THE POLITICS OF EXCESS: RELIGION, GENDER, AND RACE
IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN

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INTRODUCTION

While Charles Brockden Brown’s four major gothic novels, Wieland (1798), Ormond (1799), Edgar Huntly (1799), and Arthur Mervyn (Part I, 1799; Part II 1800), vary in a number of respects, all four are structured similarly. In each, Brown establishes a schema of extremes. His framework functions by opposing excesses of freedom with excesses of control. Wieland, for example, contrasts the court’s constraint of one’s religious freedoms with the extremes to which the individual may carry his or her religious beliefs. Ormond situates weak, ultra-feminine characters in opposition to strong, ultra-masculine characters. Only those persons who occupy a medium between the two extremes find success. Edgar Huntly and Arthur Mervyn extend the schema from character behaviors to race, embodying those extremes in Indians and blacks. Indians signify the uncontrolled and violent nature of mankind while black slaves represent the oppression of slavery and its ensuing threat of insurrection.

Ultimately, Brown’s schema alludes to the political factionalism facing early America. The new government needed to provide the fair and equal representation and personal liberties that the British Empire failed to offer. But to allow complete freedom (without the oversight of government) risked that Americans might become like the unregulated Indian “savages” who prowled the wilderness. To dramatize this potential for abuse of freedom, Brown describes the savage and violent behaviors of those characters who occupy the far left end of his spectrum. The most obvious interpretation of this structure suggests Brown intends to critique—and warn against—the Republican
Party. To be sure, Brown does fear extreme abuses of liberty. However, he also fears that too much governmental control—of the sort desired by the Federalist Party—will create a nation of servants very much like blacks slaves.

To fully grasp the political implications of Brown’s schema, one must first understand the ideologies of the Republican and Federalist parties. In fact, the first party system “did not arise from the controversy over ratifying the Constitution” but rather “out of divisions in the ranks of those men who had led the struggles to secure adoption” (Buel 1). The founding fathers actually “held party politics in abhorrence” and hoped the Constitution would correct such political factionalism (Buel 2). However, subsequent conflict over presidential contests and Alexander Hamilton’s fiscal policies did eventually produce a two-party (Republican and Federalist) system: “they thought the enlarged dimensions of the national government would bring about [the end of party politics] by making it hard for a majority to coalesce except in the national interest” (Buel 3). Of the respective parties, the Republicans placed their faith in the common man, believing “the measure of government should fit the expectations of the governed” while the Federalists believed “that the social order was artificial, that contrivance was necessary to its preservation, and that the decisions of an elite must never take second place to the prejudice of the people” (Buel 92). The split also bred dissension over possible foreign alliances. The Republicans favored ties with France, based on their similar egalitarian ideologies, while the Federalists insisted an alliance with Great Britain would stimulate America’s lagging economy.
Although Brown’s novel continually alludes to politics, most critics have difficulty classifying the author’s personal beliefs. Mary Chapman notes:

Scholars interested in Brown’s relationship to competing visions of liberal democracy current in the infant republic have found his fiction ambiguous. Do his works support Jeffersonian idealism, characterized by a belief in humanity’s innate integrity and perfectibility, an agrarian vision of America, a desire for minimal governmental interference, and support for French revolutionary principles? Or do they advocate Federalist restraint, characterized by pessimism about human nature, a belief in the need for governmental regulation to preserve law and order, and a fear of French democracy’s extremes and the dissolution of organized religion? (Chapman 15)

For my own part, I believe Brown is less ambivalent than he is moderate. As I will show, the author’s novels do not indicate a fear of freedom or control but rather a fear of too much of either. In the end, extreme freedom and extreme control both threaten the liberties of the American people. If an excess of freedom is given to the populace, they can wield that power violently against the minority. If too much control is given to the government, it can stifle the will and independence of the people. Ultimately, in their extreme forms, freedom and control become one in the same by working against democracy and exploiting, rather than serving, the America people. In Brown’s estimation, moderation protects against such abuse.
CHAPTER I: WIELAND

In Wieland, Brown questions the lengths to which an individual may pursue his religious beliefs. Although the Constitution provides for religious freedoms, just how one interprets that liberty is, finally, left to the discretion of the courts, not the individual. In the novel, we see, to various degrees, the lengths one may carry his or her religion. The elder Wielands each pursue a particular individual brand of religion. While their practices occasionally border on the eccentric, their beliefs never endanger the liberties of another citizen. Wieland, Jr., however, pushes his religious belief to the extreme—ultimately culminating in the murder of his wife and children. At this point, the courts must step in to determine whether the law actually protects Wieland’s faith. Although an extreme example, the story does mirror the dilemma facing the framers of American government: should democratic freedom have limits, and if so, how do we define those boundaries? The question was especially pertinent considering the litany of new religious beliefs just beginning to sweep the nation. By opposing Wieland’s savage abuse of freedom with the court’s decision to limit the character’s religious liberty, Brown dramatizes the debate between freedom and restraint—between Republican and Federalist political ideologies.

Wieland opens with the story of Theodore Wieland, Senior. An intense man, Wieland develops a fascination with religion, and in particular, a religious text “by one of the teachers of the Albigenses, or French Protestants” (Brown 10). During its Albingenses Crusade, the Catholic Church brutally subdued this southern French
separatist sect (also known as the Cathars). While the Catholic Church strenuously objected to the Albigensian Church’s gnostic tenets, it was not the Cathar’s beliefs, but their murder of a papal legate which sparked the Crusade. However, the Albigensian text is especially convincing to Wieland, who falls into a state of utter religious devotion. He emigrates from Germany to Philadelphia with the hope of becoming a missionary to the Indians. But when the Indians’ savage customs shake his resolution, he retires to a small farm with his wife. There he divides his time between family (two children, Wieland, Jr. and Clara are born) and God. Wieland maintains a rigorous schedule of study and prayer and also constructs a temple for his personal use:

At the distance of three hundred yards from his house, on the top of a rock whose sides were steep, rugged, and encumbered with dwarf cedars and stony asperities, he built what to a common eye would have seemed a summer house. […] The edifice was slight and airy. It was no more than a circular area, twelve feet in diameter, whose flooring was the rock, cleared of moss and shrubs, and exactly leveled, edged by twelve Tuscan columns, and covered by an undulating dome. […] It was without seat, table, or ornament of any kind. (Brown 13)

Wieland maintains such a rigorous schedule of prayer that he rises twice during the night to pray in his temple. “Nothing but physical inability to move was allowed to obstruct or postpone this visit” (Brown 13).

On one such night, after spending a particularly stressful day in the city,
Wieland goes to his temple. There, he explodes in a burst of flames. He suffers burns and bruises and slips into a fever. During his hallucinations he reveals bits of information (the only explanation his children will ever receive) as to the cause of his spontaneous combustion:

By his imperfect account, it appeared that while engaged in silent orisons, with thoughts full of confusion and anxiety, a faint gleam suddenly shot athwart the apartment. His fancy immediately pictured to itself, a person bearing a lamp. It seemed to come from behind. He was in the act of turning to examine the visitant, when his right arm received a blow from a heavy club. At the same instant, a very bright spark was seen to light upon his clothes. In a moment, the whole was reduced to ashes. (Brown 19)

Wieland dies a short time after relating his version of events. His killer, whether God, man, or a phantasm of the mind, will always remain unknown.

