Republic of Intellect

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In early November 1796, just as he was beginning to contemplate his self-defensive letter to Theodore Dwight, Elihu Smith was interrupted in composing his regular Saturday afternoon correspondence by William Johnson, who returned to their new rooms at 13 Cedar Street, having just purchased “a new Novel—by the author of ‘Man as he is’—intitled ‘Hermsprong, or Man as he is not.’ He began to read it to [William] Dunlap, who was here, & I threw aside more serious employments, to become one of his hearers. [Charles Brockden] Brown came in. We were pleased; & I propose to read this new book—whose author seems to be treading in the profane steps of [William Godwin’s 1794 novel] ‘Caleb Williams.’” Of course Robert Bage’s Hermsprong (1796) would delight these friends. The titular protagonist, having been nurtured in North American forests by an Indian tribe, arrives in England, where he uses his uncivilized outsider’s vantage point and his skill at witty and frank conversation—what he calls “plain and simple truth”—to slaughter one by one the landed gentry’s sacred cows: the importance of rank, title, and property; male superiority and women’s ornamental refinement; patriarchal authority and filial duty; and the corrupt patronage by which an aristocratic class controls sycophantic clergy and magistrates.
Over the next week Smith recorded further details of *Hermspring*'s reception by club members and their larger social circle; these details allow us to outline important aspects of the club’s reading habits. Smith finished the novel’s first volume in a day, started straightaway on the second, then, deciding his friends should hear it, hurried around town to rally them. That evening he read aloud to an audience of Johnson, Brown, Dunlap, and Mrs. Dunlap. He “began the volume anew,” he writes, “& did not quit it, till it was finished. The reading has given us uncommon pleasure; we pronounced the book an excellent one; & I have half resolved to undertake the mechanical task of compiling, out of it, a Comedy.” At the end of the month Smith noted with pleasure that the British *Monthly Review* for September 1796 had given *Hermspring* a “liberal” review, “& the spirit of a Godwinite breaks forth in the selection of extracts,” confirming their evaluation of the novel’s worth and their assessment of its cultural politics.²

This particularly enthusiastic example of a common scene of late-eighteenth-century reading offers just one instance of many on record in which literary association—in this case, the sheer pleasure of sharing a new novel with a group of friends—structured the daily experiences of informal reading audiences just as it did formal meetings of groups like the Friendly Club. We can learn much from such descriptions. The consumption of the new novel, for example, took place in a mixed-sex setting and was absorbing enough to cause Smith to set aside other work and contemplate new literary projects. The audience valued the novel for more than pleasure; Smith’s aim to undertake a dramatization would be a public service, “mechanical,” duty driven. Judging by Smith’s description of the novel as printed in two volumes, Johnson appears to have purchased the pirated Dublin edition instead of the original London edition’s three, suggesting the efficiency of colonial printing and transatlantic circulation, including the circulation of British magazines and critical reviews, which contributed to the impression that they shared with European authors a common intellectual sphere.

Most of all, these entries outline the process by which Smith and his friends assimilated a new work into their understanding of modern fiction, including the place of fiction in the republic of intellect. Though the author’s identity remained unknown to the friends, Smith framed his account by reference to their favorite recent novel, William Godwin’s *Things as They Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, published just two years earlier. The comparison between these par-
ticular books might seem odd at first. Stylistically Bage’s novel is more Goldsmith than Godwin, lighthearted where the latter is urgent, even anxious. But if profanity sold the book to Smith, on this score the novel had much to offer; as the *Monthly Review*’s treatment made plain, a “Godwinite” would be pleased by *Hermesprong*’s attempt to give the established church and other aristocratic power bases a sincere and solid thrashing.³

Another series of events recounted in Smith’s diary over the same period of time speaks to the philosophical uses of fiction that drew the group to Bage’s novel and led its members to cultivate “Godwinite” identities. A week after William Johnson introduced *Hermesprong* to his friends, William Dunlap read to the same audience his new play, *Tell Truth and Shame the Devil*, adapted from a French one-act “dramatic proverb,” *Jerome Pointu*. Smith worried that the play might be “too moral to succeed” in America. “Our audiences must have a plentiful dose of fun,” he writes, “to make even a drop of morality palatable,” a sentiment that recalls his interest in producing a comedy based on *Hermesprong*. If Smith was not accurate in his prophecy regarding Dunlap’s play, he at least thought he was. When the play was staged in January 1797 Smith recorded his frustration with the audience’s response: “The night was extremely cold—the audience thin—the piece moral—is it wonderful that it did not produce bursts of applause? Yet there was some, in several parts. But not enough to satisfy the wishes of one, who longs to see a deserving piece well received.”⁴

Dunlap’s *Tell Truth* relates to Bage’s *Hermesprong* not only chronologically and thematically—they both feature spirited young protagonists who aim to expose the vice and folly of unrighteous elders—but also through an explicit reference to Godwin in Dunlap’s adaptation. As the play’s second act opens, Semblance, a vicious patriarch and a corrupt lawyer, laments the current state of society, epitomized by his ward, Tom, who has set out to unmask Semblance as a hypocrite:

My ward, Tom . . . undertaking to be a critic, politician, reformer. Lord! Lord! how times have changed since I was young! . . . Formerly a clerk would sit all the week at his desk, and scarcely allow himself time for a walk on Sunday: but, now, they are men of spirit, wits, judges of authors, and critics at the Theatre; and we shall have a stripling of four-and-twenty tell you that the basis of all English law is violence and injustice, and advise you to read *Godwin*. I have no patience!⁵
Like Lord Grondale, the aristocratic patriarch in *Hermsprong*, Semblance—whose name obviously indicates deceptive surface and appearance—covers up his own licentiousness by expressing indignation that a young person of no rank should dare to call him on his errors. Semblance expands the list of Tom’s sins to include upstart literary criticism, an apparent analog of judging one’s elders, and a clear indication of the connections Dunlap drew between literary culture, politics, and reform. But Dunlap gives what could be read simply as the manifestation of a generation gap a measure of philosophical significance through the reference to Godwin. Suddenly, Tom’s designation elsewhere in the play as a “preacher of sincerity”—a characterization akin to Hermsprong’s self-proclaimed “vice” of “frankness”—takes on more meaning. Both *Hermsprong* and *Tell Truth* frame sincerity in opposition not only to falsehood but also to customary systems of deference and politeness that curtailed conversation based on the class, sex, or age of speakers and listeners.

As Dunlap’s reference to Godwin suggests, the notion of sincerity celebrated by Dunlap and Bage shared philosophical foundations with the book that, even more than any work of fiction, kept club members occupied for a significant portion of the 1790s: Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793), which had been published a year before *Caleb Williams*, with a revised London edition reprinted in Philadelphia in 1796. Brown hailed the book in 1795 as “my Oracle” and Smith viewed its morals as “more pure” than the New Testament. Dunlap, thrown into raptures by *Political Justice*, launched a correspondence with the author. Within months of the group’s enthusiastic reading of *Hermsprong*, Godwin’s treatise would be at the center of Smith’s controversy with the Dwights and the Tracys. In addition to considering the work politically dangerous, Smith’s friends blamed it, in large part, for destroying his Christian faith. Moreover, Uriah Tracy had agreed with the Dwights that it was particularly harmful to female readers, a point the senator fixed by forbidding his wife to read it and possibly curtailing her year-long discussion of it with Smith.

The emphasis these conservative Friendly Club associates placed on the potential effects of radical thought on female readers helps to deepen our understanding of the gulf that separated Smith from his former friends and mentors and Dunlap from his brothers-in-law: rifts between friends and family that stand for divisions in the larger cultures
of the new nation. The Friendly Club’s self-consciously gendered reading and conversation speaks both to Godwin’s notion of sincerity and to the controversial feminism of his eventual wife, Mary Wollstonecraft. For Friendly Club members, Godwin and Wollstonecraft—even before news of their marriage was public knowledge in America—presided over what promised to be a new age of reason and intellectual improvement. With a host of other writers bent on propagating similar ideas, they aimed to launch a revolution of manners among men and women in the republic of intellect.

Of course these issues cannot be separated from the politics of Godwin’s and Wollstonecraft’s reputations at the end of the century, when they went from being among the most celebrated authors in Europe and America to being spurned by former friends and becoming the special targets of the anti-Jacobin, countersubversive right. Conservatives allied Godwin’s political philosophy with the extreme disorder of the French Revolution, fearing that one would follow in England. Godwin and Wollstonecraft’s marriage in 1797, an international news item, drew derisive commentary in the rapidly growing anti-Jacobin press. More scandalous than their marriage, though, were Godwin’s actions following the birth of their daughter in August 1797 and Wollstonecraft’s death only weeks later. Within months, along with his wife’s Posthumous Works, Godwin published Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman, in which—acting on his own confidence in truth-telling and the moral force of sincerity—he frankly outlined Wollstonecraft’s intellectual and sexual histories, including accounts not only of her romance with Gilbert Imlay, an American adventurer who had abandoned her and their illegitimate daughter soon after their return to London from Revolutionary France, but also her romantic obsession for a married man, the painter Henry Fuseli, and finally Godwin’s own premarital sexual relationship with her, which resulted in her second out-of-wedlock pregnancy, the child who would grow up to become Mary Shelley. Perhaps even more shocking than Godwin’s detailing of her sexual history, he also recounted her repeated suicide attempts on being abandoned by Imlay. The Memoirs scandalized even the couple’s friends and admirers. The poet Robert Southey, who like some Friendly Club members had once “all but worshipped” Godwin, thought the philosopher had “strip[ped] his dead wife naked” and left her corpse exposed to public view.

Smith had associated Wollstonecraft with Godwin long before
the two writers actually became romantically involved; he discussed them together in a conversation with Susan Tracy as early as November 1795.  

This intuitive connection, like Smith’s association of *Hermesprong* with *Caleb Williams*, exemplifies a larger process central to club members’ reading: the habit of establishing links among newly published texts in order to create a canon from which they drew inspiration and with whose authors they sought to establish intellectual commerce. In drawing such connections, Smith anticipated later critics who would organize Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Bage, and other oppositional authors into a cohesive group (the “British Jacobins”). This process also offered grounds for self-praise and a celebration of their readerly acumen. In 1795, for example, when Dunlap first attempted to establish a correspondence with Godwin, the reply, which arrived in early 1796, included Godwin’s congratulations on the accurate “conjecture of there being considerable intimacy” between him and Thomas Holcroft.

The process of assembling information about their favorite authors was more gradual than scholars usually recognize; in retrospect, we have much more information about such thinkers and their texts than could possibly have been available to late-eighteenth-century American readers. This should caution against quick conclusions about readers’ opinions, based solely on their appreciation of texts whose social implications were just being discerned. The news of Wollstonecraft’s marriage and death, for example, arrived in so fast a succession that they hardly made individual impact on American readers, yet American readers seem not to have encountered Godwin’s memoirs of his wife for months after their London publication. Records of the club’s reading, attended to closely, can lead to better conclusions about the appeal of specific topics and arguments, and in turn facilitate the emergence of a more careful portrait of early American intellectual landscapes than the one allowed by simplistic assertions about their endorsements or disavowals of a general “radicalism.”

Club members clustered a series of authors under the general heading “Godwinian,” including Bage (whom they did not know by name), Holcroft, and the young poets Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; scientific writers like Erasmus Darwin (whose scientific poetry set a model for Mitchell and Smith), Thomas Beddoes, and Joseph Priestley; and feminist writers like Mary Hays, Helen Maria Williams, Elizabeth Inchbald, and especially Mary Wollstonecraft. Some, but not all, of these writers published under the imprint of Joseph John-
son, for whose Analytic Review Mary Wollstonecraft and others wrote and reviewed, though often anonymously. Club members were also in awe of French and German authors they considered philosophically and aesthetically progressive, such as Condorcet, Volney, Dumarsais, Christoph Martin Wieland, Schiller, and, closer to the turn of the century, the playwright August von Kotzebue. Friendly Club members had their favorite imported magazines, too, which were also left-leaning: the Monthly Review, the New Annual Register, and the Monthly Magazine. As they did with Godwin and Holcroft, club members sought out what information they could about anonymous publications and the biographical details about “the private history of the Author[s]” they most enjoyed.¹⁷

Godwin’s and Wollstonecraft’s transatlantic reputations and notoriety have often been traced through their influence on Brown, who repeatedly discussed women’s rights in Wollstonecraftian terms and tested Godwin’s philosophical principles as he measured his own fiction against Caleb Williams. Beyond questions of individual influence, however, British Jacobin writing structured the Friendly Club’s participation in debates about the philosophy of mind and about women’s capability for intellectual improvement. These issues arose in Dunlap’s plays and playhouses, in Smith’s correspondence with female friends, and in Brown’s fiction. They also formed a significant part of the appeal of radical British and European writers to club members.

