

“Pray, Madam, are you a federalist?”: Women’s Rights and the Republican Utopia of *Alcuin*

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Written during the waning years of the eighteenth century, Charles Brockden Brown’s dialogue *Alcuin* (1798) provides insight into the intellectual and political controversy that surrounded the “woman question” in the new republic. Provocatively modern in tone, the work addresses the contentious issues of women’s moral “superiority,” their education, the barriers that precluded their entering certain professions, and their lack of legal rights and political voice, as well as the nature of marriage and the viability of divorce. Ultimately, *Alcuin* provides a vehicle for Brown’s emphatic support for women’s rights within a republican society.

Structured as an ongoing dialogue between Mrs. Carter, a Philadelphia matron, and Alcuin, a poor schoolmaster, the work reflects the critical impact of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and William Godwin (1756-1836) on the development of Brown’s early philosophy, especially as it related to questions of women’s rights in the late eighteenth century. Both Wollstonecraft and Godwin were English radicals of the Enlightenment whose incisive social and political critiques were widely debated both in fashionable Continental salons and alongside American colonial firesides. Wollstonecraft was primarily known as a zealous advocate of social equality and educational opportunity for women. Godwin, a participant in the English Romantic literary movement, was a philosopher and an eminent political journalist who endorsed anarchism, personal freedom, and religious dissent in his writings. Brown’s early *Alcuin* not only provides both an historical and political chronicle of the era but also anticipates some of the philosophical underpinnings, thematic concerns, and the depiction of

character found in the four major novels that comprised Brown's major phase: *Wieland* (1798), *Ormond* (1799), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800), and *Edgar Huntly* (1799).

Recent critical appraisal of Brown's work has ranged from a condemnation ("an extremely clumsy work" [Hedges, 115]), to a qualified endorsement ("*Alcuin* is no masterpiece. . . [but] the sum of the parts is more significant than the limitations of the whole" [Davidson, 75]), to outright applause ("a small masterpiece, sophisticated and occasionally witty" [Fleischmann, 7]). Regardless of *Alcuin*'s aesthetic merit, it bears scrutiny because it provides mirrors to cultural and political debates over the roles of women in the new republic, debates that would be raised once again more forcefully during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The fragmented publishing history of *Alcuin* itself mirrors the fluctuating political mood of the early nationalist era, one that evinces the conservative temper that was beginning to pervade the new republic. Not until the twentieth century were all four parts of the dialogue even published as a collection.¹ Within Brown's lifetime (1771-1810) only Parts I and II—which center on the recurring question, "Pray, Madam, are you a federalist?," consequently evoking discussions on suffrage and education for women—found a reading audience. The first two parts, written sometime between the winter of 1796 and the spring of 1797, were serialized from March 17, 1798, to April 7, 1798, in the Philadelphia-based *Weekly Magazine*. Although Brown's friend and biographer William Dunlap assessed the date of composition as late 1797 (1: 70), twentieth-century scholarship has established that Parts I and II were written between the winter of 1796 and the fall of 1797.²

Brown's friend Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith later had Parts I and II published in book form.³ Smith delivered the proofread manuscript to the New York-based publishing house of Thomas and James Swords in late February 1798. The dialogue was finally published in book form two months later and copyrighted the following week (1 May 1798). Although written soon afterwards,⁴ Parts III and IV were not published until five years after Brown's death in Dunlap's *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown* (1815). The reason for the publishing delay is not really known. Friends, notably Dunlap when he included it in the *Life of Brown*, tacitly repudiated the latter half—which foregrounds the now-visionary *Alcuin*'s visit to a female utopia, a utopia that mirrors Godwin's concepts in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793). Perhaps Brown himself abandoned any further attempts to publish the final sections, reflecting what might be viewed as a growing conservative stance. Or conceivably well-meaning friends, such as Smith and Dunlap, may have deterred Brown from publishing what they saw as a text too radical for American tastes, especially in a society which was skeptical of the agendas of Wollstonecraft and Godwin.⁵

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is a spirited and ardent treatise on the plight of women and their need to be afforded

equal rights. Like Brown’s *Alcuin*, this work deals, in part, with the poor education of women and how this substandard—even frivolous—education enslaves them. In the introduction to the first edition, Wollstonecraft contends that

women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state. . . . [s]trength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty. . . . One cause of this [state] I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. (31-32)

Wollstonecraft specifically attacks Rousseau and writers who espouse what she sees as Rousseau’s tyrannical anti-female philosophy. She emphatically argues against the Rousseauvian notion that women are inherently weak. Rather than being trained as “gentle, domestic brutes” (50), a woman’s natural propensity for trade and the professions, Wollstonecraft asserts, should be carefully nurtured. Accordingly, she outlines what she deems to be a rational course of study for the eighteenth-century woman, a curriculum that includes the study of literature, medicine, history, and politics. She concludes her argument with a call for a revolution in female manners: “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated. . . .” (287). Women should be educated and trained to exist as autonomous beings and should not be made dependent upon marriage for economic and social survival.