The novel’s dark, gothic opening demonstrates religion’s hold on the American psyche. Faith not only influences the daily rituals of the novel’s characters but also informs how they interpret otherwise unexplainable phenomena. Wieland, Sr. and his wife, for example, represent the American penchant—and perhaps even inclination—to worship what and how they please. Wieland draws spiritual inspiration from his Albigensian text. But even so, we must remember that he does not learn of his religion from others or from its established church. Rather, he relies on his own limited
interpretation of the text. His beliefs and practices are very much of his own styling. Even within a single family, religious tastes are divided. Mrs. Wieland follows the religion of the Zinzendorf Moravians. Clara writes:

The character of my mother was no less devout [than father]; but her education had habituated her to a different mode of worship. The loneliness of their dwelling prevented her from joining an established congregation; but she was punctual in the offices of prayer, and in the performance of hymns to her Saviour, after the manner of the disciples of Zinzendorf. My father refused to interfere in her arrangement. His own system was embraced not, accurately speaking, because it was the best, but because it had been expressly prescribed to him. (Brown 13-14)

The passage not only reveals the presence of several individualized faiths within the same household but also the idea that God “expressly [prescribes]” certain beliefs to certain individuals. In addition, the wilderness solitude compounds the incidence of individual religious interpretations by forcing man and wife to exercise otherwise communalistic religions in isolation. Marshall N. Surratt describes the origin of Mrs. Wieland’s Zinzendorf Moravian faith, noting that, “the Moravians stressed pietism and, at least in the early years, were semicommunalistic. Several communities on the Hernhut model were established in eastern Pennsylvania during the 1740s and 1750s” (Surratt 319-320). Ironically, Mrs. Wieland twists this “semi-communalistic” religion into a private faith. One must wonder, then, whether she can truly describe herself as a
Zinzendorf Moravian. She and her husband’s story both articulate the difficulties settlers faced in practicing their religions. Alone in the woods, rural early Americans were literally forced to worship God in radically individualized ways. The seclusion of country life perhaps helps explain why eighteenth century America, a largely rural society, bred so many new forms of religion.

By the time of the Second Great Awakening, a period from 1800-1830, Americans would see the beginnings of dozens of new religions and Christian denominations, including the Latter Day Saints, the Disciples of Christ, the Cumberland Presbyterians, and the Seventh-day Adventists. In a very subtle way, Wieland indicates the seeds of these religious movements to come. Jon Butler writes:

*Wieland* tapped an extraordinary range of religious interests already evident in the twilight of the Federalist period. It articulated a fascination with divine interventionism in dreams, visions and ghosts than increased in the next decades. It uncannily stressed the explosive religious proclivities evident in bourgeois families. It pointed toward broad middle-class interest in supernatural phenomena and in Swedenborgianism, Freemasonry, Mesmerism, and spiritualism. Ultimately, it pointed to a dramatic American religious syncretism that wedded popular supernaturalism with Christianity and found expression in antebellum Methodism, Mormonism, Afro-American Christianity, and spiritualism. (Butler 226).
It is clear that Americans were beginning to pursue more individual styles of worship. The more traditional churches of the older civilized world, including the Church of England and the Catholic Church, lost believers to newer and less ritualized religious systems. Beginning in 1787 with the creation of the Constitution (and quite uncoincidentally the year in which Brown sets his novel), Americans were finally able to enjoy at least a bit of latitude in the pursuit of their faiths. And quite naturally, with the blessing of the Constitution, Americans began to experiment with faith; opening the way for belief in ghosts, visions, dreams, supernatural philosophies like Swedenborgianism and Mesmerism, and sometimes entirely new religions, as with the Mormons. Whatever the tenets of the faith or inclinations of the believer, one thing is certain: Americans would not be bound by old-world convention. The spiritual climate just beginning to surface in Wieland reflects an American quest for individualism. Given the events of the novel, we may interpret that individualism as a form of savagery in which the civilized institutions and rituals of the old world are refused in favor of a diverse and still uncultivated American conception of religion. Wieland’s son, Wieland, Jr., carries his beliefs to such an extreme that self-styled spirituality becomes an abuse of religious freedom.

Having been witness to their father’s death, we can only surmise that the Wieland children, Clara and Wieland, Jr., are left psychologically damaged. Clara, the narrator of the book, does not relate her or her brother’s emotional state, but some years later, Wieland, Jr. begins to mirror his father’s fanatical behavior. Much like the elder,
Wieland is “grave, considerate, and thoughtful” whilst an obsessive studier (Brown 23). But whereas Wieland, Sr. devoted himself solely to religious meditation, Wieland, Jr. becomes obsessed with oratory, especially with the figure of Cicero. In fact, Wieland, Jr. never tires of “conning and rehearsing [Cicero’s] productions” and even engages in debates of Roman eloquence and rhetoric with his brother-in-law, Henry Pleyel (Brown 25). Like his father, Wieland’s obsession dominates the use to which the temple is put. Wieland places a bust of Cicero in the temple, which is now transformed from sacred center to leisure space. Clara writes:

This was the place of resort in the evenings of summer. Here we sung, and talked, and read, and occasionally banqueted. Every joyous and tender scene most dear to my memory, is connected with this edifice. Here the performances of our musical and poetical ancestors were rehearsed. Here my brother’s children received the rudiments of their education; here a thousand conversations, pregnant with delight and improvement, took place; and here the social affectations were accustomed to expand, and the tear of delicious sympathy to be shed. (Brown 24-25)

Ironically, the scene of their father’s spontaneous combustion holds little horror for the Wieland children. They sing and banquet in total denial of the temple’s terrible history. What’s more (and with little compunction), they transform the site from a center of sacred isolation to a place of communal play. However, the idyllic “conversations” and
“evenings of summer” do not last forever. Wieland’s fascinations with “the divinity of Cicero” soon betray a dangerous fixation (Brown 26). It seems that, as so often is the case in the Gothic genre, the sins of the father find a home in the son.

Fuelled by the divinity of rhetoric, Wieland brutally murders his wife and children upon hearing a strange voice. In his article, “Voice, Identity, and Radical Democracy in Wieland,” Eric Wolfe argues that it is actually Wieland’s obsession with “conning and rehearsing” the oratorical voice that predisposes him to respond blindly to the disembodied commands of Carwin. But that Wieland would mistake Carwin for the voice of God seems strange. Religion, in the traditional Christian sense, is rarely mentioned in context with Wieland before the murders. Clara does not describe her brother praying, attending church, or reading the Bible. Only after the crimes do we learn of Wieland’s longing for direct communication with God. He states: “It is needless to say that God is the object of my supreme passion. I have cherished, in his presence, a single and upright heart. I have thirsted for the knowledge of his will. I have burnt with ardour to approve my faith and my obedience” (Brown 158). Perhaps Wieland’s obsession with Cicero merely masked his unconscious psychological desire to hear a voice of authority. In this way, Cicero comes to represent God. Eric Wolfe extends this idea, suggesting that just as understanding “the language of Cicero’s orations” and finding its “proper bodily figurations” allows Wieland “to become one with the text, or more precisely, to become one with himself,” so hearing and acting out the commands of God (or who he believes to be God) allows Wieland to become one
with the divine and one with the divine within himself (Wolfe 441). Wieland declares: “O! that I might be admitted to thy presence; that mine were the supreme delight of knowing thy will, and of performing it! The blissful privilege of direct communication with thee, and of listening to the audible enunciation of thy pleasure!” (Brown 159). His murder of his wife and children (an act Wieland considers a sacrifice), elevates him to a spiritual ecstasy which other, less damaged, Americans might achieve through prayer, the singing of hymns, or confession.