A major discrepancy seems to exist, however, between club members’ embrace of Wollstonecraftian feminism and their unwritten and perhaps unconscious homosocial constitution. Probing that inconsistency yields fruitful interpretations of key texts club members produced, including Brown’s Alcuin (1798) and Ormond (1799). This investigation also yields new understanding of the place of mixed-sex friendship and conversation in the history of gender in Federal-era America by revealing the limitations and complex configurations of American feminism and intellectual “radicalism” in the decade. Specifically it allows us to see ways in which a hoped-for revolution in understandings of gender and society remained partial even for progressive thinkers, limited in part because the Godwinian ideal of a clash of minds—a template compatible with the club’s guiding principles—came into conflict with cultural pressures to maintain politeness of speech in mixed-sex society.
“Godwin came and all was light!”

From the early nineteenth century on, critics have referred to Brown as “the Godwin of America,” and ever since his first twentieth-century biographer brought Elihu Smith’s unpublished diaries to bear on Brown’s life and fiction, scholars have made much of a passage in an unsent letter to Brown in which Smith outlined his friend’s transition from a Rousseauistic wanderer in a world of his own imagination to a searcher, above all, after truth. “Now & then a ray of truth broke in, but with an influence too feeble to dissipate the phantoms, which error had conjured up around you,” Smith wrote of Brown’s romantic past. But “Godwin came and all was light!” To read this history as a rebuke would be a grave misinterpretation, given that Smith elsewhere in the letter refers to Godwin, without irony, as “the Sun himself.” But even critics who recognize Smith’s own adoration of Godwin have failed to consider carefully the specific appeal of Godwin and his circle to the Friendly Club, when so many of their contemporaries and associates could see him only, in Theodore Dwight’s vitriolic phrase, as “a philosophical madman . . . from whom our cosmopolites have drawn the most important articles of their creed.”

These highly varied responses demand some explanation of the work the Friendly Club’s “cosmopolites” considered so pure and their “religionist” friends so dangerous. A sprawling treatise of over eight hundred pages, Political Justice inquires into the nature of government and the nature of mind, a dense combination of political philosophy, psychological theory, and morals. Its author, on its publication in 1793, was a 37-year-old former Dissenting minister who since the late 1780s had participated in radical publishing circles in London as a magazine writer and critic, though such biographical details would become apparent to his American readers only over the course of several years. (All the while they enjoyed his anonymous contributions to the New Annual Register.) They encountered in his imposing text, which some of them read only after encountering the subsequently published Caleb Williams, a bold work that announced itself in opposition to monarchical government (and government in general) and in favor of universal benevolence and the progress of knowledge. Providing a utilitarian critique of Lockean individualism, it argued that all action should be undertaken by a standard of justice for the greatest portion of society possible: “The first object of virtue is to contribute to the welfare of
mankind.” The criteria for determining what was “just” depended to some degree on the ability of careful observers to project the effects of given actions or ideas. This notion, in turn, depended on an associationist and materialist conception of mind in which all thought, like all physical motion and force, is bound together in unending chains of cause and effect. In this way, the scientific mindset that revealed the laws of the physical world could be trained to illuminate as well a science of morality.

This set of core principles made up the crux of Godwin’s “doctrines of necessity,” a foundational tenet for the work as a whole. “In the life of every human being there is a chain of causes,” he wrote, “generated in the lapse of ages which preceded his birth, and going on in regular procession through the whole period of his existence, in consequence of which it was impossible for him to act in any instance otherwise than he has acted.”

Derived at least in part from the Calvinism of Godwin’s early years, *Political Justice*’s deterministic system nonetheless allowed for “voluntary action,” interventions in these “chain[s] of causes” based on alterations in one’s beliefs. If voluntary actions are based on one’s opinions and one’s opinions are subject to change, then benevolent men can undertake the work of leading the mass of humanity into higher understanding of moral laws—inserting their influence, that is, into the chains of cause and effect that determine individuals’ behavior.

This belief necessitated Godwin’s emphasis on sincerity, which he laid out clearly in five propositions: “Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be virtuous over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being communicated: Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement.”

If one discerns the motives by which another person acts, one can to some degree predict that person’s behavior. Antithetical to the state’s government by threat of force, Godwin’s program was, instead, the architecture for a progressive and optimistic intellectual republic whose citizens were men and women of benevolence, a republic that depended on free inquiry and free expression, and on the ability to shape public opinion.

*Political Justice* bestowed on Godwin a celebrity both immediate and meteoric. In William Hazlitt’s famous retrospective account of the era, Godwin “blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation,” especially among young bourgeois writers with radical leanings. Samuel Taylor
Coleridge, the same age as Smith and Brown, wrote poetry in Godwin’s honor; William Wordsworth, another contemporary in age, reportedly encouraged a student friend to throw aside his chemistry books “and read Godwin on necessity” instead. Based on the Friendly Club’s experience and interactions with contemporaries, Godwin’s writings appear to have enjoyed a broad audience of earnest young intellectuals in America, as well. Political Justice was available from American booksellers as early as May 1793; excerpts appeared in magazines in New York and other cities beginning that summer. Godwin’s fame only escalated with Caleb Williams, one of the most popular novels in America in the 1790s.24 An American edition of the novel was published in 1795 by the same Philadelphia bookseller who would publish the first volume of Brown’s Arthur Mervyn (1799). Another Philadelphia printer put out American editions of the revised version of Political Justice (1796) and Godwin’s later collection of essays on education, The Enquirer (1797), which club members also read, debated, and recommended to friends.25

The Friendly Club’s enthusiasm for British Jacobins unsettles easy understandings of the partisan divisions in Federal-era American culture, but it also belies the group’s reputation with historians as political conservatives who engineered Brown’s supposed movement from radicalism to conservatism.26 When Dunlap eventually received replies from Godwin and Holcroft, Smith sent the news to Brown in Philadelphia along with the injunction that “[w]e must do something to convince these men that we are worthy to receive some moments of their consideration.”27 The friends’ eagerness for anecdotes about these writers was gratified beginning in early 1798 when the group encountered a young actor and recent émigré, Thomas A. Cooper, who had been mentored by Godwin and Holcroft in London. (Not until Cooper’s arrival did the group realize Godwin had once been a clergyman.)28 Cooper, who eventually joined Dunlap’s Old American Company, provided club members with copious information about their favorite writers’ physical appearances, fashion sensibilities, and personal relationships—Godwin’s acquaintance, for example, with Mary Hays, another novelist they enjoyed and had already inferentially categorized as “Godwinian.”29

Godwin’s appeal to this circle had multiple dimensions.30 They shared with him a belief in the doctrine of human perfectibility; a resistance to established authority, especially of the clergy; a desire to harness the “engines” of literature for purposes of moral reform and the
dissemination of philosophical and scientific principle; and especially a celebration of inquiry, what Godwin called the “intercourse of mind with mind.” Godwin’s idealization of “unreserved communication . . . among persons who are already awakened to the pursuit of truth,” which “accustoms us to hear a variety of sentiments,” perfectly suited the friends’ rationale for the club itself.

Friendly Club members above all shared Godwin’s faith in progressive education—central to Political Justice and The Enquirer, but also to the writing of his future wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, who blamed unequal systems of male and female education for the deficiencies of mind that prevented most women from making useful contributions to society. Though Godwin rarely articulated feminist positions himself, his conception of mind and education—as well as his emphasis on marriage’s complicity with a corrupt system of private property—made Godwinian thought eminently compatible with Wollstonecraft’s argument that, given equal education, women would be capable of the same intellectual and professional achievements as men. Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), which included her most influential statements on this theme, had enjoyed success on both sides of the Atlantic since its publication even as the events flowing from the French Revolution made the subject of women’s participation in politics a major topic of debate in Europe and America.

Though she was always a controversial writer, Wollstonecraft had broad support in America among the same sectors that embraced Godwin’s writings, including most Friendly Club members. Smith was a professed fan from the Vindication forward; one of the few letters from another person he transcribed in his diary is a 1794 letter Susan Tracy had written to a male relative in defense of Wollstonecraft. Brown, too, was strongly influenced by Wollstonecraft, as were his parents, who owned copies of her texts as well as Godwin’s. The Friendly Club circle read together Wollstonecraft’s translation of C. G. Saltzman’s Elements of Morality, a progressive primer for schoolchildren, and her A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (1796), an account of travels undertaken with her infant daughter and without male escort, which William Johnson had purchased a few months before he brought home Hermsprong.

If Friendly Club members already admired Wollstonecraft, her Short Residence fixed their affection. Wollstonecraft wrote the book as a series of letters to her American lover, Gilbert Imlay, following his
abandonment of her and their daughter, Fanny. Godwin, who had met Wollstonecraft years earlier and had not been favorably impressed either by her or her feminist treatise, later wrote of Short Residence that “if ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me the book.” On the other side of the Atlantic, not much later than Godwin encountered it, Elihu Smith recorded that he read the book’s first few pages “with melancholy satisfaction” and that he stayed up long past midnight to finish it. “This is more a view of the author, than of the country she travelled thro”, he wrote of it in his diary, “there being but little information which is to be treasured up; yet the work is pleasing, & abounds with remarks, not the product of a common mind.”

Writing about it to Susan Tracy a few days later, he said the book had given me some information, some pleasure, but more pain. I could wish you to read it, as it opens a new vista into the soul of this admirable woman, but that I fear it would be the occasion of a melancholly too afflicting, & which you have every reason in the world to shun. In this work, Miss W. appears wounded, afflicted, desolate. She is a mother, & is deserted. There is an air of mystery thrown over the whole book, perhaps only so because I am ignorant, of circumstances well known in Europe, but which at this distance I cannot penetrate. It has, of consequence, interested me the more, & excited new eagerness to discover what is the cause of her evident unhappiness. At present I will not hazard a conjecture, as, in all probability, I shall soon be able to obtain a true statement of facts.

Against this backdrop of romantic melancholy and mystery, the group received news of Wollstonecraft’s marriage to Godwin a year later with total enthusiasm. “Miss Wollstonecraft is now the wife of Mr. Godwin,” Smith announced in a letter to his friend Idea Strong in October 1797, convinced that the news would give her “a lively gratification,” particularly as Wollstonecraft “is probably rendered as eligible, by this match, as she can desire” and would have both the intellectual support and the financial means to support her in “the cultivation of those sciences in which she so much delights” and in her “successive & interesting publications.” (The couple’s financial situation was never so rosy.) When word of Wollstonecraft’s death arrived only a few weeks later, Smith lamented that “[t]he loss of 50,000 french & as many Austrians, on the Rhine or in Italy, would have affected me less.”
Such investment in biographical circumstance reveals the degree to which club members had idealized these writers not simply for their ideas but as key exemplars for participation in the republic of intellect. On this assumption—the most significant point on which this group sided with British Jacobins—literature was an “engine,” something capable of pushing society toward reform by promoting correct moral views. Recognizing this philosophical and sometimes reform-oriented program for fiction is crucial to understanding much of the writing Friendly Club members produced in the 1790s. Although Thomas Holcroft pioneered this approach in *Anna St. Ives* (1792), Godwin fixed the template in *Caleb Williams*, which he intended, as he wrote in the preface, to communicate truth to “persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach.” Even the progressive early poetry of Coleridge and Southey confirmed Smith’s, Brown’s, and Dunlap’s shared sentiment that generic diffusion itself should be subordinated toward reformist ends; poems, plays, and novels would reach audiences that philosophical treatises may not, and by different means: by capturing readers’ imaginations.

The program for reform-minded fiction laid out by the British Jacobin writer Mary Hays in the September 1797 *Monthly Magazine* bears striking similarity to Brown’s stated fictional principles, suggesting, if not his direct indebtedness to Hays’s essay, at least their mutual indebtedness to Godwin. In Hays’s view,

> [t]he business of familiar narrative should be to describe life and manners in real or probable situations, to delineate the human mind in its endless varieties, to develop the heart, to paint the passions, to trace the springs of action, to interest the imagination, exercise the affections, and awaken the powers of the mind. A good novel ought to be subservient to the purposes of truth and philosophy[. . .] The language of the novelist should be simple, unaffected, perspicuous, yet energetic, touching, and impressive. It is not necessary that we should be able to deduce from a novel, a formal and didactic moral; it is sufficient if it has a tendency to raise the mind by elevated sentiments, to warm the heart with generous affections, to enlarge our views, or to increase our stock of useful knowledge. A more effectual lesson might perhaps be deduced from tracing the pernicious consequences of an erroneous judgment, a wrong step, an imprudent action, an indulged and intemperate affection, than in painting chimerical perfection and visionary excellence, which rarely, if ever, existed.
Hays’s chief example of this form of authorship was, predictably, the “author of Caleb Williams.” Brown and Smith had corresponded about Hays’s 1796 novel Memoirs of Emma Courtney, and they likely encountered this essay as well, as they were careful readers of the Monthly Magazine. Hays’s description fits both the agitated style and the utilitarian rationale Brown hoped to copy in his own career as a novelist, which began within months of this essay’s publication.