Godwin’s own views on the role of women were even more radical than those of his wife. He held that any institution that limited or suppressed individual freedom, whether it be religious, social, or political, should be abolished. In *Political Justice*, he dynamically contends that marriage is a law that is “the worst of all laws” (2: 272). Furthermore, marriage is

an affair of property, and the worst of all properties. So long as two human beings are forbidden by positive institution to follow the dictates of their own mind, prejudice is alive and vigorous. So long as I seek to engross one woman to myself and

to prohibit my neighbour from proving his superior desert and reaping the fruits of it, I am guilty of the most odious of all monopolies. . . . As long as this state of society continues, philanthropy will be crossed and checked in a thousand ways, and the still augmenting stream of abuse will continue to flow.
(*Political Justice* 2: 272-273)

Initially, Godwin objected to the institution of marriage, one he saw as being oppressive and restrictive, and therefore harmful to the good of the state. Eventually, the radical English philosopher tempered his stand.⁶ Subsequent editions of *Political Justice* included monogamy in his ideal state, but this emendation did little to alter the conservatives' perception of his views; his notoriety as an anarchist and an atheist (an unsubstantiated charge) precluded any acceptance from conservatives, regardless of Godwin's philosophical shift.

As a whole, the liberal thinkers and spokespersons (such as Franklin and Jefferson) within the new republic tended to evade Godwin's philosophy as it applied to women and to marriage; their rhetoric primarily centered on revolutionary concepts, especially in conjunction with the French struggle and universal rights. Ironically, conservative Federalists focused on the women's rights issue. These Federalists, led by Yale President and Hartford Wit Timothy Dwight, became alarmed by what they saw as Godwin's advocacy of sexual licentiousness, of his rejection of marriage and, therefore, of the dissolution of the family, fearing such iconoclasm would lead to chaos. Targeting liberal thinkers as reprobates, conservatives like Dwight inveighed against the spread of ideas similar to those espoused by Godwin and Wollstonecraft.

Wollstonecraft's ideas presented in *Vindication*, in particular, were viewed suspiciously. Many Americans perceived *Vindication* as a dangerous document that provided grounds for deism, attacked the institution of marriage, and served as a vehicle for promulgating the radical—and thus menacing—revolutionary ideas of the French.

Parts III and IV of *Alcuin* were completed during a period of change and uncertainty, a period whose mood can be exemplified by the national furor over the XYZ affair (1797). (After the XYZ affair was made public in April 1798, public outcry over the bribe solicitation by the French agents—agents referred to in correspondence as “X,” “Y,” and “Z”—grew so vociferous that the country began preparing for war against France.) In addition, considerable political, social, and cultural turmoil had beleaguered the new republic after the adoption of the Constitution: xenophobia (the Alien and Sedition Acts of the summer of 1798 that were precipitated by the XYZ affair), fiscal instability, little inherent unity, frontier insurrections (Shays's Rebellion, 1786-1787, and the Whiskey Rebellion, 1794), and, with the exception of the Continental Congress, no shared institutions among the states.

Unquestionably, this political and intellectual climate had a great bearing on *Alcuin's* content—and on its censor. In this respect *Alcuin* is an historic anomaly.

Its expression of a liberal view of women’s rights and the nature of marriage and yet the suppression (for whatever reason) of the more radical Parts III and IV (which portray a Godwinian feminist utopia) reflects the tumultuous climate of the late 1790s. Moreover, *Alcuin* is a literary first because it succinctly provides an *American* discussion on the rights of women and a social/political culmination of this discussion because the publishing of Parts I and II and the writing of Parts III and IV were concurrent with the climactic debate over sexual equality (Davidson, 72).

The woman question, however, had roots predating the time in which Brown was formulating his ideas. An earlier example of the turbulence the women’s rights question evoked is Abigail Adams’s request (dated 31 March 1776) that her husband and his compatriots should

remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than were your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound to obey any laws in which we have no voice or representation. (*Familiar Letters*, 150-151)

Despite his wife’s strong language in this letter, Adams refused to consider seriously Abigail’s argument. His jesting, yet caustic, reply (dated 14 April 1776) to her request fully illustrates his view and the view of his fellow conservatives—and even those views on the subject of such liberals as Franklin and Jefferson—toward women’s rights in the new republic:

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges [sic] were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numer-ous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. . . .

