes the then Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, as saying that without the support of public opinion “nations cannot now go to war, unless for grounds and reasons which will justify them in the general judgment of mankind” (1). But the author disagrees with such an optimistic view, questioning why it is only now that public opinion may stop wars and promote peace, and yet never has in the past, even though the base ideas behind public opinion have always been present. “The Follower”, then, represents this lesser voiced concern over what good may come out of opinion by exemplifying the inherent flaw in bias. To the one who is stuck in one opinion, unshaken by other arguments, he will see things the way he wants to see them, and not at all as how they actually are. The “power” of opinion then, is one that takes people down ways they had not thought they were going, convinced that they were standing firm upon an ideal. Perhaps, then, it is better to question opinion and the tide of opinion rather than hope that it will work in one’s favor.

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