This understanding of literature’s ability to carry philosophical conviction helps to explain club members’ enthusiastic dissemination of Jacobin texts among family and friends. Such choices had more at stake than mere literary taste. What people chose to read carried philosophical and political implications of the highest order. Members who styled themselves “philosophers” and embraced Godwinianism as an alternative to Christianity set about to convert male and female relatives and friends alike, though with various degrees of transparency about their motives. Though Smith defended Political Justice to Theodore Dwight in part as compatible with the metaphysics of Dwight’s grandfather, Jonathan Edwards (whom Godwin indeed cites on certain points), he appears to have been more enthusiastic about the possibility that Godwin could win over “the votaries of Jesus” to “our Philosophy.” Smith gave copies of Political Justice and Caleb Williams to Mrs. Tracy, to his sisters, and to his friend Idea Strong, along with books by Bage and Inchbald. He was even willing to enlist believers in his cause; he had given the sermons of Joseph Fawcett, a minister with Godwinian leanings, to his parents and to Susan Tracy. “I would sustain [you] by my principles, & protect [you] by my counsels,” Smith wrote to his sister Abigail to accompany copies of Caleb Williams and his own Edwin and Angelina. Along with Godwin, Smith wanted to believe that the reception of truth was necessary, inevitable, and that the appropriately conditioned mind would receive the forcible impressions of truth without resistance.

British Jacobins and the Politics of American Reading

Unlike most British writing of the late 1790s, in which Jacobin and anti-Jacobin positions were starkly demarcated, the writings of Friendly Club members (Brown and Dunlap in particular) have been characterized as both Jacobin and anti-Jacobin, Jeffersonian and Federalist, radical and conservative. Part of the problem critics face in arguing for or against the “radical” character of Brown’s writing lies in the dif-
ferent areas—politics, religion, class, sexuality—to which scholars look for evidence of “radicalism.” If the term refers above all to democratic efforts to broaden the public sphere and to resist political aristocracy, the Friendly Club’s record is mixed. The broadening they desired had less to do with extending rights to common people than with an ideology of natural aristocracy that rewarded intellectual merit and challenged power bases like hereditary wealth and the clergy. “It is in the Political part of his work, that this writer is most exposed to the charge of fancifullness,” Smith wrote of Political Justice in his long letter to Theodore Dwight; in letters to other friends he took specific exception to Godwin’s criticisms of the American “executive” or presidency. “We are not yet, even in America,” he wrote to Idea Strong, “sufficiently instructed to bear a purely democratical government.”

The union Smith embodied of moderate Federalism and religious skepticism has precipitated mixed readings of the club’s politics; in their own time it allowed members on one hand to shore up the social privileges of class and gender and on the other to challenge some entrenched forms of cultural authority.

One challenge in seeking to answer questions about the group’s radicalism, especially in relation to a chronology of their reception of British Jacobin writing, stems from a lack of documentary evidence. Smith’s diary, which contains such a careful account of his reading and the group’s discussions, ends with his death in September 1798; William Dunlap’s volumes from 1799 to 1806 are lost. In the absence of a firm date for the group’s reception of Godwin’s Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft, and given the fact that Brown’s works like Alcuin and Ormond have both been read in contradictory terms—as among the most radical expressions of feminist argument in the early republic or as evidence of Brown’s supposed turn toward anti-Jacobinism and Federalism—the task of placing these writings in a history of the group’s reading is more difficult than critics have credited.

The available sources indicate that religion and gender, rather than local or national politics, were key points in the group’s attraction to the New Philosophy. Reading the memoir of a man interred by the French Jacobins, for example, Smith seized on and translated a description of “a New Religion” the prisoners had invented on rational principles, as well as the memoir’s account of the Gironist martyr Madame Roland, whose “energy & virtue,” Smith thought, placed her “character, in my eyes, far above that of any woman who I now recollect to have
become celebrated in the history of nations.” Smith recommended the memoir to Brown along with Dumarsais’s Analyse de la Religión chrestienne; Essay sue le Prejuges contenante l’apologie de la philosophe, “the fount whence the Philosophers of the New School have drawn their delightful, vivifying, & invigorating, waters; the work which most deserves to be the Manual of the little children of Truth.”

Members like Smith, who believed fiercely in “the right to think” and in the possibilities of collaborative inquiry into self-knowledge, assented to Wollstonecraft’s proposition that men and women shared equally such capacity for rational development. Smith hoped the “children of Truth” would include his family members, especially his sisters. “Women,” he wrote to his youngest sister, Fanny, “are formed for something nobler than merely to be wives & mothers.” In the same letter he exhorted her to cultivate “the attributes of a moral being, of which to think yourself is one of the first.” His exhortations to “think [of] yourself” as a “moral being” constituted Smith’s way of discouraging dependence on Christian foundations for morality.

If resistance to religious authority and traditional gender roles (especially regarding education) were the two points on which the group most identified with British Jacobin writers, these were also two areas on which cultural and political conservatives focused much of their reactionary rhetoric. Just as they featured in British anti-Jacobin writing as stereotypes of romantic radicals, especially after 1798, Godwin and Wollstonecraft suffered the wrath of American conservatives. Following suggestions from Robison and Barruel that women were chief targets of the Illuminati conspiracy, both for their capacity to exert female influence and to reproduce the order, Timothy Dwight argued in his orations that the infidel philosophers who led the Illuminati aimed to make American women into “bawd[s]” and “strumpet[s],” and to induct them into a “promiscuous and universal concubinage.” By the end of the century Godwin and Wollstonecraft—jointly the embodiment of religious and sexual radicalism for conservatives—were even accused by American conservatives of being actual members of the Illuminati.

“Seducing Suppositions”:
Gender and the Scene of Conversation in Alcuin

The provocative views on religion and gender that drew club members to European radicals also drove Brown’s first wave of fictional output in
the late 1790s. These issues find an especially strong place in the composition and publication of _Alcuin_ in 1797–98; in several other pieces published in the Philadelphia _Weekly Magazine_; in _Wieland_, which took up most of Brown's summer and early fall in 1798; and in _Ormond_, which was composed in New York in December 1798 and published in January 1799. They even characterize his two “late” and much-maligned domestic novels, _Clara Howard_ and _Jane Talbot_ (both 1801), which also take up religion, gender, and Jacobinism in important ways. Only yellow fever (in the serialized opening to _Arthur Mervyn_ and other sketches published in Watters's magazine in 1798) and somnambulism (in the lost manuscript for his first completed novel, _Sky-Walk_ and in 1799's _Edgar Huntly_) can compete with controversial debates on religion and gender for space in Brown's early productions. Of these works from his first year of intense literary production, _Wieland_ is most preoccupied with religion, and though it betrays Brown's interest in gender debates, as in the Wieland siblings' equal access to education and Clara's determination to manage her own property, gender in _Wieland_ does not enjoy the prominent attention given to it either in the earlier _Alcuin_ or in the later _Ormond_, where explicit discussions of women's education and social status take center stage. Although they do so in ways that aim to vindicate women in general and Wollstonecraft in particular, these books also offer insight, perhaps unexpectedly, both into the homosocial constitution of the club's conversational space and into gender politics in the new American republic.

One of the most debated topics in Europe and America in the 1790s, women's rights had been the subject of popular discussion in the United States even before the publication of Wollstonecraft’s _Vindication of the Rights of Woman_. Still, if Wollstonecraft's book merely “expressed what a larger public was already experiencing or was willing to hear,” in its wake Americans could hardly bring up the topic without reference to her thinking and, eventually, to her biography. _Vindication’s_ circulation—as an import, in four separate American editions, and in excerpts in several American magazines—helped to increase discussion of women's education and participation in public life. Together with increasing literacy rates and growing urban populations, Wollstonecraft’s book helped create a new “woman-centered” print public, in which “Americans discussed and debated women's familial, social, economic, and political roles.”

Susan Tracy's comments on Wollstonecraft, written in January 1794
and transcribed by Smith in his diary almost two years later, anticipate several of the topics that Brown would emphasize in *Alcuin* and *Ormond*; Wollstonecraft’s “proposed amendments in the Education of Women” constitute her chief concern. Tracy agrees that women should study science and also values Wollstonecraft’s arguments for women’s entrance into the professions. Women would make good merchants, she wrote, and are even capable of the “courage & fortitude” necessary to be surgeons. They are not often given a chance to manage property or to learn law, she acknowledges, but there is no reason they could not. Like men, women differ individually in temperament. Tracy also falls back, like Wollstonecraft herself, on religious justifications for her feminism and may have been comforted by the work’s pious tone. “Is there danger in enlightening the understanding of Woman,” Tracy asks her correspondent, but raises this question particularly “as it respects practical religion, & the great duties we all owe to God’s Family on earth?” Even if the limitations she places on the “practical” applications of an enlightened woman’s “understanding” seem at first to narrow the possibilities for women’s public utility, the final phrase of her question suggests a confidence that female improvement is a matter of universal importance.

If questions about women’s rights and intellectual capacity were never far from the club’s reading and conversation, they were carried on, among some members at least, without Susan Tracy’s or even Wollstonecraft’s piety. As readers, club members encountered feminist issues in *Hermesprong’s* reform agenda; in Holcroft’s *Anna St. Ives*; in the works of Elizabeth Inchbald, Helen Maria Williams, Erasmus Darwin, and Mary Hays, as well as in French writing by Condorcet and Madame Roland, all writers whose publications were eagerly read by these and other Americans. In the months surrounding *Alcuin’s* composition, the topic seems to have heated up significantly in Anglo-American culture. In August 1796 and a year later, in the fall of 1797, Smith worked on his own utopian scheme, perhaps spurred on by Brown’s work-in-progress. Smith’s plan included women’s equal inclusion in a state-sponsored educational system (at least up to the university level), even though it clearly excluded them from political office. Brown had already completed a significant portion of *Alcuin* when the group began its enthusiastic reading, in the spring and summer of 1797, of Mary Hays’s novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), but there can be little doubt that its subject matter, including a critique of women’s education, resonated with Brown. Hays had also published several essays
on women’s intellectual capacity in the *Monthly Magazine*, which club members read and discussed regularly within months of each issue’s publication in London.57

Brown’s engagement with the cultural conversation on women’s rights in the spring of 1798 with *Alcuin* meant something quite different than it would have even a few years earlier, even if most Americans were not yet aware of the scandalous contents of Godwin’s posthumous *Memoirs* of his wife.58 By the time Brown’s dialogue was published, the anti-Jacobin publishing establishment in Britain had begun its crusades against the New Philosophy, which either unsexed women, critics claimed, or made them sexually licentious. By the summer of 1798, anti-Illuminati orators and pamphleteers were paying special attention to questions of gender in their assault on the alleged conspiracy (though they were not yet invoking in print Wollstonecraft’s sexual history). Their arguments were bolstered by fiction like Hays’s, which in spite of her claim that her heroine was being held up as a “warning” nevertheless portrayed a woman driven by both passion and principle to propose an extramarital affair with the man she loves. Even more damning were early word-of-mouth reports of Wollstonecraft’s own illicit behavior. In the face of such rumors, support for her among Friendly Club members still ran high: “Many ridiculous stories have been propagated” about Wollstonecraft, Smith wrote to Idea Strong as early as the summer of 1796, “but there are so many fools & so many knaves interested in decrying her, that I choose not hastily to credit what they say.” In any case, he reassured her, “the truth of any sentiment does not depend, in the least, on the character of him who utters it.”59

Understanding *Alcuin, a Dialogue*, however, may require one to set aside Smith’s position on this matter, inasmuch as Brown used “character”—in the sense of fictional personae—to set forth philosophical arguments. The book consists of an exchange between a young schoolteacher named Alcuin and an urban *salonierre*, the wealthy widow Mrs. Carter. The two take up topics ranging from women’s participation in politics (*Alcuin’s opening question is “Pray, Madam, are you a federalist?”*) to education, marriage, and property. Mrs. Carter voices Wollstonecraft’s arguments, in the dialogue’s first phase, against the exclusion of “one half of mankind” from the “usefulness and honour” attendant to the “liberal professions” and maintains that the “tendency of rational improvement is to equalize conditions” between men and women. Though she believes the United States affords women more
opportunity for mental progress than any other country in human history, it is still “manifest that we are hardly and unjustly treated.” She sees herself as “exempt from the grosser defects of women, but by no means free from the influence of a mistaken education.” As “rational beings,” she believes, their options should be the same as men’s.  