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. . . . (*Familiar Letters*, 155)

Because under the Constitution yet another masculine system was firmly installed, the voices of this discontented “tribe” became more vehement, their arguments reaching a crescendo during this crucial period in American history. As a result, the American popular press was inundated with treatises on both sides of the woman question. There was even a verse (sung to the tune of “Yankee Doodle”) that embraced “the peaceful scene / of government petticoats” (Violette,

36-37). Respected early Republican women writers, such as Abigail Adams and essayist and playwright Mercy Otis Warren, too, added their eloquent voices to the controversy, but the popular ditty more than any other form demonstrates the widespread public fascination with the subject to which Brown responds in *Alcuin* (Arner, 279).

Despite such lively republican interest, the woman question still had not been fully resolved. By 1796, two years before the first parts of *Alcuin* were published, the question of women's suffrage was put to the test when the women of New Jersey exercised their right to vote in the state election, which generated a furor in the press. (By 1807 the state legislature of New Jersey repealed the clause in the state constitution that had extended franchise to all inhabitants whose assets were fifty pounds or greater, thus "solving" the suffrage problem by excluding a legal loophole that might qualify a propertied woman voting rights, reaffirming, in my opinion, another "masculine system.")

As an examination of the collated and complete text demonstrates, *Alcuin* reflects and illustrates the debate surrounding women's rights and the structure of the family during the early nationalist era, just as it provides a forum for examining Godwinian and Wollstonecraftian philosophy.

For the most part, Brown's method in *Alcuin* is exploratory, that is his employment of form permits him to create a testing ground of ideas. His manipulation of the dialogue format and his painstaking delineation of character clearly lend themselves well to this exploration process. Mrs. Carter, the wise and prudent middle-class matron, and Alcuin, the impetuous and easily influenced schoolmaster, serve, respectively, as advocates of and dissenters against popular philosophies and assumptions about women. Moreover, Brown's dialogue format may offer tacit evidence of his own conflicting beliefs: that the sexes are absolutely equal ("the differences that flow from the sexual distinction are nothing in the balance") and that gender differences do exist as a result of class distinctions, individual experience, and environment, the latter belief an outgrowth of the Lockean notion of *tabula rasa* (Fliegelman, xix).

Throughout the dialogue Alcuin defends the status quo and women's subservient roles, acknowledging the impact of situational determinism on their plight, whereas Mrs. Carter is more critical of her sex and the conditions that have molded them. Brown implements a pattern of argument—chivalry/apology juxtaposed against criticism—through his characters in a manner that corresponds to that employed by Wollstonecraft in *Vindication*. The basic analogy used in Brown's and Wollstonecraft's works has a distinct correlation: Mrs. Carter postulates that American women should be entitled to full political rights just as Wollstonecraft affirms that women should be afforded equality by the French revolutionaries.

Alcuin opens with the initial meeting of Alcuin and Mrs. Carter. Alcuin is disquieted by Mrs. Carter's lyceum. He is all too aware of his "unpowdered locks . . . worsted stockings, and . . . pewter buckles . . . embarrassed air, and . . . uncouth gait" (6: 5). His awkwardness, over-sensitivity, and insecurity compel him to

blurt out to his hostess one of the more astounding questions asked of an eighteenth-century American woman: “Pray, Madam, are you a federalist?” Instead of answering him, she poses her own question with a decidedly satiric inflection: “What! ask a woman, shallow and inexperienced as all women are known to be, especially with regard to these topics, her opinion on any political question! What in the name of decency have we [women] to do with politics?” (6: 7).

Mrs. Carter’s subsequent probing questions underscore the absurdity of Alcuin’s unconventional question. Even though the talk at the lyceum is mainly political, a woman, even one as intelligent and politically astute as Mrs. Carter, would have no formal party affiliation. Because of her gender she has been automatically excluded from taking part in elections and in having a voice in the government. Later, she passionately and eloquently expands on the incongruous notion of a nation whose rhetoric deployed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution exhorts egalitarian and democratic ideals, but whose formation and enforcement of the law denies these same fundamental rights to the majority of its citizens:

What have I, as a woman, to do with politics? Even the government to our own country, which is said to be the freest in the world, passes over women as if they were not. We are excluded from all political rights without the least ceremony. Law-makers thought as little of comprehending us in their code of liberty as if we were pigs, or sheep. (6: 22)

Mrs. Carter ably furthers this line of argument, cataloguing all others who are afforded no political rights in America: men under the age of twenty-one, immigrants, the non-propertied, and African slaves. The litany of the politically subjugated persuasively illustrates the exclusions of various groups in a government that is “the freest in the world.”⁷ Mrs. Carter’s analogy between women and livestock (strongly implying that women are no more than property) reveals her anger at being so easily dismissed by the Framers. Perhaps Alcuin proffers another of the novelist’s harrowing predictions: the nation’s denial of universal suffrage and equal rights to half of its citizenry will lead to its dissolution. Such an implied proposition echoes Abigail Adams’s caveat to her husband twenty-two years earlier: “we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound to obey any laws in which we have no voice or representation” (151).

