

benedict arnold

anti-jacksonian

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Scholars have generally accepted the thesis of John William Ward's *Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age* that Jackson represented for the people of the first half of the nineteenth century something more than the complex of sentiments and associations usually generated by a popular public figure.¹ As Ward explains it, Jackson came to embody several ideas that, while not necessarily rigorously nor even rationally thought out, together form in the image of Jackson a dramatic unity corresponding to the *ethos* of the age. These "ideas" cluster around three concepts: the first Ward terms *Nature* (used to denote the interface between wilderness and civilization, the ideal locale for man to discover the best to be learned from both); the second, *Providence* (recalling the thoroughly American notions of a special relationship with God and a special plan for the new nation—particularized to include divine intercession in the lives of individual men chosen to lead toward the millenium); and the third, *Will* (a kind of Americanized *arete*, an inner drive to excellence, but an excellence less defined by self than by society and social necessity). The result of these special relationships, when seen in an individual as the popular imagination saw it represented in Jackson, is that contradiction in terms, the democratic hero. He is a hero because he does for society things that society needs to have done—whether it knows it or not—and cannot do for itself; he is democratic because he is a common man who rises to eminence by hard work and innate talent, and because, rising from as close to the soil as (in Jackson's case) willful disregard of the truth can put him, he has learned his lessons from "Nature." Such a man becomes a hero because providence and nature, in collusion, "provide" him the necessary lessons, and because his own will is so strong that he cannot be kept from the special prominence he as much "wills" for himself as it is chosen for him.

While this remarkable will sets Jackson apart from other men, his elevation by his admirers to a position above other men is nonetheless a kind of collective self-congratulation, an assertion of the potential selfhood of each man in the new and God-favored land. Thus, Jackson becomes a symbol for the optimistic notion of self-reliance and its special efficacy on American soil. If there are fears that the self-reliant individual may mistakenly turn the force of his will toward ends not for the common good, the doubts are allayed (if not removed) by the rejoinder that, because both men and nation are God-directed, a Jackson cannot stray far from the path leading toward the glorious future in which all men will share.

Of course that is the way Americans have always preferred to think about the consequences of self-reliance, both for the individual and for the nation. Unfortunately, as our most perceptive writers have repeatedly shown, it is an optimism that will not take much probing. Ward recognizes both the limitations and the contradictions of the popular conception of Jackson as a democratic hero, and it is more accurate to say of his work that it records Americans' attempts to define themselves and to verify their nationalistic aspirations through a figural creation, the embodiment of the best that could be hoped for. In other words, Andrew Jackson is one symbol adopted by a complex and dynamic young nation — a nation, for all its brave claims, not altogether sure of itself. Other images mirror other views, especially in the retellings of the American past by writers anxious to find symbols to illuminate the present.²

Benedict Arnold and the tale of his treason becomes one such retelling. His is not a story Americans felt compelled to come to terms with; there is no large body of public comment to compare to that which Ward has collected about Jackson. Nevertheless, as it occurs in the histories, fictions and dramas throughout the Jacksonian era and well into a time given over to very different immediate concerns, Benedict Arnold's story paints for the nation a much less brilliant prospect. In effect, Benedict Arnold serves as a representative of the darker side of Jacksonianism, a negative image of the Jacksonian hero. A hero can bear the ethos of an age, can bear its values and aspirations; and thus a Jackson can mirror in his public image a dream of the unparalleled promise of the new land. Conversely, a hero can be a part of an anxiety dream, a dream of the way we do not want things to be and fear they are. We see what these writers fear in their versions of Arnold's fall: the representation of America's democratic men as mob, and of Arnold — the most notorious of America's progeny to turn against her — as an avarice-twisted hero. These fears mirror a fatal flaw in the favorite dream of America as promised land. The self-versus-society conflict at the center of many of these works reflects no easy optimism, but rather the fear that the new society bears the sins of

the old, that the new land, after all, fosters no special bond between society and the unfettered individualists who at times serve it.

Thus, the story of Benedict Arnold, as told by historians and popular writers of the first two thirds of the nineteenth century, may tell us little about the actual events, or about the “real” Benedict Arnold, but in recreating their own versions of his fall these writers create as well a representation of their own society—and within that recreation they articulate anxieties about the present that make a much less optimistic picture than other, more popular and more public visions. To an age in which the keys to society’s expectations of itself were terms such as “providence” and “progress,” Arnold’s story becomes in all its versions a warning of limited possibility. And in some versions Arnold’s story becomes, ultimately, a vision of American life and American possibility that is uniquely an American tragedy.