Alcuin’s responses to these arguments are not antifeminist so much as they question the liberal foundations of Mrs. Carter’s (and Wollstonecraft’s) thought. Rather than assume that education and the professions should be accessible to both sexes, he asks whether the current state of education and professional life yields the greatest good to society. In this way, Alcuin stages a dialogue between Wollstonecraft and Godwin on reform, pitting against one another ideas Brown and his friends found attractive in both writers, and using the dialogue form to force reconciliation or to seek common ground where he has found discrepancy. (Brown was extraordinarily prescient in this regard, given that Godwin’s Enquirer and his revisions to Political Justice were influenced, most scholars agree, by Godwin’s conversations with Wollstonecraft.) If Mrs. Carter’s arguments are consistent with Wollstonecraft’s feminism, Alcuin’s jealousy of Mrs. Carter’s leisure echoes Godwin’s critique, especially in The Enquirer, of the liberal professions. “[I]ndeed,” Alcuin says, he has “but little [respect] for any profession whatever” that prioritizes “gain” over “usefulness.” Instead, it would be “prudent” to determine “those advantages” that would flow from opening the professions to women before actually doing so; perhaps, he suggests, reform needs to go deeper than simply admitting women into a system that is fundamentally flawed.  

At this early point in the discussion, educational issues move to the fore, and Mrs. Carter scores points not only by revealing the problems of traditional gender training (“What think you of female education? Mine has been frivolous. I can make a pie, and cut out a gown”) but also by forwarding Wollstonecraft’s argument in favor of coeducation. Gender-segregated schooling, she declares, has created separate cultures for men and women, complete with separate languages and systems of manners, separate “ideas, maxims, and pursuits,” to the effect that meaningful mixed-sex communication is stifled: “All intercourse between [the sexes] is fettered and embarrassed. On one side, all is reserve and artifice; on the other, adulation and affected humility. . . . The man must affect a disproportionate ardour; while the woman must counterfeit indifference or aversion. Her tongue has no office, but to
belie the sentiments of her heart, and the dictates of her understanding.” Mrs. Carter’s line is particularly damning, for false education has not merely prevented women from developing intellectual faculties, it actively works to undermine what feelings (“heart”) and reflective capacity (“understanding”) have already been cultivated. At the same time, the problem is Godwinian as well, since the situation forecloses on the possibility of sincerity. With this in mind, we can see that Mrs. Carter’s concluding sentiments, which some critics have read as lackluster or “unoriginal,” make perfect sense. When she concludes that friendship is essential to a true marriage, she offers more than a clichéd description of the companionate ideal, for the very possibility of mixed-sex friendship—within marriage as well as without—has been threatened, she believes, by educational programs that prevent sincere conversation between men and women.

This threat bears on *Alcuin* itself, a literary performance that both takes mixed-sex conversation as its central topic and attempts to represent such an exchange in its own form. In representing a conversational situation described by its participants as fundamentally problematic, Brown would seem to benefit from the possibilities afforded for fictional characters to model an ideal type of conversation between the sexes. As one critic has pointed out, as much as *Alcuin* is about women’s rights, it also models “a specific kind of conversation in mixed company,” an alternate “salon society” that complements the all-male Friendly Club. In *Alcuin*’s third part, which remained unpublished in Brown’s lifetime, Alcuin resumes the conversation by reporting on a visit he claims to have made to a utopian society that did not acknowledge sexual distinction. More utopian even than this “paradise of women,” though, the dialogue forwards the notion that educational reform may make professional life and marriage compatible with men’s and women’s mutual participation in the republic of intellect, where a widow and an impoverished schoolteacher could actually rise to prominence by putting their abilities to the service of the larger society.

“Conversation” itself takes center stage in the dialogue. In the several pages of exposition that preface the actual exchange between Alcuin and Mrs. Carter, Alcuin provides extended commentary on the social setting, including his initial fears that the degree and style of performance required by genteel parlor society will preclude his participation. Mrs. Carter’s apartment, which she keeps for her brother, a physician, serves as “a sort of rendezvous of persons of different ages and condi-
tions, but respectable for their talents and virtues.” The “instructive society” sought out by these young intellectuals, however, remains bound by social conventions of politeness, gentility, and the period’s oratorical culture. “[C]onversation,” as Alcuin puts it, “is a scene.” His anxiety about social artifice suggests that the blend of instruction and rational entertainment offered by Mrs. Carter’s coterie exists in tension with the demands of appropriate fashion and poise; its conversation may not be as “unfettered” as he imagines. These requirements almost discourage him from attending her lyceum: “I looked at my unpowdered locks, my worsted stockings, and my pewter buckles. I bethought me of my embarrassed air, and my uncouth gait. I pondered the superciliousness of wealth and talents, the awfulness of flowing muslin, the mighty task of hitting on a right movement at entrance, and a right posture in sitting, and on the perplexing mysteries of tea-table decorum.”

Importantly, Alcuin’s anxieties are explicitly gendered; if at first his hesitancy stems from “the pride of poverty” and “the bashfulness of inexperience,” his catalog of reservations also suggests a simultaneous discomfort with looking at women’s suggestively covered bodies (the muslin gowns seem “awful,” perhaps, for what they both disclose and suggest to the imagination) and with being onstage himself (his performance anxiety regarding oratorical posture). Unaccustomed, it seems, to a social and intellectual sphere under female government—an educational situation that is the inverse of his schoolroom, where he spends “[e]ight hours of the twenty-four” enforcing rote learning—Alcuin finds Mrs. Carter’s mixed-sex tea-table, with its “careless and unfettered,” “abrupt and sententious,” “fugitive and brilliant, and sometimes copious and declamatory” conversation to be a mystery, albeit one that eventually overcomes his hesitations and claims his attention on repeated occasions.

At this point, instead of simply modeling ideal intellectual interactions between men and women, the dialogue begins to suggest that mixed-sex conversation may prove difficult to dissociate from what Mrs. Carter eventually calls “the sexual distinction”—that is, from physiological differences between the sexes. From Alcuin’s point of view, the bodily mysteries thinly veiled by muslin line up with the mysteries of tea-table ritual and, ultimately, present a topic that the promiscuous constitution of the conversation requires, under principles of politeness, to remain uncommented upon. One critic makes a similar point by identifying in Alcuin “a slippage between two adjacent literary
genres: the philosophic dialogue and the seduction narrative.”

This generic ambivalence comes into focus, tellingly, when the conversation between Alcuin and Mrs. Carter turns to the difference between mind and body. The possibilities for mental development, according to Alcuin, are “the same” regardless of sex, because “the sexes are equal” in terms of “the principle of thought”; however, he argues, the body has been universally recognized to be the seat of “the sexual distinction,” and “[w]e all know,” Alcuin puts it suggestively, “what is the final cause of this distinction.”

Here Alcuin asserts universal knowledge as a way to maintain a euphemism. Although the word “cause” remains ambiguous—it is not clear whether he means that sexual reproduction is the reason for this distinction, or merely the consequence of it—everyone knows, he seems to say, that sexual intercourse propagates the species, and so no need exists to talk about the subject aloud. Nevertheless, the question does resurface, in the dialogue’s third part, which circulated privately among club members and their larger social circle but remained unpublished until it appeared in William Dunlap’s 1815 biography of Brown. Part III establishes, among other things, that Alcuin has an easier time broaching such tough subjects with other men rather than with women; in order to imagine a utopian society without sexual distinction, Alcuin fantasizes about a conversation with another man in which he has the freedom to explore such ideas. Even though Alcuin’s interlocutor during his visit to the imaginary society is male, when their discussion arrives at the subject of sexual knowledge, Alcuin stops short of relaying this portion of their conversation to Mrs. Carter. “It may not be proper” to continue, he suggests. “This is a topic on which, strange to tell, we cannot discourse in the same terms before every audience.” Perhaps he should write it down for her, since “decorum would not perhaps forbid you to read, but it prohibits you from hearing.” Mrs. Carter, however, will have nothing of this double standard. What she reads she may as well hear: “There are many things improper to be uttered, or written, or to be read, or listened to, but the impropriety methinks must adhere to the sentiments themselves, and not result of the condition of the author or his audience.” Nevertheless, she allows him to refrain from relating the details on sex among the utopians, and Alcuin’s failure to push his account to its conclusion seems an uncanny parallel to Brown’s failure to see the sequel through to the press, presumably because he and Smith considered the treatment too risqué.
If the issue of sexual content in polite conversation goes unremarked for the remainder of the dialogue, one explanation for Alcuin’s reluctance to breach conversational decorum may be found back in the earlier, published portion. Toward the end of part II, when sex becomes the topic of conversation, Alcuin abruptly concludes his first conversation with Mrs. Carter by both acknowledging his sexual arousal and leaving its details concealed. “When I reflect on the equality of mind” between the sexes, he confesses,

and attend to the feelings which are roused in my bosom by the presence of accomplished and lovely women; by the mere graces of their exterior, even when the magic of their voice sleeps, and the eloquence of eyes is mute, and, for the reality of these feelings, if politeness did not forbid, I might quote the experience of the present moment—I am irresistibly induced to believe that of the two sexes, yours is, on the whole, the superior. 68

Three things seem particularly worthy of comment here. The first is Alcuin’s tendency to reveal as much as he conceals (he discloses his arousal by their exchange only to disavow its appropriateness as a topic of conversation), which is in part, I think, what allows one to identify in Alcuin elements of the seduction tale. Second, Alcuin makes this disavowal in the name of “politeness,” which prevents him from spelling out the details of his arousal beyond the suggestion, a few lines later, that it prevents him from “reason[ing] dispassionately on this subject.” And third, Alcuin’s ability to slide so effortlessly from encomia to “the equality of mind” that distinguishes “accomplished and lovely women”—terms whose parallel placement within the sentence in which they appear would seem to suggest they should be taken as synonymous—into a list of “the mere graces of their exterior.”

Alcuin has, in other words, elided the question of Mrs. Carter’s intellectual capacity by focusing on his own sexual attraction to her in terms that conflate intellectual interest with sexual preoccupation. (We do not learn whether the attraction is mutual, but Brown suggests elsewhere—in Clara’s initial encounter with Carwin in Wieland, for example—that women’s sexual arousal by male interlocutors poses similar challenges to conversation.) Alcuin follows his semiconfession of his sexual feelings for Mrs. Carter with a declaration that the arousal he experiences in her presence is “impossible to feel for one of our own sex.” The failure of mixed-sex conversation in Alcuin can be seen then
to have roots simultaneously in idealized fraternity and in a form of homosexual panic. And while the idea that men in the late eighteenth century could not be sexually aroused by same-sex conversation is belied at every turn in familiar letters that testify to the erotic bonds of friendship, this seems a curious but important argument to have emerged, in the late 1790s, in a dialogue on “the rights of women” written by a member of a group that welcomed Wollstonecraft’s ideas but that apparently never considered admitting women as members. As one critic has argued, “Alcuin gains coherence if one understands that Alcuin and Mrs. Carter are pursuing different ideological agendas.” Hers is aligned with “the plight of women” and his with “impoverished intellectuals.” It may be correct to assert that this division results from Brown’s “divided loyalties,” but the dialogue also accurately represents a style of mixed-sex conversation that was still difficult in the mid-1790s.69

Alcuin’s keen interest in education and its formal and thematic emphasis on debate and conversation suggest its proximity to Godwin’s Enquirer, which Brown read during the same months he was composing the dialogue. Taking education as an overarching focus, Godwin presented the collection of essays “not as dicta, but as the materials of thinking.”70 This notion—that writers could offer, rather than specific solutions to social problems, a set of materials to encourage debate among readers, and that dialogue itself would promote social progress—anticipates social formations like the club or even like the larger mixed-sex circles in which members participated as the likely setting of literary reception. When Smith was testing the waters for Brown’s new work, he read it aloud both to the club and to mixed-sex audiences of friends to gauge the potential response. Even if these settings constituted an ideal audience formation to receive Brown’s dialogue, they also seem to have raised or at least acknowledged specific problems of mixed-sex society. Based, perhaps, on such test readings, Smith and Brown decided not to publish the dialogue’s continuation, with its portrait of a sexless society.71

Ormond and the Fate of Wollstonecraftian Feminism in America

When Brown returned to these topics in Ormond, less than a year after Alcuin was published, he produced a dystopian counternarrative to Alcuin’s unpublished “paradise of women.” The novel opens in New York, where Stephen Dudley, a merchant who lives in comfort with his unnamed wife and his daughter, Constantia, loses his fortune to a con-
fidence man, leaving him helpless before merciless creditors. Humiliated, Dudley takes his family to Philadelphia, where they change their family name and start a new life. A new set of disasters arises: Mrs. Dudley’s death, Dudley’s sudden blindness, and Philadelphia’s 1793 yellow fever epidemic come in quick succession. Constantia, pushed to the novel’s fore by these events, faces an even more severe trial when she encounters the megalomaniacal Ormond, who like Ludloe in Memoirs of Carwin turns out to be an international revolutionary radical with purported connections to “an adventurous and visionary sect” of schemers. Ormond, sexually aroused by Constantia’s intellectual abilities, abandons his superficial mistress and attempts to turn Constantia’s rationalism against her, to seduce her by force of mind. When this fails he resorts to more traditional gothic fare: he arranges her father’s murder, imprisons her in a country mansion, and threatens her with rape, murder, and necrophilia. Somewhat miraculously, through a “desperate” and “random” blow with a penknife, Constantia kills her attacker and eventually relocates to Europe with her lifelong friend—and the novel’s narrator—Sophia Courtland.