The dearth of legal and political rights for women in Federalist America is most decidedly the locus of Mrs. Carter’s speech. Alcuin’s unusual question, elicited by an ensuing discussion of the policies of French Revolutionary Carnot and the arch-Federalist Peter Porcupine (a ferocious Francophobe) and couched within the immediate context of the Federalist/Anti-Federalist debate, thus can be read two ways.⁸ First, the schoolteacher may be asking whether she is opposed to

the pro-French views of the Republicans. (This was a period of strained relations between the Adams Administration and Republican France, which culminated in the revelation of the XYZ affair and the subsequent passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts.) Or, he may be inquiring whether she ascribes to the arguments of the Anti-Federalists, who were displeased with what they saw as the conservative slant of the Constitution, protesting that it failed to reflect the liberalism of 1776. Mrs. Carter's eventual reply, however, encapsulates the latter issue:

If they [politicians] generously admit me into the class of existences, but affirm that I exist for no purpose but the convenience of the more dignified sex, that I cannot be entrusted with the government of myself . . . it is not for me to smile at their tyranny, or receive as my gospel, a code built upon such atrocious maxims. No, I am no federalist. (6: 23)

At this point we should ask if there is a spokesperson for Brown's views in the dialogue: do the characters merely function as exponents of concerns and philosophies that the author found intriguing but were not necessarily his own? Since much of the work is really a discussion of opposing viewpoints, with one character dominating the dialogue, this is highly unlikely.

Who then is the spokesperson? The visionary schoolmaster or the mistress of the tea table? Brown's unequivocal preference to identify the schoolteacher with Charlemagne's court philosopher (and, consequently, his titling of the dialogue) at first appears to suggest his alliance with the former. But Brown presents Mrs. Carter, not the schoolteacher, as having the most formidable intellect and soundest logic, strongly indicating that she is the spokesperson. Mrs. Carter, not the titular character, dominates the dialogue. The schoolteacher is subordinated, becoming her willing pupil. She becomes his teacher, instructing and testing him throughout all four parts. Although her life is defined by the statement "she was always at home," she is more than the stereotypical middle-class matron.

Brown's decision to use a middle-class woman, instead of an aristocratic woman—or an impoverished schoolmaster—as his spokesperson obliquely echoes Wollstonecraft's concerns. In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft contrasts the roles of aristocratic women ("fine ladies") with their middle-class counterparts ("notable women"):

The latter [notable women] are often friendly, honest creatures, and have a shrewd kind of good sense joined with worldly prudence, that often render them more useful members of society than the fine sentimental lady (112)

Clearly Mrs. Carter is distinguished by her "shrewd kind of good sense" and "worldly prudence." She appears to be the woman who is the primary audience

for Wollstonecraft's discussion on education and political rights for women, the quintessential example of the notable woman Wollstonecraft describes. In the character of Mrs. Carter, we can see a forerunner of Brown's most admirable Wollstonecraftian woman, Constantia Dudley (*Ormond*). (Constantia, constant as her name implies, is courageous, intelligent, benevolent, resourceful, curious, and especially forgiving. She has benefited from a superb education. Her father has tutored her in the works of Newton and Hartley, Tacitus, and Milton. Thus she has received the type of education Brown advocated for women in *Alcuin*, one that would allow women to pursue "those paths which lead to usefulness and honour" [6: 11]). Moreover, because Mrs. Carter is depicted as a "notable woman" (as defined by Wollstonecraft), shrewd and prudent, we must give her discourse credence and precedence over Alcuin's lofty, idealistic speeches.

In addition, Alcuin's off-hand commentary on the political discourse at the lyceum, "The edicts of Carnot, and the commentary of that *profound jurist*, Peter Porcupine, had furnished ample materials of discussion" (6: 7; emphasis added), reveal the ineptitude of the schoolmaster's political acumen. Obviously mention of the French revolutionary and the vituperative Porcupine facilitates Brown's illustration of the ongoing political debate in the 1790s. Alcuin's assessment, however, of Porcupine as a "profound jurist" represents the schoolteacher's fallacious reasoning. The controversial Porcupine's fame rested upon scurrilous exposés and highly inflammatory tracts, hardly the record of a "profound jurist." His vicious opposition to Thomas Paine, the author of "An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex," one of the first tracts in America that specifically dealt with women's rights, would have been well-known by Brown's contemporary audience. The reference to Porcupine thus would circuitously imply that although Alcuin might not be anti-feminist, he might not be as predisposed toward women's rights at the outset of the dialogue as an initial reading might indicate. Only through Mrs. Carter's forceful dialectic does Alcuin evolve into the fervent—almost fanatical—Godwinian-styled feminist he becomes by the end of the dialogue.