While both Wieland, Sr. and Wieland, Jr.’s stories concern the theme of religious individuality, only Wieland, Jr. allows himself to become such a slave to his beliefs that a “booming voice” compels him to act without hesitation and without reason. He deduces that by killing his family he enacts God’s will, which in his mind, represents the highest law, superseding even American criminal statutes. His position is somewhat persuasive considering the American Constitution’s provision that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (U.S. Constitution). But does this provision provide for the violent practice of one’s religion? Brown underscores this paradox by portraying a remorseless Wieland. In the character’s view, he has done little more than exercise his religious beliefs, above which there can be no authority. During his court defense, Wieland states:

“If my judges are unable to discern the purity of my intentions, or to credit the statement of them, which I have just made; if they see not that my deed was
enjoined by heaven; the obedience was the test of perfect virtue, and the extinction of selfishness and error, they must pronounce me a murderer.

“They refuse to credit my tale; they impute my acts to the influence of dæmons; they account me an example of the highest wickedness of which human nature is capable; they doom me to death and infamy. Have I power to escape this evil? If I have, be sure I will exert it. I will not accept evil at their hand, when I am entitled to good; I will suffer only when I cannot elude my suffering.

You say that I am guilty. Impious and rash! Thus to usurp the prerogatives of your Maker! To set up your bounded views and halting reason, as the measure of truth!

Thou, Omnipotent and holy! Thou knowest that my actions were conformable to thy will. I know not what is crime; what actions are evil in their ultimate and comprehensive tendency or what are good. Thy knowledge, as thy power, is unlimited. I have taken thee for my guide and cannot err. To the arms of thy protection, I entrust my safety. In the awards of thy justice, I confide for my recompense.

“Come death when it will, I am safe. Let calumny and abhorrence pursue me among men; I shall not be defrauded of my dues. The peace or virtue, and the glory of obedience, will be my portion hereafter.” (Brown 169-170).

In this defense, Wieland reveals his belief that the American courts cannot hold him
accountable for actions, he believes, God ordered. God’s edict supersedes man’s law. Who are the courts to judge Wieland’s murders when the Constitution provides for his religious freedom? The judges “usurp the prerogatives” of God. And in Wieland’s rationalization, whatever the penalty on Earth for his crimes, only God can truly punish him in the afterlife. Luckily for Wieland, heaven has “enjoined” his deed.

In the end, the courts rule against Wieland and place him in jail. Later, he escapes, attempts to kill Pleyel and his sister Clara, and, finally, upon hearing the voice of Carwin once again, kills himself. While Wieland is certainly mad if he can rationalize the slaughter of friend, family, and self, through his lunacy, we see the possible effects of unchecked religion, or on a broader level, unregulated freedoms. In most cases, insular religious interpretations can do no harm. Wieland, Sr. certainly does not turn into a savage killer because of his Albigensian beliefs. His death does scar his family, but we can attribute his spontaneous combustion to little more than mystical forces. But when Brown maps that same type of religious fervor onto the son, a man with a psychologically marked past, who falls victim to the abuses of the malicious Carwin, we witness a savage outcome. And by drawing Wieland’s tale from the real life accounts of James Yates and William Beadle, two fathers, who fueled by religious fervor, murdered their own families, we see effects of excessive freedom—even if those cases are exceptions to the rule.

By contrasting the court’s mandate of control with Wieland’s savage abuse of liberty, Brown invokes the conflict between Federalist and Republican political
ideologies. Federalists feared that if given too much freedom, Americans would devolve into the sort of violent fanatics that Wieland, Jr. becomes. Republicans worried that without enough liberty (and protection from the caprice of a powerful central government), the common man cannot truly experience “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Declaration of Independence). In Brown’s novel, both the court and Wieland offer cogent arguments for their actions. The courts, with their connection to the federal government and ability to enforce the actions of American citizens, obviously echo a Federalist ideology. Wieland’s individualism and claim that his religious freedoms are paramount positions him at the extreme end of a Republican philosophy. Further evidence of Wieland’s Republican association emerges through the character’s love of Cicero. During the dictatorship of Julius Caesar, Cicero became one of the main proponents of a return to traditional republican government. He favored rule by consensus and envisioned allowing the Senate, rather than a dictator or emperor, to govern Rome. Although Cicero did not participate in Julius Caesar’s assassination, he was widely rumored to have sympathized with the Liberatores. For these reasons, Republicans adopted the orator as a shining symbol of popular rule.

While Brown places the court and Wieland at opposite ends of the political spectrum, there can be little doubt that the author intends to condemn Wieland’s “Republican” abuse of freedom (not the courts who uphold justice). In fact, many scholars view Wieland as a critique of unrestricted and insular religious practices. Jon Butler acknowledges Brown’s “condemnation of individual religious enthusiasm” while
Daniel Williams and Eric Wolfe broaden that condemnation to include the radical democracy which empowers extreme religious freedom (Butler 226). Williams writes, Brown’s “story warns readers, citizens of an experimental democracy, not only to question voices of authority commanding blind obedience but also the human capacity to interpret the words of such voices” (Williams 666). Williams’s reading broaches a paradox central to Brown’s characters and the development of the American government: if freedom has restraints is it still freedom? America allows Wieland to pursue his “experimental” religion and yet his flawed “capacity to interpret the words” of his faith lead to dangerous obsession.

In the end, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact target of Brown’s condemnations. On the one hand, the novel certainly condemns the religious mania which initiates the slaughter of innocents. A political philosophy—or more specifically—a Republican philosophy that empowers complete religious freedom is dangerous. On the other hand, Wieland’s blind obedience to voices of authority (whether God or Carwin) lead him to commit murder. Thus, the character is both a savage and a slave. Without the freedom to question authoritarianism—or more specifically—the centralized power of a Federalist government—Americans are liable to follow any command, even to their doom. Even as Wieland, Jr. and Sr. pursue their individual religious beliefs, they seem to crave an authoritarian voice to submit themselves to. Ironically, the freedom to act as they wish enslaves them to a force beyond the people’s control. Brown’s novel shows not only the dangers of extremes in Republican and Federalist ideology but also the
hazards of mixed political ideals. Surely Brown does not object to freedom or order; rather, he fears too much of either. Ultimately, Wieland wrestles with the paradox confronting all Americans, especially those tasked with drawing up the U.S. Constitution: should freedom have limits. In the face of burgeoning religious diversity, in which the seeds of a vast number of new beliefs, theologies, practices, sects, and even religions were being planted without any knowledge as to their long term effects, caution is certainly a wise course of action. But without rebellion against voices of authority and established institutions (“civilizing” forces like the church) there can be no innovation and thus no “America.”
CHAPTER II: ORMOND