Publicity for Ormond promised that it would engage recent events of global consequence, and indeed the novel invokes the French Revolution at several key moments, though obliquely. Many critics have read the novel as reactionary to such events, and (similar to readings that posit Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin as politically conservative) often take for a starting point the implication that Ormond is a Godwinian and an Illuminatus. From this view, Constantia’s rationalist education renders her vulnerable to a nearly successful seduction and makes her story a cautionary tale against the dangers of adopting Wollstonecraftian ideals. Other critics read Constantia as a feminist heroine and discern a more progressive political agenda on Brown’s part. Yet another set of influential readings suggests a more conflicted combination in the novel of reactionary anxieties and radical principles. Another critic has recently argued that Ormond maintains a “commitment to some form of feminism,” perhaps even “a homosocial, feminist utopianism,” even as it seeks to correct “Wollstonecraft’s overinvestment in reason and abstract principle, and even in manliness and heterosexuality.” On this view, the novel’s sensational climax, in which Constantia murders Ormond in self-defense, “refuses the chivalric, heterosocial fantasies of antijacobin literature,” though this critic also designates Ormond as Godwinian and the novel as anti-Jacobin.
Such a reading assumes that Ormond responds to the controversy generated by the 1798 publication of Godwin's Memoirs of Wollstonecraft. But even if this chronology of reception and production is accurate, the novel certainly was not recognized in such terms by the anti-Jacobin establishment in England. The Antijacobin Review saw Ormond as filled with “disgusting and pernicious nonsense,” including an implied defense of suicide in Mr. Dudley’s temporary temptation to take his own life when he loses his fortune. The review denounced Brown’s second published novel as a product of “the brain of phrenzy . . . the effusions of a pragmatic enthusiast!” and its author as “a mad-headed metaphysician!” If Ormond cannot be so easily classified as anti-Jacobin, other meanings available at the time of its initial publication and transatlantic reception need to be more fully discerned.

Ormond emerged directly from a nexus of Friendly Club discussions of education, gender, religion, and politeness. It tests—and ultimately vindicates—many of the club’s foundational tenets, in particular its members’ confidence in the efficacy of women’s education and improvement. First and foremost a novel about female education, Ormond takes up the same issues and arguments Brown dealt with in Alcuin. At the same time, the novel develops Alcuin’s response to other ideas associated with British Jacobins and in doing so helps to illuminate some of the contradictions that plague the Friendly Club’s commitment to Wollstonecraftian feminism, especially the group’s failure to create a gender-inclusive club culture. Though Ormond invokes Godwinian keywords at crucial moments—most significantly in Ormond’s attempt to seduce Constantia in part by invoking Godwin’s arguments against marriage—the novel is populated more obviously by a series of female characters who illustrate different models of experience and education, with specific reference to arguments on education put forward in Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Structured on a series of seduction stories in which Constantia’s virtue and her enlightened education are put to the test, the novel contrasts Alcuin’s acknowledgment that both decorum and sexual arousal inhibit his ability to converse with Mrs. Carter. In Ormond, the titular villain actually uses conversation’s rational and sexual appeal as his primary avenues toward seduction.

Brown’s dystopian portrait of perverted rationalism should not be misunderstood as either a simplistic repudiation of positions he entertained in Alcuin or as a sign that in the fall of 1798 he suddenly
found his cultural politics dramatically transformed. As were Alcuin's and Mrs. Carter's, Constantia's views in many regards—with important exceptions, such as her opinions about marriage—are alternately Wollstonecraftian and Godwinian, most often a combination of the two. She has been educated by her father in a manner consistent with Wollstonecraft's recommendations; her “ardent thirst of knowledge,” which follows on her father's similar desires, is gratified by “meditation and converse” with him, as well as by “books and the pen.”

Compare this description to Alcuin’s paradise of women, where “the same method of education is pursued with regard to both sexes,” based on multiple “avenues [to] knowledge”: “Conversations, books, instruments, specimens of the productions of art and nature, haunts of meditation, and public halls, liberal propensities and leisure . . . within the reach of all.”

Poverty and gender prevent Constantia from full use of these resources, but her education clearly surpasses many women’s, including Alcuin’s Mrs. Carter. Aiming to prevent Constantia from merely becoming “alluring and voluptuous,” Stephen Dudley attempts to help her become “eloquent and wise” by teaching her Tacitus and Milton instead of Petrarch and Racine, and physical science and philosophy of mind—Newton and Hartley—instead of music or drawing. “These accomplishments,” we are told, “tended to render her superior to the rest of women.”

Central to Constantia’s education, and among its most pleasurable fruits, are the same social habits that were central to the Friendly Club: conversation, correspondence, reading, and friendship itself. Conversation, as Constantia’s “chief employment,” offered her “benefits of the highest value” as her father taught her about “the moral history of mankind” based on his youthful observations of Italian landscapes and revolutions. Constantia also takes “intellectual amusement” in her “uninterrupted correspondence” with her friend Sophia, which is apparently how the latter has the intimate knowledge necessary to narrate the novel. So, too, is Constantia the subject of correspondence among friends, as the narrative structure also bears out: Ormond is framed as one enormous letter from Sophia Courtland to the mysterious I. E. Rosenberg, who lives in Germany but is for some reason “deeply interested” in Constantia’s fate as well as in “[s]ociety and manners” in the United States more generally.

The parallel between Constantia’s intellectual habits and the Friendly Club’s preoccupations implies that the novel asks not only what will come of equal access to education but also, as in Alcuin,
whether mixed-sex society can function on the same principles as segregated company. Idealized habits of unrestrained conversation apparently have their dangers in mixed company, as Constantia’s mind is precisely what makes her attractive to Ormond. The sexual excitement generated by his conversation apparently renders her, in turn, vulnerable to his attempts at seduction. Brown contrasts Constantia with Ormond’s original victim of seduction, his mistress Helena Clewes, a textbook example of Wollstonecraft’s arguments against typical female education. The narrative takes pains to point out that Helena is not merely “silly or ignorant”—not the sort of fallen woman who has been corrupted by reading novels, in other words. Rather, her “understanding bore no disadvantageous comparison with the majority of her sex.” Her problems are systemic. Whereas Constantia has been educated to be “eloquent and wise,” all of Helena’s training has been focused on singing: “Her voice was thrilling and melodious, and her utterance clear and distinct,” but her talents have been “calculated to excite emotions more voluptuous than dignified.” Helena has none of Constantia’s ability to discern men’s character by “exercis[ing] her judgment,” and so she is an easy target not only for Ormond but also for Constantia’s reformist impulses; Helena’s “defects” make Constantia eager to “assist her in repairing [the] deplorable error” of her education. Unfortunately for Helena, Ormond has become infatuated with Constantia. Rejecting Constantia’s advice that he marry Helena, Ormond abandons his mistress instead, precipitating her suicide.81

Helena stands and falls both as a representative of traditional femininity and as a figure of friendship’s failure, suggesting that the ill effects of a faulty female education include obstacles to same-sex friendship as well as to mixed-sex conversation. Though Constantia has received an ideal education, she constantly fails to find the friendship she so desires. In spite of Sophia’s prior indication that Constantia’s letters to her were unremitting, she later locates Constantia’s loneliness in the “distance” that separates Constantia and Sophia, which “forbade communication” and so increased Constantia’s eagerness to meet someone “congenial with her principles, sex, and age.” If Helena offers one example of the potential to fill this void—albeit a friendship that ultimately fails—the second possibility arrives in the form of a mysterious woman “whose person and face instantly arrested [her] attention.” Like Constantia’s, we are told, the stranger’s “aspect was heroic and contemplative” rather than “seduc[tive],” and that she appeared to be someone in whom “the
female was absorbed . . . in the rational creature.” Her appearance seems to confirm Constantia’s intuition, on first hearing stories about the newcomer, that this might finally be someone who will “prove worthy of her love.”

In this newcomer, Martinette de Beauvais, the novel offers another model of female experience and education, as well as another possibility for friendship to flourish. In a synopsis of her life story that takes up two chapters of the novel—relayed in a conversational style that “denoted large experience, vigorous faculties, and masculine attainments”—she describes her own education as “conducted on the justest principles,” one that resembles Constantia’s, with the exception that her understanding of events in Europe appears to flow from “a better means of information than books.” A child of mixed nationalities and parents who perpetually traveled, Martinette describes herself as “a girl, prompt, diligent, inquisitive,” possessed of “versatile curiosity and flexible organs.” When her parents died she was placed in an Italian seminary under a lascivious priest. Martinette works the priest’s perverse interest to her advantage by letting him teach her in “metaphysics and geometry,” including “the newest doctrines respecting matter and mind.” Her greater education comes not only through book learning but also experience, when she escapes from Father Bartoli and becomes the traveling companion of a wealthy woman, a situation that allows “[n]ew avenues to knowledge, by converse with mankind and with books, and by the survey of new scenes.” Her experience expands significantly when she falls in love with a young adventurer and “political enthusiast” who “proposed no other end of his existence than the acquisition of virtue and knowledge.” Together they emigrate to America to fight in the Revolutionary War against the British; her husband dies in a British prison, and Martinette carries her revolutionary fervor with her to France, where she numbers herself among the Girondists in the Revolution there. Like Constantia, Martinette has “panted after . . . friendship,” though unlike Constantia she pined even more for “liberty”; ultimately, friendship, like marriage—following the death of her husband the revolutionary—is something Martinette feels compelled to “sacrifice” in order to keep her “liberty inviolate.”

Martinette, like Helena, presents not only a potential object for Constantia’s affection (though like Helena she removes herself suddenly from the scene, ending the possibility that she will become intimate with Constantia) but also the occasion to reflect on the effects of
a particular model of female education. Where Helena had only been allowed to cultivate ornamental qualities, Martinette, like Constantia, had received a solid scientific and philosophical education. Unlike Constantia’s, her education is augmented by travel, observation, and participation in major world events, a proximity to revolution that Constantia envies. Early on we learn that Constantia’s father has taught her that the “most precious materials of the moral history of mankind are derived from the revolutions of Italy”; later, after her initial sight of Martinette but before they are intimately acquainted, she fantasizes that this woman somehow maintained personal access “to the actors in the great theatre of Europe.” The scope of Martinette’s experience makes Constantia self-conscious of “her own slender acquirements,” a “humiliation” that is compounded when Martinette reveals her personal intimacy with Volney and other philosophes and Enlightenment literary celebrities.\footnote{84}

Martinette’s military history raises the issue of gender ideology. During Martinette’s elaboration on her revolutionary activities, Constantia recoils in revulsion when her new friend confesses to have volunteered for a potential suicide mission, reminiscent of Charlotte Corday’s notorious assassination of Marat only a few years earlier. With no visible “symptoms of disgust or horror” Martinette details other bloody scenes in which she participated, including the murder of thirteen officers, two of whom were former lovers who had renounced their allegiance to the Revolution. When Constantia interjects, “But a woman—how can the heart of women be inured to the shedding of blood?” Martinette reminds her that women have the “capacity to reason and infer,” that they, like men, are subject to “the influence of habit.” Caught up in the torrent of revolution, she tells Constantia, she “felt as if imbued by a soul that was a stranger to the sexual distinction.”\footnote{85} Whereas Constantia had initially been attracted to Martinette for her proximity to events of the French Revolution, here she confronts a tendency to romanticize revolution (one apparently shared by her father) without a clear understanding of the toll its violence can take.

Though on one hand Martinette resembles the Amazonian figures who were staples of anti-Jacobin fiction,\footnote{86} she also prefigures Constantia’s own capacity for violence in the novel’s conclusion. Constantia’s self-defense markedly contrasts an earlier experience, when she was attacked by would-be rapists in Philadelphia and was incapable of protecting herself. If anti-Jacobins pointed to violent women as a sign of
the corruption bred by the French Revolution and by Wollstonecraftian feminism alike, Brown vindicates Constantia’s “masculine attainments” and uses her capacity for violent self-defense as an argument against gender essentialism.

Such a vindication of Wollstonecraft may still be perfectly consistent, of course, with the idea that the novel stages an anti-Godwinian critique. Taking this approach, at least one critic reads the novel as a rewriting of Godwin’s Memoirs, with Constantia a surrogate for Wollstonecraft herself, and Ormond a combination of Imlay and Godwin, seducers who appealed to Wollstonecraft’s radicalism and rationalism to get what they wanted sexually. Yet even if evidence existed that Brown had read the Memoirs by the time he wrote Ormond, such an interpretation is difficult to support. Contrary to the almost universal assumption of the novel’s critics, Brown insists that Ormond is neither an Illuminatus nor a Godwinian. Brown does invoke the Illuminati conspiracy scare (again, without naming it), but primarily to set Ormond apart from the sect. While in Berlin, we are told, Ormond encountered a group that closely resembles the Illuminati: “schemers and reasoners who aimed at the new-modelling of the world, and the subversion of all that has hitherto been conceived elementary and fundamental in the constitution of man and of government . . . reformers [who] had secretly united to break down the military and monarchical fabric of German policy.” But he also met others, who “more wisely, had devoted their secret efforts, not to overturn, but to build; that, for this end, they embraced an exploring and colonizing project.” These are the visionaries Ormond joins, which seems a clear indication that readers were to understand him as something other than an Illuminatus.