Only when Alcuin addresses the issues of education for women and their proper sphere does Mrs. Carter comment that "now you talk reasonably" (6: 8). Encouraged by her approval, Brown's rustic philosopher expands on his feminist beliefs:

Women profit by their opportunities. They are trained to a particular art. . . . The arts of women are far from contemptible, whether we consider the skill that is required by them, or, *which is a better criterion, their usefulness in society*. . . . But though we may strive, we can never wholly extinguish in women the best principle of human nature, curiosity. (6: 8-9; emphasis added)

Women's "place" and their utility in society underscore this passage. Alcuin sees the traditional role of women as being far more honorable than many of the roles men play in society. (Soldiers and barbers bear the brunt of his scorn.) Furthermore, he later asserts (under Mrs. Carter's adept probing) that the sexes are equal, the only difference between the two being attributed to the circumstances under which each is subject. The interests and talents of men and women are evenly proportioned.

Shrewdly, Mrs. Carter tests the sincerity of Alcuin's feminist protestations. In her role of interlocutor, she raises the popular contention that there are no female Pythagorases, Lycurguses, Socrateses, Newtons, or Lockes. To her satisfaction, Alcuin facetiously dismisses this illogical argument, one which is obviously androcentrically-based: "You might as well expect a Laplander to write Greek spontaneously, and without instruction, as that one should be wise or skillfull without suitable opportunity" (6: 10).⁹ In other words, because women are not afforded the same educational and professional opportunities as men, they should not and cannot be expected to produce the female equivalent to, say, Newton. (Wollstonecraft, too, addresses the argument that there are no female Newtons and thus that women are inferior to men. Her answer, "that he [Newton] was probably a being of superior order, accidentally caged in a human body" (70), thus differs from the argument presented by Brown.) The faulty syllogistic argument in itself manifests the injustice and inequities assigned to women.

Mrs. Carter is quick to concur with Alcuin's assessment, her voice growing more emphatic and strident than the schoolteacher's: "Yes . . . of all forms of injustice, that is the most egregious which makes the circumstance of sex a reason for excluding one half of mankind from all those paths which lead to usefulness and honour" (6: 11). If we accept the proposition that Brown is filtering his own thoughts and agenda through the words of Mrs. Carter, then we must view this as a wholesale acceptance of the Lockean view of *tabula rasa*. Eighteenth-century woman is ignorant and ineffectual, not because she lacks the innate abilities of men, but because her worldly experience has impeded any effort to acquire knowledge and honor. In other words, Brown has tested one of Locke's crucial tenets and has validated it. (Antithetically, in *Wieland* he will test another Lockean tenet—the idea of empiricism—but in that case he will repudiate it.)

The dialogue then moves swiftly to the prohibition of women in the professions, which Mrs. Carter decries. Alcuin strongly objects to Mrs. Carter's assertion that the plight of women—that is, their dependence upon men—would be ameliorated if they could be trained for and then be permitted to practice within a profession. His sophist argument, especially when he exalts the role of woman as wife, mother, and housekeeper (to whom he refers as a "household deity" [6: 30]), ultimately exposes him. He is not the liberal thinker and budding feminist he purports to be. Instead, Alcuin espouses the patronizing views of the patriarchy. He, like the framers of the Constitution, wants to maintain what John Adams referred to as the "masculine system." But for the modern reader his argument, even though it addresses what he sees as being the moral superiority of women,

is weak and biased since it privileges woman’s role in the home over the other roles in society she might play.

The schoolteacher begins the argument by stating that women can become merchants and bankers: “The profession of merchant may be pursued with success and dignity . . . there are bankers and merchants of your [Mrs. Carter’s] sex, to whom that consideration is attached to which they are entitled by their skill, their integrity, or their opulence” (6: 13). His argument here is well taken, yet Mrs. Carter continues her series of queries: “But what apology can you make for exclusion from the class of physicians?” (6: 14). Here, too, Alcuin handles the counterpoint well: “To a certain extent the exclusion is imaginary” (6: 14), he claims, citing his own grandmother’s remarkable medical skills as an example of women’s substantial contribution in the medical field.