We see in Wieland Brown’s disinclination to support fully either Republicanism or Federalism. It seems that too much of anything—whether it be freedom or control—is bad. The solution for the framers of the Constitution was one of moderation. Freedom was provided for but only in the sense that it could be regulated. As such, individuals cannot exercise their freedoms with savage behavior, just as the government cannot make slaves of its citizens. Brown also structures Ormond along the spectrum of control and freedom. But rather than articulate this structure in terms of law and religion (as in Wieland), Brown plays the extremes out in terms of gender. In many gothic novels, women are the victims of male aggression. In Wieland, for example, Theodore Wieland, Jr., strangles his wife and twice nearly murders his sister, Clara. While Clara does lives to narrate her story, she does not succeed in freeing herself from male antagonism. Clara must endure Carwin’s voyeurism and manipulations (it is he, after all, who unleashes Wieland’s savagery) and Pleyel’s rejection. In Brown’s second novel, however, women are no longer merely helpless victims. Two of Ormond’s main characters, Constantia Dudley and Martinette de Beauvais, exhibit many of the savage behaviors usually attributed to males. Brown triangulates this schema by opposing the female characters, Helena Cleves, Martinette de Beauvais, and Constantia Dudley against each other.

Helena Cleves is an archetypal gothic female. She is soft, feminine, and ultimately doomed to the machinations of a powerful male figure:
[She] was endowed with every feminine and fascinating quality. Her features were modified by the most transient sentiments, and were the seat of softness at all times blushful and bewitching. All those graces of symmetry, smoothness, and luster, which assemble in the imagination of the painter when he calls from the bosom of her natal deep the Paphian divinity, blended their perfections in the shade, complexion, and hair of this lady. He voice was naturally thrilling and melodious, and her utterance clear and distinct. A musical education had added to all these advantages the improvement of art, and no one could swim in the dance with such airy and transporting elegance. (Brown 132)

Helena’s beauty, elegance, and femininity represent qualities a man might hope for in a wife. Ormond, however, prefers to exploit her “symmetry, smoothness, and luster” for his own desires. He takes Helena as his lover and then refuses to marry her. Although perfect in her “feminine and fascinating quality,” she has neither the strength of mind or body to free herself from Ormond’s firm grasp. “To say that Helena Cleves was silly or ignorant would be hatefully unjust. Her understanding bore no disadvantageous comparison with that of the majority of her sex; but, when placed in competition with that of some eminent females or of Ormond, it was exposed to the risk of contempt” (Brown 133). In the end, her inability to muster stereotypically masculine traits such as intelligence and strength result in her suicide. When the strain of her unfulfilled engagement becomes too much to bear, Helena poisons herself with sleeping pills.
Martinette de Beauvais is the antithesis of Helena Cleves. The two women exist on opposite ends of the gender spectrum. Whereas Helena is feminine, soft, and passive, Martinette is masculine, strong, and fearless. We first meet with the mysterious Martinette when Constantia, the main character, visits a neighbor. Constantia quickly becomes fascinated by the woman’s “large experience, vigorous faculties, and masculine attainments (Brown 191). Martinette has even fought as a soldier. Her remarkable exploits as a warrior began when she followed her dearly loved husband onto the battlefield. Martinette describes her past to Constantia:

“My soul was engrossed by two passions, - a wild spirit of adventure, and a boundless devotion to [my husband Wentworth]. I vowed to accompany him in every danger, to vie with him in military ardour, to combat and to die by his side.

“I delighted to assume the male dress, to acquire skill at the sword, and dexterity in every boisterous exercise. The timidity that commonly attends women gradually vanished. I felt as if imbued by a soul that was a stranger to the sexual distinction. We embarked at Brest, in a frigate destined for St. Domingo. A desperate conflict with an English ship in the Bay of Biscay was my first introduction to a scene of tumult and danger of whose true nature I had formed no previous conception. At first I was spiritless and full of dismay. Experience, however, gradually reconciled me to the life I had chosen.
“A fortunate shot, by dismasting the enemy, allowed us to prosecute our voyage unmolested. At Cap François we found a ship which transported us, after various perils, to Richmond, in Virginia. I will not carry you through the adventures of four years. You, sitting all your life in peaceful corners, can scarcely imagine that variety of hardship and turmoil which attends the female who lives in a camp.

“Few would sustain these hardships with better grace than I did. I could seldom be prevailed upon to remain at distance, and inactive, when my husband was in battle, and more than once rescued him from death by the seasonable destruction of his adversary.

“At the repulse of the Americans at Germantown, Wentworth was wounded and taken prisoner. I obtained permission to attend his sick-bed and supply that care without which he would assuredly have died. Being imperfectly recovered, he was sent to England and subjected to a rigorous imprisonment. Milder treatment might have permitted his complete restoration to health; but, as it was, he died. (Brown 201-202).

Martinette’s story is a tale of gender paradox. Her twin passions, for example, are contradictory. On the one hand, she lusts for the very unladylike “adventure,” and on the other, she desires to devote herself fully to her husband. In the conventional sense, devotion to husband would entail the establishment of a home, care of the household, and production of children. Only with the fulfillment of these wifely duties would
society understand Martinette as a devoted wife. The domestic life is obviously incompatible with a desire for journey and war. Not only does Martinette deliberately “assume the male dress,” but she delights in it and the swordplay and physical exertions which accompany it. Martinette even suggests one’s gender behaviors are changeable (an unheard of and revolutionary notion for her time). “The timidity that commonly attends women gradually vanished. I felt as if imbued by a soul that was a stranger to the sexual distinction” (Brown 201). Martinette embraces and excels at her newfound masculine qualities—with savage consequences. On one occasion, she rescues her husband and kills his adversaries. Her skills as a warrior seem superior to those of her male counterparts. Speaking to Constantia, Martinette even boasts with male-like arrogance, “You, sitting all your life in peaceful corners, can scarcely imagine that variety of hardship and turmoil which attends the female who lives in a camp. Few would sustain these hardships with better grace than I did. I could seldom be prevailed upon to remain at a distance, and inactive, when my husband was in battle” (Brown 202). In a final affirmation of her masculine character, Martinette, even in war—an experience supposedly beyond female competency—outlives her husband.

Martinette’s adventures are not just the stuff of a loving wife fighting for her husband. Her stories also betray a savage core. Unlike Constantia who cringes at the mention of spilled blood, Martinette’s wartime experience dulls her sensitivities:

What are bleeding wounds and mangled corpses, when accustomed to the daily sight of them for years? Am I not a lover of liberty? And must I
not exult in the fall of tyrants, and regret only that my hand had no share in their destruction? […] Have women, I beseech thee, no capacity to reason and infer? Are they less open then men to the influence of habit? My hand never faltered when liberty demanded the victim. If thou wert with me at Paris, I could show thee a fusil of two barrels, which is precious beyond any other relic, merely because it enabled me to kill thirteen officers at Jemappes. Two of these were emigrant nobles, whom I knew and loved before the Revolution, but the cause they had since espoused cancelled their claims to mercy” (Brown 205-206).