Though Sophia initially identifies Ormond’s cabal as “wiser” than the Illuminati, she describes it as even more shrouded in secrecy. Sophia suspects that, like successive waves of French revolutionaries, Ormond is implicated in schemes of “pillage and murder” that have been “engrafted on systems of all-embracing and self-oblivious benevolence,” and that “the good of mankind is professed to be pursued with bonds of association and covenants of secrecy.” His society turned against its own ideals, deformed by the requirements of secrecy.

Far from forming an anti-Jacobin critique, this criticism of Ormond’s secret society resembles Godwin’s arguments against political associations in Political Justice, a recognition that unsettles the mistaken assumption that Ormond represents Godwin. This faulty conflation...
depends on Sophia’s use of Godwinian keywords in her description of Ormond’s principles: “sincerity,” “necessity,” his “enthusiast[ic]” “disbelief” in religion, as well as his antimatrimonialism. On a close reading, however, none of these apparent signs of Ormond’s presumed Godwinianism holds up; though he professes that his chief “boast was his sincerity,” Ormond proves duplicitous at every turn, assuming disguises and, like Carwin, “imitating the voices and gestures of others.” Sophia herself makes plain the contrast between his profession of sincerity and his actual tendency toward concealment when she contrasts his appearances with his “actions.” Likewise, in contrast to Godwin’s emphasis on virtue as universal benevolence, Ormond consistently promotes his own self-interest over the happiness of others, and where Godwin is essentially optimistic (his doctrine of necessity, after all, provides the foundation for a theory of inevitable human progress), Ormond’s brand of necessitarianism leads only to nihilism. In contrast to the villains in most anti-Jacobin novels, in which “[e]ach chapter . . . provide[d] a crucible in which the . . . new philosophy could be . . . found not merely wanting, but productive of the most conspicuous evils,” Ormond claims in some places to hold certain Godwinian beliefs but clearly counters these claims with his own actions. Even his arguments against marriage are less principled than they are instrumental in his effort to seduce Constantia.

The topic of antimatrimonialism, in fact, suggests the clearest divergence between Ormond’s opinions and Godwin’s. In Political Justice, in an appendix to his discussion of property, Godwin infamously laid out his arguments against marriage on four specific points: he argued that there was no guarantee that two people’s “inclinations and wishes” would coincide over time (an idea related to Godwin’s principal critique of promises more generally); he saw the notion that one must have a life companion as itself the result of “cowardice, and not of fortitude” or self-determination; he believed that marriages were often contracted before the parties were mature enough to make such a binding decision; and, finally, he viewed marriage as “the most odious of all monopolies,” whereby men dominate women by removing them from the social, sexual, and even conversational markets. (In fact, it is conversation and not sexual intercourse that seems to be Godwin’s chief attraction to women “of accomplishment”; in his ideal state, if several men are attracted to one powerful woman, “[w]e may all enjoy her conversation; and we shall be wise enough to consider the sensual intercourse as a
very trivial object,”94 a litmus test almost all of Brown’s characters, male and female, seem to fail.)

Although Godwin’s revised treatment of marriage attracted the attention of Smith and his colleagues, this aspect of his work was not a point on which they recorded major disagreement, and while Godwin softened his opposition to marriage over time, the gist of his critique remained in later editions. One of Godwin’s chief additions in later editions concerns friendship’s role in marriage, in terms that recall Mrs. Carter’s conclusion to Alcuin, which was composed after Brown had access to the second edition. “Friendship,” Godwin wrote there, “if by friendship we understand that affection for an individual which is measured singly by what we know of his worth, is one of the most exquisite gratifications, perhaps one of the most improving exercises of a rational mind. Friendship therefore may be expected to come to the aid of the sexual intercourse to refine its grossness and increase its delight.”95

There can be little doubt that Brown had Political Justice on hand when he sketched Ormond’s character; as many have pointed out, some phrases are so close as to suggest an “exogenous context.”96 And yet Ormond’s “matrimonial tenets” (which Sophia describes as “harsh and repulsive”) are not Godwin’s at all. “Marriage is absurd,” Ormond believes, because of “the general and incurable imperfection of the female character.” Though he does base some of his opposition on the Godwinian objection to promises, Ormond uses this approach only to justify his abandonment of Helena. Constantia does not cure Ormond’s misogyny; he simply declares a changed opinion to further his seduction efforts. Sophia seems ambiguous on this point: “He was suddenly changed,” she says, “from being one of the calumniators of the female sex, to one of its warmest eulogists.”97 But she emphasizes verbal expressions here rather than actual beliefs; in any case she has already warned that Ormond’s words are worthless.

Constantia’s own views on marriage are more consistently Godwinian, though with crucial amendment. Early in the novel, before Ormond’s introduction, Constantia recognizes the implications of the permanence of marriage “vows of irrevocable affection and obedience.” She elaborates on this reasoning later in the novel, again using the language of Godwin’s critique of promises; vowing to remain faithful in marriage would be to “abdicate the use of her own understanding” in determining when “obedience” was unreasonable or when and where “conjugal privileges” were to be admitted. She objects as well to the
laws of coverture, which will deprive her of “the product of her own labor” as well as her “personal freedom”: “So far from possessing property, she herself would become the property of another.” Although her father’s views on marriage are even more “flexible” than Constantia’s (to him, “the marriage vows were . . . formal and unmeaning”), she does not abandon the institution altogether but resolves to wait for seven years before she will seriously entertain suitors.98

When Ormond, after abandoning Helena, steps up his efforts to seduce Constantia, he does so by appealing to her rational disposition and her intellectual habits. Specifically, he engages her in conversation: “The conversation of Ormond was an inexhaustible fund” that offered “a more plenteous influx of knowledge was produced than could have resulted from any other source.” His conversation is so engaging, apparently, that Constantia forgets his behavior toward Helena. Constantia does not know, however, that Ormond’s conversation is anything but unrestrained, just as his boast of sincerity actually covers his tendency to deceive. Under the pretension of unfolding to her his utopian schemes, he draws her into his confidence; to her, he celebrates sincerity as a virtue, but secretly he lays a plan “suited to the character of this lady”: “He challenged her to confute his principles, and promised a candid audience and profound consideration to her arguments.” He designed not to entertain her views but to undermine them: “She was unaware that, if he were unable to effect a change in her creed, he was determined to adopt a system of imposture—to assume the guise of a convert to her doctrines, and appear as devout as herself in his notions of the sanctity of marriage.”99

Such duplicity could not be more un-Godwinian, a point underscored by Brown’s decision to use Constantia, not Ormond, to voice several of Godwin’s arguments against marriage and promises. Constantia’s respect for marriage rests, significantly, on principles other than religious ones. Sophia chastises her friend on this point and claims that her lack of religious training leaves her “unguarded” against Ormond.100 Constantia’s views on religion are largely unformed. “[H]er habits rather than her opinions were undevout,” Sophia complains, which suggests that she had some form of religious belief but no orthodox behavior. When “called to meditate on this subject, . . . her perceptions were vague and obscure.” She is not an atheist; she simply has not thought much about religion, which was “regarded by her, not with disbelief, but with absolute indifference.” The “modes of study
and reflection” prescribed for her by her father have “unfitted her” for discussion of religious matters. Neither is her father an atheist: “Mr. Dudley was an adherent to what he conceived to be true religion. No man was more passionate in his eulogy of his own form of devotion and belief, or in his invectives against atheistical dogmas.” Rather, he believes that children are too young and impressionable for religious indoctrination. Her father’s training reflects his attitudes toward institutional Christianity, however. Even as he “accustom[s] her to the accuracy of geometrical deduction,” he wants her to recognize “those evils that have flowed, in all ages, from mistaken piety.” Private piety has private consequences, he believes, and should be entered into with mature deliberation and reasoning; “mistaken piety” has material and social consequences that run counter to the happiness of humankind.

One needs only to think of the elder and younger Wielands for evidence. As in Wieland, religion in Ormond more often than not wears a sinister face, though its manifestations and effects are more various here than in the earlier novel. Martinette’s tutelage under Father Bartoli offers a chief example. Religious dangers appear briefly in relation to Sophia as well. Far and away the novel’s most devout character, Sophia reveals that her mother had developed a religious mania following a rapid conversion from a profligate lifestyle to Methodism under the influence of a revivalist. Unable to think on her former crimes, she goes insane. Sophia, however, marches forward under religion’s banner. She not only believes in “divine superintendence,” but is “mindful of the claims upon my gratitude and service which pertain to my God.” She elaborates on her beliefs in the language of religious testimonial: “I know that all physical and moral agents are merely instrumental to the purpose that he wills; but, though the great Author of being and felicity must not be forgotten, it is neither possible nor just to overlook the claims upon our love with which our fellow-beings are invested.”

Sophia outlines her faith in explicit contrast not only to Ormond’s but to Constantia’s principles: Sophia believes that Constantia’s lack of religious indoctrination has made her “a stranger to the felicity and excellence flowing from religion.” Ormond, on the other hand, was an “enthusiast” in his “disbelief”: “The universe was to him a series of events connected by an undesigning and inscrutable necessity, and an assemblage of forms to which no beginning or end can be conceived.” Because Sophia’s voice so fully controls the novel’s narrative, the temptation exists to read her own religious confession as the novel’s moral.
Such a view, however, fails to bring to *Ormond* one of Alcuin’s most useful lessons: that Brown’s philosophical dialogues cannot be disconnected from the question of character. He follows up this implication in *Ormond* with Sophia’s ironic and perhaps disingenuous observation about the novel’s villain: “Ormond was imperfectly known. What knowledge [Constantia] had gained flowed chiefly from his own lips, and was therefore unattended with certainty.” Sophia’s warning can be read as ironic if we apply it as well to her monopolistic role as narrator. Not only does she evade the fact that everything we know about Ormond flows from her pen, she also seems oblivious to the possible countercharge that everything we know about her is “unattended with certainty” for similar reasons. Like Ormond, Sophia is not always consistent with her self-characterization. Her faith, for example, may be more fragile than she makes it seem; when she reviews Constantia’s story at the novel’s climax, she sees more “malignity in her fate” than she does “human agency . . . merely subservient to a divine purpose,” an observation that leads her “into fits of accusation and impiety.” Sophia loses her monopoly on moralizing if we contrast this failure of resolution with Constantia’s behavior in the finale; primed by Martinette’s example of female fortitude, she protects herself by killing her attacker. In the end, Constantia makes good without God; we hear no more religious didacticism from Sophia in the novel’s conclusion, where didactic morals typically find their final expression. Instead the novel leaves us to view her faith as the manifestation of character, the particular seat of her motivation, rather than as the story’s inexorable lesson to be learned.

From this vantage point, the “education of Constantia Dudley” takes the laurels, as Ormond rightly predicts it will. Ormond labors to convince her (this time drawing on terms largely amenable to her Wollstonecraftian feminism) that to be the victim of rape is no crime, and that his intended assault will not affect her “claims to human approbation and divine applause,” nor will it diminish the “testimony of approving conscience.” Ormond hopes this realization will make her a willing victim; when she vows to take her own life rather than lose “a greater good,” he corrects her faulty thinking again:

“Poor Constantia!” replied Ormond, in a tone of contempt; “so thou preferrest thy imaginary honour to life! To escape this injury without a name or substance, without connection with the past or future, with-
out contamination of thy purity or thraldom of thy will, thou wilt kill
thyself; put an end to thy activity in virtue’s cause: rob thy friend of her
solace, the world of thy beneficence, thyself of being and pleasure?"\textsuperscript{107}

Constantia appears to accept this reasoning so far as it extends to the
preference of life as a potential victim of rape over death by suicide to
prevent such a fate. So she kills him in self-defense, though she after-
ward uses the defense that her actions were necessary to prevent “an evil
worse than death.”\textsuperscript{108}

Regarding the novel within contemporary legal and moral dis-
course on the topic of rape, one recent critic has argued that Ormond
“represents the intended rape as a final test” of Constantia’s rational-
ity: “[B]ecause rape does not involve her consent, it cannot cause her
harm.”\textsuperscript{109} Ormond’s reasoning on rape and reputation puts him in line
not only with Clarissa’s Lovelace or Anna St. Ives’s more comedic vil-
lain, Coke Clifton, but also with Mary Wollstonecraft. Consistent with
his character, however, Ormond mouths rational truths for self-serving
and pernicious ends. Constantia resists not his reasoning about reputa-
tion or responsibility but his failure to recognize the difference between
her “purity” and her “will.” By raping her he would not violate her pu-
rity, true. He would, however, fail to recognize that she has a will of her
own and that to violate her will would be criminal.\textsuperscript{110}

The novel’s climax does not place Constantia’s violence on a plane
with Ormond or Martinette, whose violent acts work toward more
questionable ends, so much as it refutes sentimental assumptions about
gender, such as those that earlier led Constantia to ask Martinette,
 “[H]ow can the heart of women be inured to the shedding of blood?”
In doing so, Brown undermines the assumptions on which conservative
moralists felt the need to protect their wives and daughters from Woll-
stonecraft’s ideas (and her fate), to enact a patriarchal retrenchment
in the name of protecting American women from becoming “concu-
bines of the Illuminati.”\textsuperscript{111} Instead, Ormond shares Wollstonecraft’s be-
lief that in order for women to play a full part and to benefit from the
march of intellectual progress they would have to overcome the limita-
tions imposed by a false sense of decorum and by essentialist notions of
gender, whether they posit women as incapable of violence or of intel-
lectual improvement.
Mixed-Sex Friendship and Conversation in the Friendly Club’s Larger Circle

The tension between sincerity and politeness, particularly in mixed-sex settings, was a recurring theme not only in club members’ writings but also in their social circles. As they took up these issues in their Monthly Magazine, in Brown’s novels, and in mixed-sex society, the group’s response to British radicalism and feminism—for some members qualified, but for others surprisingly persistent—remained central to their thought into the first few years of the new century.