But when Mrs. Carter raises the question of female exclusion from the law, Alcuin specifically cites this liberal profession as a most unsuitable profession for a woman, his tone harsh and unyielding:

True, we are not accustomed to see female pleaders at the bar. I never wish to see them there. But the law, as a science, is open to their curiosity or their benevolence. It may be even practised as a source of gain, without obligating us to frequent and public exhibitions. (6: 14)

Several critics have analyzed this short, but troublesome, passage, giving consideration to Brown’s known antipathy toward the legal profession in general and integrating that information with Alcuin’s desire to exclude women from the bar.¹⁰ Obviously, by his very rejection of the profession in which he had been trained, Brown came to consider the law to be an unfit profession for anyone, male or female, and thus his objection (and Alcuin’s and, by her acquiescence, Mrs. Carter’s objection) to the law transcends the gender issue. (In later works, notably *Wieland* [1798] and *Arthur Mervyn* [Part I, 1799, Part II, 1800] Brown exposes what he saw as the ineptitude and corruption of the American legal system.)

In a broader, all-encompassing sense, this brief allusion to the legal profession underscores the idea that *Alcuin* is the prototype for thematic concerns in his major novels. But in this specific instance, Alcuin’s objection reveals that he has consciously—even blatantly—glorified woman’s role, an over-reaction that attempts to mask his patriarchal leanings. But we can see how he does eventually acquiesce to Mrs. Carter’s perspective. As litigators, he does not “wish to see them there [before the bar]” (6: 14). Assuredly, this would maintain their moral superiority over those men who engage in “legal robbery.” He does, nevertheless, concede that they most assuredly can perform duties essential to the implementation of the law and justice: as judges and scholars.

This is a definite movement away from the concept of the “household deity.” By the end of Part II, there are subtle hints that Alcuin has come around to Mrs. Carter’s way of thinking—or at least has decided to give her views more thought.

He ends his portion of the conversation with a short lecture on the question of whether women are intellectually inferior to men, citing societal constraints and training that perpetuate this bias:

It may at first appear that men have generally ascribed intellectual pre-eminence to themselves. Nothing, however, can be inferred from this. It is doubtful whether they judge rightly on the question of what is, or is not intrinsically excellent. Not seldom they have placed their superiority in that, which rightly understood, should have been pregnant with ignominy and humiliation. Should women themselves be found to concur in the belief that the other sex surpasses them in intelligence, it will avail but little. We [all humankind] must still remember that opinion is evidence of nothing but its own existence. This opinion, indeed, is peculiarly obnoxious. [T]hey merely repeat what they have been taught, and their teachers have been men. (6: 32-33)

He now acknowledges the evils of a patriarchal system, one that subjugates and thus limits half of its citizenry. The first two sentences echo Wollstonecraft's contention that male tyranny has promulgated, in order to enslave women, the false assumption that females possess weaker intellects. Since women have been taught by the patriarchy (never should we forget that Alcuin himself is a teacher), they have adopted its tenets and, in some cases, not questioned its perpetuation of sexism. His tone here becomes strident, tacitly endorsing Wollstonecraft's call for a revolution in female manners. In this speech we are able to discern a subtle foreshadowing of the role Alcuin will take in Parts III and IV, that of an advocate of a matriarchal system.

When Alcuin returns to the lyceum a week later, he has become a Godwinian visionary. He explains that within the last week he has travelled to a "paradise of women" where there are no gender distinctions and the "two sexes mingled their inquiries and opinions" (6: 38). Obviously, Alcuin's visit is only a utopian fantasy, the direct result of his recollection of and meditation upon his earlier conversation with Mrs. Carter, an attempt to imagine a society based upon the principles he thinks she endorses. Very likely he has also spent the time perusing the works of Godwin. The paradise he describes more closely follows the concepts outlined in Book VIII, chapters v-ix in the first edition of *Political Justice* than any notions he might have gleaned from his previous conversation with Mrs. Carter.¹¹

The remainder of the dialogue is a monologue interrupted by Mrs. Carter's astute questions. Alcuin describes the paradise of woman as a republican utopia, where the inhabitants (male and female) dress alike and share all recreational and intellectual activities. In addition, this society has embraced Jeffersonian agrarianism, deeming it the most ennobling way of life. In Alcuin's visionary paradise

both men and women share in the labor and the fruits of the harvest: “The greater the number of those who are employed in administering to pleasure, the greater will be the product” (6: 48).