In terms of her independence of mind and competency as a soldier, Martinette is easily an equal (if not superior to) her male counterparts. Brown, in fact, may intend to present Martinette as a figure of gender equality. Opposing Martinette with Helena certainly emphasizes the disparity between the oppressed and the empowered woman. Whereas Helena Cleves is beholden to and ultimately destroyed by male power, Martinette wields her masculine qualities to overcome and destroy men. However, the gap between Helena and Martinette also emphasizes the dangers of extreme equality.

Even though Brown’s feminist publications might suggest his advocation of total gender equality, scholars remain divided as to Martinette’s role. Mary Chapman contends that Brown’s version of gender equality “produces a bayonet-wielding ‘lady who sheds no tears’” (Chapman 14). Paul Lewis argues that “Martinette, for all her deviation from gender norms, serves neither as monster nor villain but as role model”
Kristin Comment sees Martinette as a negative example of equality: “Martinette becomes a symbol not just of ‘male-identified’ nonsympathy, but also of a perverted womanhood, signified most graphically by her brutality in battle. Her features become ‘pregnant with delight’ as she details her violent military exploits, including the murder of ‘thirteen officers at Jemappes’ […], the term ‘pregnant’ calling attention to Martinette as a woman who takes life rather than gives it” (Comment 1). This critical division reinforces the discrepancies of Brown’s feminist writings. Chapman writes:

Feminist critics, for example, either claim Brown as America’s earliest feminist or reject him for being patriarchal and condescending. Some have called Brown’s earliest major published work, Alcuin: A Dialogue on the Rights of Women Part One (1798), the first extended argument for the rights of women to appear in the United States because it features a bluestocking widow, Mrs. Carter, who attempts to convince a priggish schoolmaster Alcuin to sympathize with proto-feminist demands for more lenient divorce laws, as well as women’s rights to own property, pursue professions, and educate themselves. However, the second part of Alcuin (not published until after Brown’s death), which depicts Alcuin suddenly extending Mrs. Carter’s arguments to advocate free love and the dissolution of marriage as an institution, has suggested to other scholars that Brown is actually ridiculing the radical feminist platform of Mary Wollstonecraft and tainting all eighteenth-century feminist
positions by association. (Chapman 15)

Certain scholars believe that if the final section of *Alcuin* seems to ridicule radical feminist thought then so must all of Brown’s other feminist writings. I disagree with this argument. I believe Brown genuinely sympathizes with the feminist cause—to a point. Lenient divorce laws, property rights, and women’s education are worthy pursuits. Only when the feminist cause begins to border on extremism (with, for example, the advocacy of free love and dissolution of marriage as an institution) does Brown begin to ridicule the position. At their respective ends of the gender spectrum, Helena and Martinette both embody Brown’s aversion to extremes. Were Helena afforded the benefits of education and property ownership she might have been less likely to fall into Ormond’s control. Radical equality, however, does not create an ideal woman. Martinette’s extreme behavior transforms her into a remorseless savage.

Brown’s opposition of feminine and masculine characteristics in Helena and Martinette also alludes to the political debates of the day. Helena’s passivity and obedience to order mirrors a Federalist philosophy while Martinette’s radicalism and savagery allude to her Republican beliefs. In fact, Martinette makes no secret of her political beliefs. Her love of liberty and exultation in the fall of tyrants leads to the murder of officers at Jemappes, men whom she once befriended but whose opposition to the Revolution made them her enemies. Her fight for liberty is so dearly held that she even worships the gun which slew her enemies as “precious beyond any other relic.” Brown also loosely associates Martinette with France’s revolutionary rhetoric.
Martinette’s name (a shortened version of Marie Antoinette) and adopted nationality conjure associations with the French court. At the time of the Queen’s rule, France was notorious for its revolutionary republican conspiracies. In addition, Marie Antoinette was frequently accused of “sexual transgressions, including blatant allegations of lesbianism” (Comment 5). Brown also posits the possibility of Martinette’s own sexual indiscretions, chief among them her erotic captivation of and “attractiveness to other women” (Comment 4). By the time of the late eighteenth century, lesbianism had become synonymous with the excessive female body and a resistance to the dominant order. While some accepted the practice as representative of the female romantic friendship (seen in the work of poets like Katherine Phillips, Aphra Behn, and Anne Seward), others condemned lesbianism as a perversion of maternity. According to Kristin Comment, “recent scholarship has shown that representations of female homosexual behavior emerged during the eighteenth century in response to anxiety surrounding the destabilization of gender roles, and that the patriarchy responded with subtle efforts to regulate female intimacy” (Comment 2). “Antoinette became the era’s most popular symbol of ‘monstrous’ sexuality in women, and Brown’s fictional ‘Martinette’ constitutes a reincarnation of those excesses anyone following the events in France would have recognized” (Comment 5). Helena, conversely, represents none of the gender destabilization or sexual excesses of the Revolution. Rather than threaten the patriarchy, she becomes a slave to it (literally, as Ormond retains complete control over her). Thus, gender characteristics become a means for opposing Helena and Martinette,
but also a means for drawing out allusions to political ideologies of the day.

Whereas Helena and Martinette occupy opposite ends of the gender and political spectrum, Constantia resides in the middle. While she is not a battle-hardened warrior like Martinette, she is able to endure the loss of her mother and her family’s home and money. When her father, Stephen Dudley, goes blind, Constantia becomes the family’s sole bread winner. By toiling as a seamstress, the young woman scrares together enough money for rent and for the Dudleys’ daily meal of polenta. Yet, her care-giving skill—a stereotypically feminine ability—makes her the ideal nurse when the Yellow Fever epidemic strikes. Constantia nurses countless friends and strangers—some make a full recovery while others die:

The season advanced, and the havoc which this fatal malady produced increased with portentous rapidity. In alleys and narrow streets, in which the houses were smaller, the inhabitants more numerous and indigent, and the air pent up with unwholesome limits, it raged with greatest violence. Few of Constantia’s neighbours possessed the means of removing from the danger. The inhabitants of this alley consisted of three hundred persons. Of these, eight or ten experienced no interruption of their health. Of the rest, two hundred were destroyed in the course of three weeks. Among so many victims, it may be supposed that this disease assumed every terrific and agonizing shape. (Brown 82)

Even though the disease consumes the whole of Philadelphia, Constantia and her father
are never infected—a blessing the characters attribute to their meager diet, but one we may understand as beholden to Constantia’s strong constitution and excellent caregiving skills.