The continued attention they gave Mary Wollstonecraft offers the best example of this enduring interest. One response to Wollstonecraft in the group’s Monthly Magazine, and American Review seems especially pertinent given the author’s decision to frame his comments as a mixed-sex parlor conversation, reminiscent in some ways of Alcuin. In September 1800, a regular columnist who wrote as “the Speculatist”—the prose style seems very much like Brown’s—provided an account of a debate among young New Yorkers on Wollstonecraft’s legacy. The account, which the Speculatist attributes to a friend, illustrates the contention that “speech” is “eternally prostituted,” in polite conversation, “to the purposes of falsehood.” In the essay’s conversational scene, a married man who is something of a “gallant” asks a young woman, Lucy, her opinion on Wollstonecraft’s Vindication. Two other young people are present, a young gentleman and a young woman, both of strong intellectual talents. Lucy, “whose powers were by no means adequate to an accurate decision on a question of some importance,” glances around the room to ascertain the group’s expectations. Fearing she will falter, the intellectual young gentleman volunteers for her that though Wollstonecraft may be criticized for style, abruptness, and lack of method, surely Lucy “must be charmed with the intrepid spirit of our authoress in stepping forth the champion of her sexes’ [sic] rights—in combating a thousand prejudices long held sacred—in opposing reason to the force and number of her antagonists, and pointing the way to the luminous regions of truth and science.”112

Lucy parrots this opinion, the implication clear that she is nothing more than a stage actress who has had “her part assigned her.” The married gallant, having set a trap, retorts that “Miss Woolstencraft [sic] has not treated her subject with so much delicacy as is requisite” and that “she talks about things which you ladies are not accustomed
to mention, and calls them by their names without ceremony.” When he asks the more intelligent young woman, Maria, her opinion on “our female philosopher,” Maria balks and in “the name of delicacy” chooses, in the narrator’s view, to “debase the purity of her mind with a falsehood, rather than to incur the terrible opprobrium of indelicacy.” She responds that she has not read Wollstonecraft thoroughly but has read enough to be deterred from finishing, although she ultimately “should never qualify herself to judge correctly of so coarse a performance.” Of the four people involved in the conversation, the Speculatist’s friend asserts, only one told the truth: the young gentleman who assigned Lucy her part and who was clearly disappointed by Maria’s timidity (his eyes had been “fixed upon her with a thrilling expression of tender solicitude; but instantly averted with evident chagrin” at her answer).

The sketch helps to frame the Friendly Club’s complicated, sometimes convoluted, response to the challenge of maintaining sincerity in mixed-sex society. Its moral is clearly that “delicacy” and “gallantry”—gendered sides of the same polite coin—lead to indirection and falsehood. The narrator seems less conscious of the ease with which the young gentleman, the anecdote’s center of moral and intellectual gravity, so easily took it upon himself to tell Lucy what she “must” think, almost as if he were doing her a favor. Two things seem significant about this scenario. First, that the sketch, at such a late date, allows such a spirited defense of Wollstonecraft to stand on the record. And second, that it places its hero—a young and earnest intellectual like club members themselves—in such a pedagogical and judgmental position in relation to his female peers. The sketch reveals a conflicted approach to mixed-sex conversation; on one hand, it continues to idealize truth-telling without consequence and intellectual equality between men and women, while on the other it assumes that in the current state of society, educated young men will preside over women as teachers and judges rather than meet them on equal terms as peers.

As much as civic and intellectual life, for middle-class men in the late-eighteenth-century city, was dominated by fraternal association, mixed-sex social settings like the one represented in the Speculatist’s sketch took up significant amounts of club members’ time, energy, and theoretical consideration. On the latter score, especially as such settings related to understandings of friendship, several approaches seem to have coexisted for club members, some of which were highly influenced by ideas about gender like the ones Brown explored in his
novels. Much of the mixed-sex society these men enjoyed took place in the homes of married members, such as Kent, Dunlap, or the Woolseys, or other married friends and relatives, such as William Johnson’s brothers, erstwhile club members. But before and after Smith’s death, the younger, single members of the club participated in heterosocial friendship circles that encouraged consideration of the possibilities for mixed-sex intellectual association and provided opportunities to put into practice some of the radical doctrines on women’s improvement they found so compelling in their reading of Wollstonecraft and other British Jacobins. The daily interactions of a mixed-sex social and intellectual world—including walks, teas, dinner parties, parlor performances, and group readings of recently published novels and poetry—constitute a complementary intellectual culture to the one represented by club meetings proper; this heterosocial culture, however, as the sketch also suggests, remained one in which boundaries of politeness were sometimes tested but where conversational convention was difficult to breach without consequence.

If Brown’s *Alcuin* suggested one approach to mixed-sex intellectual culture, in which “the sexual distinction” and the erotics of conversation posed an obstacle to unrestrained conversation, other models for heterosocial society coexisted among club members. Like *Alcuin*, Smith’s diary entries on this topic suggest a dichotomy not so much between public and private spheres but between sensuality and delicacy. Unlike *Alcuin*, however, Smith suggests at one point that friendship between men runs the risk of greater sensuality than mixed-sex friendships. In his autobiographical sketch of his childhood to age 11, Smith follows a lamentation on the “debas[ing]” influence of a male schoolmate, who introduced him to masturbation and other “low pursuits of vice,” with a rhapsody to the “[p]recious friendship!” he sustained with a young girl named Hannah Jones, “now a wife, & a mother,” whose friendship, he claims, “subsists to this day.” Smith’s description of this friendship, which resulted from the “fortunate” “mixture of sexes,” in some respects resembles his portraits of male friendships, including a comparison of their friendship to the love between David and Jonathan, though he frames Jones as one in a series of little “mistress[es]” and also refers to their friendship as “amour.” Still, the absence of the “sensuality” that arises in same-sex friendships leads Smith to conclude that mixed-sex “intercourse,” at least at a “tender age,” is more “refined & delicate than [friendship] between two of the same sex.”
In one of Brown’s later literary magazines, William Dunlap put forth a different view. In response to an essay on friendship written by Brown’s future brother-in-law, John Blair Linn, Dunlap declared mixed-sex friendship an oxymoron. “The attachment between persons of the same sex, is called friendship,” Dunlap maintained, “and perhaps can, strictly speaking, be said only to exist in relation to persons of the same sex.” This argument required “[f]riendship between man and woman” to be labeled “love”; following an account of several romantic schoolboy “attachments,” Dunlap declares that on his marriage, “the passion of friendship was swallowed up in the passion of love.”

Dunlap, of course, continued long after his marriage to participate in all-male associations and to offer expressions of friendship to Brown, Smith, and others (though perhaps without the romantic effusion that characterizes some contemporary exchanges). But his autobiographical argument helps to explain Smith’s fears, expressed in his 1795 accounting of the club’s brief history to that point, about the impact of marriage on fraternal association. Writing to one recently married male friend, Smith speculates that the event has “rendered life precious to you, by . . . more endearing sentiments” than those among same-sex friends, but wonders nevertheless about “changes of opinion,” “revolution of ideas,” or other “variation of character” that may also have resulted. “Do you view things, with different eyes[?]” he wonders.

[A]nd tho’ you love your friends as much as ever, love them from different principles? How are pleasures and how science, affected by this change? The flame of Love often outblazes the rays of Ambition; Con-nubial Joy saddens the once-pleasant calls of Friendship; & paternal care extinguishes the lamp of benevolent Investigation.

Smith describes here the limited resources of an economy of emotion implicit in romantic friendship. Placing energies in heterosexual romance, marriage, and parenthood depreciates other “pleasures,” like science, ambition, and friendship itself, thereby jeopardizing friendship’s contributions to “Investigation.” Though he goes on to reassure this correspondent that he assumes the opposite—that his friend’s governing passions have likely been “expanded & ennobled” by his change of situation—Smith remains ambivalent as he seeks reassurance: “Shall I be disappointed? Ay—shall I?”

Young New Yorkers of the Friendly Club’s acquaintance participated in a vibrant heterosocial intellectual culture, and though such so-
ciety contrasted somewhat with the all-male public world of civic associations as well as with the private gender-exclusive enclave of Friendly Club meetings themselves, younger club members at the turn of the century made concerted efforts to flout convention, even if these efforts never resulted in women's admission to the club.120 Two overlapping waves of female friends were particularly important to club members from the mid-1790s until just after the turn of the century. The first gathered in the home of Mrs. Maria Morton, the widow of a Revolutionary-era merchant, whose eligible and intelligent daughters, Susan and Margaret, were favorite female associates of the group until Susan moved to Boston on her marriage to Josiah Quincy. The second, which overlapped with the coterie that had assembled earlier at Mrs. Morton's home, included a trio of young women—Maria Nicholson, Margaret Bayard, and Maria Templeton—almost a decade younger than Smith, Brown, and Johnson, and gathered at Templeton's family home as well as the home of Bayard's married brother. Though their acquaintance with Friendly Club members began prior to Smith's death, and though it would eventually lead, a decade later, to the marriage of William Johnson to Maria Templeton in 1809, this second circle cohered most fully between early 1799 and the fall of 1800, when Margaret Bayard married the Jeffersonian editor Samuel Harrison Smith and the couple relocated to the nation's new capital in the District of Columbia.

Among both sets of mixed-sex friends, and in letters to female friends and family members more generally, a style of intellectual exchange prevailed in which Friendly Club members positioned themselves as interlocutors or teachers of their female associates. Eliza Susan Morton Quincy's later recollection of the advantageous “friendship of Mr. William Johnson and Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith of Connecticut,” who were “distinguished for literature and accomplishments,” described a “course in history” supervised by the former, a point that underscores not only the intellectual nature but the pedagogical character of the relationship these young men established in relation to female acquaintances.121

This pedagogical stance—similar to the relationship the British writer Mary Hays described with a series of male intellectuals, including Godwin, who served as her “monitors”—was a self-conscious effort to compensate for deficiencies in female education. Although such relationships were at times described as designed for mutual improvement, they also seem to have been viewed, especially by the young men,
as a means to create ideal female companions if not future wives. “If we can mutually assist each other, in the acquisition of knowledge & virtue,” Smith wrote to his friend Idea Strong, “we cannot commence [a correspondence] too speedily.” Yet in the same letter Smith strikes a tutelary tone that makes plain the dynamics implicit in such an exchange.

“You are not one of those unthinking girls,” he assures Strong:

[Y]our mind is not of that trifling cast, to be alive only to the rumors of the day, & the flatteries of fools. . . . To some young women the seriousness of this letter, & the importance attributed to epistolary communications, would be sufficient to terrify them from attempting to write again—especially to him who could address them such a letter. With you, or I have dreadfully deceived myself—the case will be different. You will be pleased to turn your time to some account; & to derive instruction from a source whence the mass of letter-writers expect only the gratification of vain & foolish imaginations, or a curiosity equally idle, unproductive, & contemptible. . . . You will, gladly, enter on the pursuit of those inquiries which lead to the discovery of the truths most important to be rightly known & comprehended, by rational beings.122

In spite of the language of mutual assistance, privately Smith characterized this letter as designed “to set her on reflecting—which is as much as I can expect to do.” By providing occasion for reflection, he saw himself as doing more than offering rote instruction; he was facilitating a process that would result in her independence of thought. Nevertheless, he clearly saw himself—at some points even with older women like Susan Tracy, who had literally been his teacher when he was a child—in the position of instructor. In a letter of “counsel” and “instruct[ion]” to his sister Abby on her engagement, Smith suggests that such instruction would make young women into intellectual companions for their husbands. “It is not enough that your society be tolerable to him,” Smith wrote to Abby, “you must labour to induce him to seek it, in preference to all others; or if this be not possible, at least, to make it pleasant to him, when society of a more illustrious character cannot be obtained.”