True to Godwinian philosophy, the institution of marriage does not exist in this “paradise of women.” What follows is the first extant indication that Brown, although fascinated by the tenets of Godwinism, had found flaws in this radical philosophy. Through Mrs. Carter the novelist seizes on an opportunity to reprove Godwin and his followers:

A class of reasoners has lately arisen, who aim at the deepest foundation of civil society. Their addresses to the understanding have been urged with no despicable skill. But this was insufficient. It was necessary to subdue our incredulity, as to the effects of their new maxims, by exhibiting those effects in detail, and winning our assent to their truth by engrossing the fancy and charming the affections. (6: 52)

She unstintingly condemns Godwin’s advocacy of cohabitation, claiming that cohabitation shatters the self-esteem, devotion, freedom, character, and conviction of its partners. In what first appears to be a retraction of views expressed in Parts I and II (where she had equated marriage with slavery), Mrs. Carter now maintains that the institution of marriage is necessary and sacred. But this is not a retraction; it is a clarification. It is not the institution to which she most strenuously objects. Rather, she objects to the legal ramifications associated with marriage:

Marriage is a sacred institution, but it would argue the most pitiful stupidity to imagine that all those circumstances which accident and custom have annexed to it are likewise sacred. Marriage is sacred, but iniquitous laws, by making it a compact of slavery, by imposing impracticable conditions and extorting impious promises have, in most countries, converted it into something flagitious and hateful. (6: 57)

Following a particularly distasteful portrait of marriage, Mrs. Carter proffers a viable option to what might be construed as an intolerable situation: uncontested divorce, an option that oddly enough directly repeats the sentiments Godwin champions in *Political Justice*; in fact, she appropriates his phrase “groundless and obstinate attachment” in her argument to underscore this isolated (and perhaps perceived as uncharacteristic) alignment with Godwinian philosophy.

The dialogue concludes with Mrs. Carter’s refutation of Godwinian philosophy based on a Wollstonecraftian definition of marriage.¹² “Marriage is an union founded on free and mutual consent. It cannot exist without friendship. As soon as the union ceases to be spontaneous it ceases to be just” (6: 67).

Thus the dialogue concludes with a reaffirmation of the established order. Alcuin teacher/ersatz philosopher turned pupil/visionary has completed the course. Mrs. Carter's apologia on the institution of marriage and the viability of divorce in a society that, for the most part, disenfranchised women, remains true to Wollstonecraft's ideals—and anticipates Godwin's own shift in political stance. Alcuin, the supporter of the early Godwin, has investigated (through the implication that he has read *Political Justice* and, more importantly, with his dialectic with Mrs. Carter) the more extreme views advocated by radical thinkers regarding the woman question. Mrs. Carter's final comments provide closure on the debate, especially in conjunction with the subject of marriage: "If I were to talk for months, I could add nothing to the completeness of this definition" (6: 67).

Her apparent retrenchment (that is, her espousing of the established order) at the end may appear paradoxical. But because she is the spokesperson in the dialogue, her reversal is perhaps evidence of an encroaching conservatism in Brown's thought. Certainly, it is endemic to the socio-political climate of Federalist America. More likely, it reflects Brown's own ambivalence regarding the woman question, an ambivalence precipitated by the escalating debate between conservatives and liberals.

Indeed, *Alcuin* is fraught with contradictions and disjunctions that may appear to be troublesome and inconsistent. But if we view the text in the context of the cultural debate in late eighteenth-century America, we can see that this early work does afford a testing ground of ideas. In *Alcuin* Brown is examining and questioning the validity of Godwin's more radical ideas while still offering support for women's rights. As in a cultural debate, many voices are heard, many are silenced, many are debated. Here the voices are reduced to two, but two voices that endorse equality and suffrage, and thereby reflect a modification of what was viewed as unchecked radicalism.

Notes

1. *Alcuin: A Dialogue*, ed. Lee R. Edwards (New York, 1971). It is no coincidence that the publication of the complete text occurred in the wake of resurgence of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the early stages of review of the American literary canon. (I would characterize the canon prior to this time as exclusionary, traditionally devaluing or neglecting works grounds of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, genre, and theme. An obscure eighteenth-century dialogue on women's rights written by a novelist known for his gothic novels would have, prior to this date, been regarded as an historical curiosity at best.)

2. Robert D. Arner, in the Historical Essay to the Bicentennial Edition (274-276), places the composition of the first half of *Alcuin* at this early date based on Brown's propensity for incorporating contemporary events and personages in his works. The references to Carnot and Peter Porcupine (who were both subject to political debate in late 1796), the indirect allusion to Thomas Young (who was awarded the Doctorate in Physics in July 1796), and Elihu Smith's declaration in the 1798 Advertisement to *Alcuin* that the "following Dialogue was put into my hands, the last spring [1797], by a friend who resides at a distance, with liberty to make it public" (quoted in Arner, 276) support the hypothesis of the earlier date.

3. *Alcuin; A Dialogue* (New York, 1798).

4. Arner conjectures that Parts III and IV were composed between August-September 1797 and April 1798 (277-278). The April end date would be in keeping with the text's reflection of the turbulent political mood of the time, especially the public reaction to the disclosure of the XYZ affair.