Unlike Helena and Martinette, who are easily classified into opposing categories, Brown presents a much more complex portrait of Constantia (a representation which, ultimately, resists categorization). Like Martinette, Constantia subtly indicates the possibility of lesbian orientation. For example, Brown mentions Martinette’s erotic captivation of Constantia. While the women do not seem to have slept together, Constantia’s attentiveness to all of Martinette’s revolutionary stories may represent political, as well as erotic, captivation. Still, the women’s relationship is never emotional. The most tender and heartfelt liaison of the novel occurs between Constantia and her childhood friend Sophia. When they reunite after years of separation the women seem as though inebriated by love:

   The succeeding three days were spent in a state of dizziness and intoxication. The ordinary functions of nature were disturbed. The appetite for sleep and for food were confounded and lost amidst the impetuosities of a master-passion. To look and to talk to each other afforded enchanting occupation for every moment. I would not part from her side, but eat and slept, walked and mused and read, with my arm locked in hers, and with her breath fanning my cheek. (Brown 241)

It is difficult to determine whether Constantia’s relationship is sexual or merely a
romantic friendship. Whatever the case, the closeness of the women is enough to destabilize heterosexual norms. Ormond, for example, is quite threatened by the relationship. He exclaims, “False imagination! Thinkest thou I would refrain from knowing what so nearly concerns us both? […] Perhaps I neither followed you nor led you to a being called Sophia Courtland. I was not present at the meeting. I am unapprized of the effects of your romantic passion for each other. I did not witness the rapturous effusion and inexorable counsels of the new comer” (Brown 246). Of course, Ormond did follow Constantia and has, presumably, witnessed passion between the friends. In the end, his sexual jealousy prompts him to attempt to rape Constantia. But it is at this moment, when Constantia’s strength, independence, and sexuality seem to fully align her with Republican radicalism, that Brown complicates matters. Rather than allow herself to be raped, Constantia kills Ormond—the most masculine, savage, and Republican figure of the novel. In the end, she can represent neither liberal extremism, because of her literal destruction of the embodiment of Revolutionary Republicanism, nor can she represent the conservative extreme, due to her resistance to patriarchy and destabilization of gender roles.

Although Ormond is only a work of fiction, the novel, like Wieland, weighs liberal and conservative extremes against one and other. By the conclusion, Brown destroys both the Federalist (Helena) and Republican (Ormond) embodiments of radical political ideology. Constantia, the one character who occupies a medium between the extremes, succeeds to live on. Through the character we glean an understanding of the
complexities of Brown’s feminist and political thinking. Feminist and political scholars have long remained unable to determine Brown’s precise political leanings. But in my opinion, I do not believe the difficulty is simply one of authorial ambivalence. Rather, Brown’s politics, like the character of Constantia, are rich and complex. And yet, such an intricate portrait serves to present the rich and complex—and thus realistic—nature of the author’s mind and of the American political, cultural, and historic backdrop.
CHAPTER III: EDGAR HUNTLY AND ARTHUR MERVYN

Savagery in Wieland and Ormond is limited to the crimes (both physical and mental) of its characters. But the novels Edgar Huntly and Arthur Mervyn extend savagery into the realm of those who were actually considered “savages”—Indians and blacks. It is useful to discuss these books in tandem because they were composed together. Brown wrote and published Part I of Arthur Mervyn then completed Edgar Huntly before moving on to Part II of Mervyn. Thus, thematic similarities between the novels are not surprising. But what may be surprising are the numerous thematic connections with Brown’s other novels. As I have shown, Wieland and Ormond each establish a schema of excesses. Wieland describes the effects of political excess, placing Wieland, Jr.'s actions on one end of his framework and the court’s control of religious freedoms on the other. Ormond creates a gender spectrum with the excessively weak and passive Helena Cleaves at one end and the strong and violent Martinette de Beauvais at the other. In the novels Edgar Huntly and Arthur Mervyn, Brown places cultural savages, Indians and blacks on opposing ends. Indians signify excessive freedom while blacks represent the effects of extreme control. As early America worked to invent its national identity, fears that Americans might become like Indians and blacks began to surface. Edgar Huntly and Arthur Mervyn each articulate these anxieties. Huntly dramatizes the possibility that whites may become like savage Indians while Mervyn suggests commonalities between white Americans and black slaves. The racial categories also operate as political metaphors, articulating the symbolic
ideologies of the Republican and Federalist parties. And yet, these seemingly contradictory political ideologies are not so different when pushed to the edge of excess.

Following the Revolution, America faced the challenge of developing a national identity separate from and superior to its former European colonizers. Yet, Americans feared becoming less like Europeans and more like Indians and blacks, two cultures white America regarded as “un-propertied, uncivilized, unknown, and unknowable” (Gardner 2). Creating racial categories became an important mechanism for separating Americans from non-Americans. Whites, obviously, represented a privileged status while Indians and blacks were regarded with anxiety.

This racial schema also helped articulate the political factionalism of the day. The Federalists feared that extreme democratic freedoms threatened to make people become savage, like the Indians. Republicans believed that strong centralized government risked creating a nation of slaves, like blacks. In his book Master Plots, Jared Gardner explains:

For the young nation in the 1780s and ‘90s, phrasing the problem of national identity as a question about race allowed the future American to be imagined in terms of easy oppositions […] European or African. By linking the European nations vying for America’s political allegiance to the structural fears that lead toward anxieties about race, what begins to get articulated here is the notion of blacks, Indians, and Europeans as something completely different from what white America imagines itself
to be. The logic of a Republican argument looks something like this: the Federalists, by reifying hierarchy, consolidating federal power, and working to reestablish the nation’s former servitude to Britain, are creating a nation of political slaves, a nation envisaged in the rhetoric of the time in terms of the slaves the Americans are familiar with: blacks. For the Federalists, the Republicans, by leveling social structures, turning power over to the people, and embracing a corrupted revolutionary ideal imported from France, are working to create a nation of political savages, a nation that comes to be articulated in terms of the nations of “savages” Americans know firsthand: Indians. (Gardner 12)

Such racial and political oppositions mirror the schema of extremes Brown establishes in *Wieland* and *Ormond*. Freedom, savagery, Republicans, and (now) Indians occupy one end of the spectrum, while order, control, Federalists and (now) blacks dominate the other side. Discussion of Indians and blacks, then, not only reflects racial anxieties, but also figuratively articulates the political debates of the new nation. “Given what was perceived to be hanging in the balance, the degree to which factionalism defined the political landscape during the nation’s first decade is not surprising. And the political factionalism of the time coded many of its darkest fears in racial terms” (Gardner 12). By portraying Indians and blacks in his novels, Brown codes his references to extreme Republican and Federalist political ideologies.

*Edgar Huntly*’s title character spends most of the book attempting to purge the
savages from the wilds. The character’s notions that the Indians must be subdued in order to prevent their savage customs from infiltrating white culture were well-founded in early America. Gardner writes, “The environment was a savage one, and in it had been found “savages”—was it not logical to suspect, as some naturalists made the case, that this could be the fate of white Americans as well?” (Gardner 4). In order to quash such a threat, Indians were commonly driven from lands which closely adjoined white settlements. In Edgar Huntly, Brown even recognizes the historical dispossession of the Delaware tribe. In 1737, some years prior to the setting of Brown’s novel, white settlers concocted the Walking Purchase, a land agreement with the Delaware tribe. The deal stipulated that the Natives would sell as much land as any man could walk in a day and a half. Rather than honor the agreement fairly, the colonists hired professional runners who more than doubled the distance the average man could walk in a day. The settlers acquired some 1,200,000 acres, leaving the Delaware disgruntled by what they believed (and rightly so) a crooked deal. The Native Americans eventually tired of the warfare and, as Brown writes, “in consequence of perpetual encroachments of the English colonists, they abandoned their ancient seats and retired to the banks of the Wabash and Muskingum” (Brown 198).