Women should also make themselves viable consultants on the education of their children. If wives apply themselves “to the cultivation of general literature” while their husbands labor at a profession, he wrote, “[w]ith what pleasure will he throw aside, at proper seasons, the ponderous volumes of the Law, to discuss with you, if you are qualified to take a part in the discussion, the more interesting themes which morals,
policy, history, poesy & criticism, unceasingly offer to the consideration of youthful, virtuous, & glowing minds!"^{123}

Club members’ differing approaches to mixed-sex friendship straddled old and new orders of relations between the sexes. Though Dunlap was only five years older than Brown and three years older than Johnson, his marital status placed him in a different position from his friends when it came to heterosocial affairs. By contrast, the younger, unmarried Friendly Club members appeared to have struck up friendships with unmarried young women that sometimes may have doubled as courtship rituals but at other times seem simply designed for intellectual improvement and emotional fulfillment.\(^{124}\) This description characterizes the mixed-sex circle surrounding Bayard, Templeton, and Nicholson, initiated just prior to Smith’s death.\(^{125}\) Documented primarily in letters from Bayard to her fiancé, Samuel Harrison Smith, who was living in Philadelphia, this circle strove to violate conventions of politeness in its efforts to establish an intellectual environment that ignored sexual distinction. Bayard and her friends formed relationships with Brown, Johnson, the Millers, Mitchill, and a young lawyer named Anthony Bleecker, who according to several accounts joined the Friendly Club following Smith’s death; over time the friendships with Brown, Johnson, and Bleecker solidified most. In spite of explicit aims to defy social convention, these friendships were never free from challenges posed by polite society, especially in the wake of an anti-Jacobin backlash against Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Darwin, and other favorite writers.

Politeness worked both ways in mixed-sex conversation. According to Bayard, when she initially met Elihu Smith in the summer of 1798, the conventions of polite conversation required her participation when she might otherwise have been too shy to speak; the group’s “conversation,” as it progressed, “became more & more pleasing & nothing but the rules of politeness induced me from time to time to address myself to the others . . . & make it general.” But certain conversational styles—displaying too much “warmth,” for example—were deemed unbecoming in women, and some topics were typically placed off limits for women or for men when they were in mixed company.\(^{126}\) According to her characterization of the young men, Brown and Johnson in particular expressed the belief that ideal conversation among the sexes would take place in pairs or small groups rather than in “a large & promiscuous company.”\(^{127}\) Bayard also recognized her male friends’
aim to expand female abilities and found their company to stimulate her desire to learn. “The other afternoon at Dr. Mitchel’s,” she records on one occasion, “I could scarcely comprehend a sentence & lost some fine strokes of wit, because I know nothing about chemistry,” a situation that prompted her resolution to improve in “the acquisition of knowledge.”

The kind of social interactions Bayard and her friends established with Friendly Club members drew disapproving comments from some, who apparently felt that Bayard was slighting her absent fiancé by socializing too intimately with other young men. Bayard informed one “lady, who spoke to me on this subject” that her relationship with male friends was “free from . . . gallantry” and was instead “the intercourse of rational beings,” but the social judgment underscored her observation that “few young persons of different sexes meet frequently to converse on serious & general topics; their intercourse [more typically] consists of an interchange of frivolous & unmeaning compliments.” The type of intellectual conversation this circle cultivated was, in her view, highly extraordinary, even “strange,” Bayard wrote to her fiancé, “& Maria & I talk of it with surprise. Intimacy, frequent intercourse; unreserved communication of ideas, cool, disinterested friendship & the parties [consisting of] young people of different sexes—Ah my dear friend, if you were but one of this circle, how happy should I be.”

At least initially, Bayard resisted some principles held by her new friends, which she characterized as “theories” that were opposed both to real-life experience and to her own Christian principles. On similar grounds she wrote disapprovingly of Mary Hays’s Memoirs of Emma Courtney, and responded enthusiastically to Robison’s Proofs of a Conspiracy, which she saw as rightly countering the “spirit of innovation & inquiry,” reactions that were diametrically opposed to the Friendly Club’s reception of the same works. Drawing on Robison’s language, she categorized Brown, Johnson, Bleecker, and Mitchell as members of the “certain class of men” a book like Proofs of a Conspiracy sought to oppose, those who are “more about, what may be, than about what is.” If she regarded their visionary principles with suspicion, however, their intellectual fervor kept her engaged. “After conversation either with Mr. Brown or Jonson [sic],” she wrote her fiancé, “I find my ideas better arranged, my mind more active & vigorous—Indeed the pleasure[s] of conversation have become so valuable, that I do not feel sufficient interest in the usual intercourse of society.”
Bayard’s sense of distance from social convention appears to have been heightened by her notion that her behavior was transgressive, that it ran against the grain of social fashion. The exhilaration of this feminist self-fashioning extended from intellectual realms to social behavior. Bayard self-consciously followed Mary Wollstonecraft’s example, for instance, in traveling on one occasion without an escort. After taking a stage to Brunswick, unaccompanied by a male companion, Bayard exulted in the sense of liberation afforded by her defiance of convention: “New views open before me, I am no longer content to humbly tread the paths which custom has worn in the road of life; I am for trying my strength to tread new ones; there are many obstacles in my way; the most formidable to me is the censure or ridicule of my own sex, most of whom are fright’d if they do anything not authorized by custom.”

If other women were put off by her behavior, her fiancé was titillated by this “enterprising spirit,” he wrote, noting Wollstonecraft’s infamy for similar breaches of decorum. Indeed, Samuel Smith’s letters constantly admonish her to increase her education and her independence, specifically by maintaining her friendships with the Friendly Club circle.

Though members held different views on the nature of mixed-sex friendship and the possibilities for unrestricted conversation in mixed-sex society, and though the circle that included Bayard appears to have challenged polite conventions on some occasions, some indications exist that the print-based republic of letters, represented in part by the group’s Monthly Magazine, offered them a more immediate and less problematic arena for women’s participation in intellectual culture. When, on one occasion, Bayard read from her commonplace book to this “little circle” of men and women, whose members preferred one another’s company above “any this city could afford,” Brown and Johnson encouraged her to submit “several pieces” to their magazine: “If [her writing] were in print said Mr. B—Why if it were in print, interrupted Mr. J it would be admired and extolled.” Though such praise “made my face glow,” she told Samuel Smith, both she and Maria Templeton agreed to become contributors to the magazine.

Though she had been initially put off by Brown’s habits as a moral observer (and perhaps even more by the threat that what he observed might find its way into print), Bayard eventually came to feel that his probing questions and unorthodox opinions, which she had early on derided as theoretical rather than practical, were ultimately educational and entertaining; his and Johnson’s “conversation,” she wrote, “is vari-
ous & instructive & seems to be an inexhaustible source of pleasure.” Moreover, it led her to cultivate an ideal of mixed-sex friendship that aspired to transcend the “sexual distinction” Brown’s characters had addressed in Alcuin; her ideal, she wrote to Smith, would be the standard to which she would hold him in their marriage.

Defending herself against the disapprobation heaped on her for her intense friendships with these single young men, she wrote one of her most passionate letters to her future husband. “Is it not wonderful,” she exulted, that some people “should suppose, that like most of my sex, I delighted in the society of men, merely because they are men, & because their attentions have been considered as flattering.” Although she admits to avoiding public walks with any one of the men individually, she does not want to consider the possibility that her weekly visits from them also might have to cease. In language that recalls British Jacobin arguments, she considers the effects of “establish[ing] principles, whose tendency is the promotion of individual & general good . . . and inflexible & uniform adherence [to which] would certainly sometimes lead us to act contrary to the established customs of the world.” Rejecting the importance of the world’s opinion, she vaunts her lover’s to the position of greatest importance, fortified by her experience of friendship with Brown, Johnson, and Bleecker but desirous that her relationship with Harrison Smith rise above the sexual distinction. “Forget that I am a woman,” she implores, and even as she worries that the fantasies she describes belong more to “imagination” than to “real life,” she concludes the letter, “You can make me what you please—make me then your friend.”

Bayard’s plea poignantly demonstrates the conflicted terms by which this group sought to create new models of mixed-sex friendship and to further women’s education and improvement. Yet even here she assumes she will occupy a pupil’s position relative to her husband’s as teacher. Undoubtedly Bayard and her “four visitants” (Brown, Johnson, Bleecker, and Templeton) experienced exhilaration as they sought to apply, in a new setting unbounded by sex, the ideals of mutual inquiry and friendship by which the club had been organized. But as Bayard’s letters ultimately bear witness, such experiments could result in the disapproval of polite society and still left unequal power dynamics in place; if the social form of the conversation circle occupies a key place in the professionalization of knowledge production, the experience of this mixed-sex circle suggests that women were being trained, in part,
to make their future husbands’ professional lives and reputations possible.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Bayard’s account is the record she offers of a persistent sympathy for Wollstonecraft and a continued enthusiasm for Godwin, long after popular opinion had turned against these writers. Though some Friendly Club members participated in the backlash against Wollstonecraft that followed the publication of Godwin’s *Memoirs*, many members of this social circle apparently remained sympathetic. Bayard herself, writing in her commonplace book in February 1799, described how moved she was by the “artless manner” of Wollstonecraft’s letters to Imlay, to the point that she almost forgave her violations of the laws of society, in the expectation that her own principles would prove as firm. Ultimately she finds Wollstonecraft’s ideals to have failed, as signaled by her inability to maintain them against the prejudice of society; she faults Wollstonecraft for concealing her relationship with Godwin and continuing to go under the name Imlay, actions that betray a confidence in the principle of sincerity and a false fear of society’s opinion. Wollstonecraft lacked “strength of judgment,” Bayard concludes. “Her imagination uncontrol’d by this principle form’d theories which it adorn’d in the most seducing actions,” and her subsequent actions were such that Bayard can “love & pity Mary Wollstonecraft” but she “can not respect her.”

If the club’s extended mixed-sex circle showed some sympathy for Wollstonecraft and continued to admire her principles, if disapproving of her behavior, Brown’s personal reaction to Wollstonecraft’s decline appears to have been somewhat mixed. At least as he presented himself in conversation with Bayard, Brown seems to have retreated from his earlier positions on the topic of women’s intellectual development, even as he encouraged her to write for his magazine and maintained his long-standing admiration of Godwin’s moral philosophy. According to Bayard, she and Brown agreed that, in the present state of society, “scientific pursuits” were “useless” for women, and hence would be a waste of their time. Only a month later, during a conversation on “morality,” Brown told Bayard that “the Godwinian was the most perfect” system he knew. “But said he, were I to marry, I should wish for my wife to be a Christian, with this system engrafted on her. For religion would afford that sanction & authority which would enforce obedience, & those motives which encourage to perseverance.” While his wife’s “obedience would be to the command [of] her God,” his
would be “to that of my reason[,] her motives, the approbation [of] her creator, & the reward of eternal happiness, mine the approbation of men, & the pleasure arising from the discharge of duty.” Such a sentiment represents a significant concession on the subjects of gender and religion at the same time he offers a surprisingly persistent endorsement of Godwin’s morality.\(^{143}\)

The previous summer Brown had published *Edgar Huntly*, his fourth novel, and the final one he would write in the gothic mode. In the section of the novel that includes the ghostly reminder of Huntly’s failure to publish Waldegrave’s heretical memoirs, Brown presented a gendered situation that prefigures these comments to Bayard. When Huntly refuses to turn over Waldegrave’s letters to his dead friend’s sister, he justifies the act by arguing that she is not adequately prepared to entertain the ideas the letters contain. The concern is explicitly gendered and rooted, as *Ormond* had been, in discussions of religion and education. “Thou, like others of thy sex,” Huntly writes to Mary, “art unaccustomed to metaphysical refinements. Thy religion is the growth of sensibility and not of argument.” Huntly refuses to make Waldegrave the “author” of his sister’s fall.\(^{144}\) Brown frames this exchange in such a way that the object of critique—is the problem Mary’s education or Waldegrave’s doctrine?—remains ill defined. By contrast, Elihu Smith, whose situation this scene echoes, had shown no similar concern for his sisters’ faith; as he had with friends like Mrs. Tracy and Idea Strong, he hoped to wean them away from Christianity, though the process was gradual and he was only reluctantly open about the extent of his own departure from Christianity. But the scenario in *Edgar Huntly* recalls more than the dilemma of Elihu Smith’s unpublished diary and other textual remains; it also recalls the failure of Godwin’s *Memoirs*, his attempt at biographical truth-telling gone utterly wrong. Such was the ultimate fate of British Jacobinism in America. Mary Waldegrave’s very name echoes Wollstonecraft’s death; her character marks the grave, perhaps, of an unqualified enthusiasm for Wollstonecraftian feminism and for the possibility of radically reforming hetero-social society at the turn of the century.
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