5. Within the next year, American society would become extremely hostile to Godwin's ideas, primarily because of the furor that surrounded his publishing of his late wife's memoirs, *Memoirs of*

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Author of “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (1799), which included a detailed account of Wollstonecraft’s affairs with a married painter, Henry Fuseli, and an American writer, Gilbert Imlay, who was the father of her illegitimate daughter, Fanny Imlay. After Imlay spurned Wollstonecraft, she attempted suicide. Soon afterwards she entered a relationship with Godwin, resulting in the conception of another daughter, Mary. Her subsequent marriage to Godwin, the birth of their daughter, and Wollstonecraft’s untimely death eleven days later are carefully recounted by the grieving husband in his introduction to her memoirs.

Subsequently, Wollstonecraftism and Godwinism became synonyms for depravity. *Memoirs* led to the widespread denunciation of Wollstonecraft’s views. In fact, the majority of philosophers and writers on both sides of the Atlantic were quick to disassociate themselves from feminist issues, fearing guilt by association with the discredited champion of women’s rights (Davidson, 73). Almost immediately an American conservative faction effectively used Godwin’s book to defeat the liberal principles espoused by the English philosopher and his late wife by proposing that *Memoirs* demonstrated that freedom for women would free their passions, not their reason; that such unchecked passion led to destruction; and that those, such as Wollstonecraft and Godwin, who held liberal views were without morals or sense.

6. On a personal level, Godwin himself accepted and embraced the institution of marriage—albeit under stipulated conditions. In the second edition of *Memoirs* (1799), he offers an astute observation and explanation for his retrenchment:

Ideas which I am now willing to denominate prejudices, made me by no means eager to conform to a ceremony as an individual, which, coupled with the conditions our laws annex to it, I should undoubtedly, as a citizen be desirous to abolish. Fuller examination however has taught me to rank this [his marriage to Wollstonecraft] among those cases, where an accurate morality will direct us to comply with customs and institutions, which, if we had had a voice in their introduction, it would have been incumbent on us to negative. (101, n. 9)

7. Furthermore, this lucid paradigm foreshadows another issue Brown will tacitly raise in another work: slavery. In *Wieland* (1798) the Wieland family fortune is founded on the acquisition and the utilization of slaves. One might question the long-term effects of establishing the economic base of a family (a government?) on an evil institution. The Wieland family is all but annihilated, its psychologically scarred survivors retreat to the Old World and its corrupt values, forsaking the opportunities the New World might offer. In the novel, reliance upon and opportunistic acquisition of slaves and slavery—and all the evil it embodies—lead to destruction. But in the dialogue between Mrs. Carter and Alcuin, Brown succinctly draws parallels between the slavery and women’s suffrage issues.

8. Lazare Nicolas Marguerite Carnot (1753-1823) was a leading force on the Directory, the executive power in France during the French Revolutionary years of 1795-1799. Carnot’s “edict” was to Citizen Pierre Adet, the French minister to the United States, instructing him to reproach the Washington Administration for its stance toward the Jay Treaty and Washington’s position that he enunciated in his Farewell Address.

Peter Porcupine was the nom de plume of William Cobbett (1763-1835), an English journalist who published a series of anti-republican pamphlets and a pro-British, Federalist newspaper, Porcupine’s *Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (1797-1799), in Philadelphia. Among his more well-known works are *A Bone to Gnaw on for the Democrats* (1795), *A Kick for Bite* (1796), and the slanderous *Life of Tom Paine* (1796). (The last work especially alludes to the error in Alcuin’s judgment, as Paine was an articulate and very vocal proponent of women’s rights.)

9. Europeans during this time often tried to shame Americans by asserting that they had produced no geniuses. Jefferson and others used the same logic Alcuin employs here to refute such charges.

10. Nancy Rice explores Brown’s aversion to the practice of law, citing as a cause for such aversion his unhappy apprenticeship with Alexander Wilcocks. She states that Brown’s law-reading experience had convinced him that money—and hypocrisy—could purchase justice, an odious concept for the young novelist (803).

Furthermore, Jay Fliegelman has compiled selections from Brown’s writings that clearly stress the novelist’s view of barristers. (Unfortunately, Fliegelman does not offer bibliographic information regarding these citations.) For example, in an autobiographical epistolary romance serialized in *Weekly Magazine*, Brown characterizes lawyers as those who compose “subtleties and sophisms calculated to mislead the consciousness of justice implanted in every human being” (quoted in Fliegelman, xiv). In a private letter, Brown employs even stronger language, declaring that by “legal robbery” the lawyer denies “the widow and the orphan of their just and righteous claims through . . . supreme artifice and eloquence” (quoted in Fliegelman, xiv).

11. Davidson notes that Godwin later modified his view toward marriage. Thus, Alcuin represents the younger and more radical Godwin (85, n. 22).

12. This definition is derived from *Vindication* and the 1787 work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (Davidson 85, n.26).

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