Unlike her fellow tribes people, Queen Mab (the only Indian character Brown grants a name) refuses to leave her home. Ironically, Edgar’s family takes over the Delaware’s formal tribal grounds. “The village inhabited by this clan was built upon ground which now constitutes my uncle’s barn yard and orchard. On the departure of
her countrymen, this female burnt the empty wigwams and retired into the fastnesses of Norwalk. She selected a spot suitable for an Indian dwelling and a small plantation of maize, and in which she was seldom liable to interruption and intrusion” (Brown 198). There in the wilderness, “Queen” Mab runs a kingdom all her own. She lives with three dogs, her only companions who differ in nothing from forest wolves. Like dutiful subjects, “she governed them with absolute sway: they were her servants and protectors, and attended her person or guarded her threshold, agreeable to her directions” (Brown 198). Under the direction of their master, the dogs enforce their master’s borders: “They would suffer none to approach them. But attacked no one who did not imprudently crave their acquaintance, or who kept at a respectful distance from their wigwam” (Brown 198). Queen Mab even fashions a rudimentary form of taxation whereby she demands “food and clothing, or whatever her necessities required” in exchange for “withhold[ing] what she claimed was rebellion” (Brown 199). In what Gardner calls Mab’s own “nation-within-a-nation,” the Queen conceives of “the English [as] aliens and sojourners” while “the rest of mankind” sees her and her dogs as “aliens or enemies” (Gardner 71, Brown 199, 198).

Despite racial and cultural differences, whites and Indians (here represented through Queen Mab) achieve similar nation-states. Each enforces boundaries, establishes government and taxation systems, raises an army, and attempts to exorcize outsiders from their domain. Indians and whites even share the same parcels of land on which to create their realms. The groups function so similarly that without racial
markers it is difficult to separate white from Indian. While naturalists proposed that whites might devolve into savages, Brown’s description of Queen Mab suggests that Whites are already very much like the savages they fear becoming. His suggestion also assumes a political dimension when we consider race’s symbolic connection with politics. “As American observers looked to the violence and uprisings of the frontier, many saw there evidence of precisely such a transformation. The politics were unformed and untried; was it not possible that, unless properly defined, the nation’s political identity could lead to unimaginable degeneration?” (Gardner 4). The American Revolution had brought with it philosophical questions concerning man’s nature and the length to which self-governance could be stretched. The possibility that America might, or had already, become a nation of savages, ruled only by their unrestricted judgment, presented a potent danger for white American identity.

Queen Mab is not Brown’s only indication that Americans might become like Indians. The author intensifies suggestions that the landscape may “lead to unimaginable degeneration” by depicting white savages. Edgar Huntly is often described as a psychological exploration of man’s uncontrolled nature. The further a white character ventures into the wilderness the more uncontrolled and the more savage his nature becomes. For example, Clithero, a mysterious sleep-walking Irish immigrant, attempts to murder his former employer after spending time in a deep cave. Dr. Sarsefield enters the forests to rescue a kidnapped girl but, in the end, spends more time stalking and shooting Indians than he does liberating the victim. When Edgar Huntly,
the novel’s main character, enters the woods, he is reborn in appearance and behavior as a savage.

Like Clithero, Huntly is a sleep-walker. One night he wakes to find he has wandered into the dark recesses of a wilderness cave. “I had awakened as from sleep. What was my condition when I fell asleep? Surely it was different from the present. Then I inhabited a lightsome chamber, and was stretched upon a down bed. Now I was supine upon a rugged surface and immersed in palpable obscurity” (Brown 153-54). Once in the cave, Huntly must exchange the comforts of civilization for the darkness the savage world. He even brandishes the primitive “Indian Tom-hawk” as a symbolic tool of his newfound savagery. Once in the cave, the heart of the savage wilderness, his appetite for blood begins to grow: “My hunger speedily became ferocious. I tore the linen of my shirt between my teeth and swallowed the fragments. I felt a strong propensity to bite the flesh from my arm. My heart overflowed with cruelty, and I pondered on the delight I should experience in rending some living animal to pieces, and drinking its blood and grinding its quivering fibres between my teeth” (Brown 156-57). The environment produces in Huntly an unnatural hunger. He becomes more animal than man and so civilized foods will no longer satiate his growing appetite. Huntly soon fills his hunger when he meets a panther there in the darkness:

No one knows the powers that are latent in his constitution. Called forth by imminent dangers, our efforts frequently exceed our most sanguine belief. Though tottering on the verge of dissolution, and apparently
unable to crawl from this spot, a force was exerted in this throw, probably greater than I had ever before exerted. It was resistless and unerring. I aimed at the middle space between these glowing orbs. It penetrated the scull and the animal fell, struggling and shrieking, on the ground.

My ears quickly informed me when his pangs were at an end. His cries and his convulsions lasted for a moment and then ceased. The effects of his voice, in these subterranean abodes, was unspeakably rueful.

The abruptness of this incident, and the preternatural exertion of my strength, left me in a state of languor and sinking from which slowly and with difficulty I recovered. The first suggestion that occurred was to feed upon the carcass of this animal. My hunger had arrived at that pitch where all fastidiousness and scruples are at an end. (Brown 159-60).

Throughout his ordeal, Huntly seems aware of the gravity of his actions. He regrets relinquishing his “fastidiousness and scruples,” and yet the call of the wild is “resistless and unerring.” The further he moves into the wilds the more he becomes like a blood-thirsty Native American. His senses heighten, his physical prowess grows, and he becomes one with the landscape, using its features to his advantage. Near the novel’s conclusion, Sarsefield and his band of rescuers even mistake the dirty, blood-soaked Huntly for a marauding Indian. The true terror of Brown’s passage is the character’s
inability to control his dark inner nature. Huntly becomes the very thing white Americans feared most—a savage.

Early American racism was not the only factor prompting the belief that whites could degenerate into barbarous heathens (although intolerance of Native Americans was certainly rampant). For Brown, discussion of Indians also underscores concealed political fears. The Native American community’s lack of conventional civic and religious institutions coupled with its tendency towards violence cemented the group’s reputation in the white imagination as the ultimate symbol of unregulated human nature. The Indian’s unfettered lifestyle naturally drew comparisons with radical Republican ideology—the same democratic policies which were being violently asserted in Revolutionary France. The indication for Brown is not so much that Americans will literally become Indians but that unregulated people will produce a nation of dangerous savages. These savages are essentially no different from the religious fanatic Wieland or the sexually and violently deviant Martinette de Beauvais.

As in his previous work, Brown is careful to detail both ends of political excess. While Edgar Huntly depicts excesses of freedom, Arthur Mervyn illustrates the purported dangers of excessive control. And like Huntly, Mervyn employs racial anxiety as a metaphor for political ideology. In the novel, black slaves live amongst whites, making boundaries between the groups difficult to enforce. The “alien” literally lives and breathes all around. Worse yet, the seemingly imminent threat of black revolt stands to destroy white America from within. Only by creating a racial category for
blacks could Americans begin to make “the invisible threat visible” (Gardner 60).

When Brown published *Arthur Mervyn* in 1800, fears of black insurrection were fresh on the American mind. The West Indies were in the midst of a slave revolt which would eventually culminate in the loss of 46,000 white lives. Left uncontrolled, blacks could pollute white America—whether by deflowering her daughters or corrupting her culture. “This nightmare of slave revolt spectacularizes that which remains invisible […] the apocalyptic but concealed threat of the alien made visible through the imagination of marauding blacks and the white bodies they leave in their wake” (Gardner 61). In *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown dramatizes that possibility of slave insurrection, most notably associating “the motifs of black revenge and yellow fever” (Christophersen 106).

In one particular instance, Arthur learns of the inhumane treatment of an ill black serving girl by a minor character, Thetford. Rather than summon a doctor to treat the girl, Thetford calls a hearse to deliver her to the worst area of yellow fever contamination. Brown describes the depth of Thetford’s cruelty:

> In vain the neighbors interceded for the unhappy victim. In vain she implored his clemency, and asserted the lightness of her indisposition. She besought him to allow her to send to her mother, who resided a few miles in the country, who would hasten to her succor, and relive [Thetford] and his family from the danger and trouble of nursing her. […]
Finding that her struggles availed nothing, she resigned herself to despair. In going to the hospital, she believed herself led to certain death, and to the sufferance of every evil which the known inhumanity of its attendants could inflict. This state of mind, added to exposure to a noonday sun, in an open vehicle, moving for a mile, over a rugged pavement, was sufficient to destroy her. I was not surprised to hear that she died the next day. (Brown 124-25)

Not long after the slave girl dies, Thetford, his family, and his household become ill with the yellow fever. Fate, it seems, is punishing Thetford for his cruelty. Before his own death, the character must “[witness] the death of his wife and child” (Brown 125). Although one can hardly feel sympathy for Thetford, the episode personifies white fears that black bodies will corrupt and destroy their own bodies (even if done unintentionally). Historically, yellow fever often assisted slaves in their mutinies. “Throughout the [West Indies] rebellion, the yellow fever became the slaves’ strongest ally. During 1795-96 alone, yellow fever killed 12,000 of the 18,000 British troops on the island, while a comparable percentage of the 33,000 French veterans sent to recapture the colony in 1802 succumbed” (Christophersen 107). The fear of black rebellion for whites, then, was not just in loosing control of their labor force (although revolt could result in economic catastrophe) but also in loosing control over themselves (here articulated in the form of a disease that ravages the body).

Brown also exposes the irony of white America’s fear of bodily and cultural
infection by suggesting the inherent paradox of the institution of slavery. This time, rather than set his characters amongst wild caves and forests, Brown surrounds Arthur Mervyn’s title character with the chaos of the yellow fever epidemic. Like Edgar Huntly, Arthur Mervyn seems to wander into the thick of the chaos almost unwittingly. Dead bodies line the streets, houses are left abandoned, zombie-like victims lie alone waiting to die. Looters and black servants are the only signs of life. As Arthur investigates a ransacked room in the Thetford house, a ghostly figure approaches from behind. He is just able to glance the “appearance in the mirror” before being knocked unconscious (Brown 116). Arthur’s attacker is none other than a slave charged with clearing away the disease’s victims. He describes his assailant: “one eye, a scar upon his cheek, a tawny skin, a form grotesquely misproportioned, brawny as Hercules, and habituated in livery, composed, as it were, the parts of one view” (Brown 116). But in the mirror, the figures momentarily become one in the same when Arthur see his face reflected in that of his black attacker.

Bill Christophersen notes the similarities between this scene and an earlier episode in which Arthur examines himself dressed in the French fashion. Arthur wears “a white silk waistcoat elegantly needle-wrought, [and] cassimere pantaloons” and looks “so well proportioned, so gallant, and so graceful” (Brown 44). This white, virtuous, Republican reflection stands in opposition to the tawny, morally depraved savage in the mirror. Christophersen writes:

More significantly though, it suggests a disparity in America’s self-
image. Arthur’s fancied likeness is decidedly French, and, insofar as Arthur may be identified with America, suggests the nation’s French self-image, based on, among other things, egalitarian ideals. Young America’s fancied self-image however, had to contend, from the first with a social reality that belied her notions of equality. This contradiction between republican ideals and the practice of slaveholding—an integral part of the national schizophrenia—was to be temporized with, of course, until the Civil War and beyond. Brown, by the ironic device of contrasting mirror images, brings into relief this American paradox and the grotesque self beneath her enlightened projection, threatening to erupt violently, to shatter the glass. (Christophersen 108).

Brown’s relief of the virtuous Republican with the slave heightens the sense that white America is already like the aggressive brute that attacks Arthur. No matter how virtuous America may appear in her Republican garb, the specter of slavery always lurks beneath her elegantly wrought attire. America cannot escape the dark nature within, just as blacks slaves cannot escape their dark skin color. As long as slavery continues, both black and white continue to be oppressed by the institution of slavery and the violent rebellions it instigates.

Brown’s complex portrayal of the anxieties surrounding slavery (truly one of the first American authors to do so) may well project his personal conflict regarding the institution. Brown’s An Address to the Government… certainly demonstrates his mixed
opinion. Brown’s essay critiques slavery’s cruelties, but it also articulates a fear of insurrection:

Devoted to the worst miseries, is the nation which harbours in its bosom a foreign race, brought, by fraud and rapine, from their native land; a race bereaved of all the blessings of humanity; whom a cruel servitude inspires with all the vices of brutes and all the passions of demons; whose injuries have been so great that the law of self-preservation obliges the state to deny the citizen the power of making his slave free; whose indelible distinctions of form, color, and perhaps of organization, will forever prevent them from blending with their tyrants, into one people; who foster an eternal resentment at oppression, and whose sweetest hour would be that which buried them and their lords in a common and immersurable ruin. (Brown 65)

There can be no doubt that Brown believes slavery itself has bred brutish and demonic behavior in blacks. He obviously abhors the cruelty of slavery, labeling it amongst “the worst miseries” and calling its execution a form of “fraud and rapine.” But in the next breath, Brown suggests black slaves would enjoy nothing more than the complete annihilation of their white masters. While Brown may long for slavery’s abolition, he still fears the slaves’ wrath. But once again, Brown’s personal fears reinforce notions that blacks and whites are not entirely dissimilar. Slavery and insurrection both represent extremes in violence—one as a violent form of control, the other as a violent
form of freedom. Additionally, a Republican political perspective insists that America is “becoming a nation of slaves at the hands of the Federalists and their British allies” (Gardner 12). Truly, the Federalist Party did intend to create an economic alliance with the British—a union which led many to believe America would again become beholden to that empire. In this scenario, both white and black become economic slaves to an entity over which they possess no control.

In conclusion, if we think of the Brown’s political schema as a circle with both ends touching each other, then we see that both edges, order and savagery, black and Indian, become something like the other. Although Federalist and Republicans represent different ends of excess, in their extreme forms, both risk subverting self-governance. On the conservative end, the strength of the federal government interferes with the common man’s individual freedom. On the liberal end, the common man suffers at the hands of his peers, who abuse freedom to excess. This framework is familiar even today, just as communism and fascism, at their extreme ends, begin to look something like one and other (even though they purport to uphold opposite and opposing ideologies). But for all his governmental allusions and political pamphlets, Brown produced no writings which definitively establish his party affiliation. Yet, his four novels *Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Edgar Huntly*, and *Arthur Mervyn* all warn against the dangers of political excess. Whether those excesses take form in religion, gender, or metaphors of race, they all reflect the political dilemmas facing early America. For my own part, I cannot believe that all this political posturing reflects a mind incapable of
decision. Rather, Brown’s novels articulate not ambivalence but moderation, the keystone of American government.
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