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The Revolution’s first historians, among the first to offer the public reasoned accounts of Arnold’s career, were less concerned about telling Arnold’s story as a tragedy than they were with making sense of what ought to have been unthinkable, the treacherous defection of the man who had been the nation’s most celebrated battlefield leader. This was an aspect of the way American historians conceived their task. Writing of Bancroft, Motley and Parkman, David Levin in effect summarizes the expectations of both writers and readers of history in the first half of the nineteenth century: the primary function of the historian was to identify and communicate “the essential harmony among separate incidents of history”—which was, when properly understood, “the unfolding of a vast Providential plan.” In an era (1800-1865) in which 35% of the most popular books were historical works or based on historical events,³ America’s historians labored to deliver to their readers not unique and perceptive conceptions but what was in actuality a consensus interpretation of the meaning of the past, carefully selecting among diverse facts to create a “moral drama” in which “true principles and raw energy overthrew unnatural laws.”⁴ The historian could find no better example of the “overthrow of unnatural laws” than the American Revolution, provided of course that he could make coherent the collection of complex and confusing human motivations within it.

The problem with Arnold’s treason, simply put, was in sorting out the contradictory elements of his early heroics and subsequent defection in such a manner that the telling would properly underline the basic lessons of human progress, God’s providence and the victory of true thoughts and deeds over unnatural and base human motives. A simple if unsatisfying explanation was to ignore Arnold’s battlefield feats and to dwell upon the deficiencies in his character. There was no

puzzle to sort out if the traitor was from the beginning simply “a monster of wickedness,” and “an abominable man.”⁵ But because Arnold’s military feats were numerous and important to the ultimate success of the Revolution, and thus not easy to ignore, a more satisfactory attempt was that of the 1809 *Biographical and Historical Dictionary*, which, while admitting Arnold’s “daring courage” on the one hand, comments on the other that “it was a courage without reflection or principle,” and thus, while remarkable, not quite laudatory. Here was potentially a rich explanatory vein, and others mined it, declaring that Arnold in battle was “like a man intoxicated,” or “delirious,” or frenzied to the point of striking a fellow officer (on more than one occasion, one account suggests, and afterwards Arnold was unable to recall these incidents). Similarly, others acknowledged Arnold’s “high *animal* courage” [italics added] or, as Jedediah Morse’s *Annals of the American Revolution* (1824) has it, a mind “formed for bold and desperate enterprise.” Most would have agreed with Richard Hildreth, whatever their response to the rest of his 1850 *History of the United States*, that one lesson of Arnold’s treason was that “the qualities of a good soldier are unfortunately often quite distinct from those of a virtuous man and good citizen.”⁶

The Hildreth assessment continues to ring true, and a majority of twentieth-century accounts are in fundamental agreement; but for the accounts written between 1800 and 1865, by far the most common explanation of Arnold’s treason chooses a slightly different emphasis. Perhaps taking his hint from the early histories of Ramsay and Gordon, Mason Locke Weems (better known then and now as “Parson” Weems) offers the following explanation in his *Life of Washington* (1800):

That which makes rogues of thousands, I mean Extravagance, was the ruin of this great soldier. Though extremely brave, he was of the vulgar sort, who having not taste for the *pleasures* of the *mind*, think of nothing but high living, dress, and show.⁷

Weems of course knew as much as anybody about the business of creating popular characters for his own purposes, and his portrait of Arnold, emphasizing extravagance and vanity, makes Arnold a convenient foil for Weems’ saint-like Washington—reason enough for his choosing this particular view. Others with more scholarly credentials than the shrewd popularizer of George Washington, however, adopted a remarkably similar version of Arnold’s fall. Most notably, there is George Bancroft and his monumental *History of the United States*, standard reading fare for self-improving Americans from the 1834 publication of the first volume to the author’s final revision in 1885, where the telling words in the explanation of Arnold’s treason are “self-will” and “extravagance.” Less notably but no less widely read are a number of histories written for schoolroom use. W. D. Cooper’s

History of North America (1795) records Arnold's crime as the deed of a man "brave but mercenary, fond of parade and extremely desirous of acquiring money to defray the expenses of it." Charles A. Goodrich's 1825 *History of the United States* (an expansion of his widely approved *History of the United States, for Schools*) decides "vanity and extravagance led him into expenses," and thus into treason. Samuel Goodrich remarks similarly in *First Book of History* (1832) that Arnold was a "very bold and intrepid man; but he was selfish and unprincipled"—an explanation reproduced in the anonymous *First Lessons in the History of the United States* (1856). William Dunlap's *History of New York, for Schools* (1837) concurs: Arnold was brave but "selfish and sordid," "having neither principle nor religion to restrain him." So also does John Frost's *History of the United States* (1859): "Arnold was brave and hardy, but dissipated and profligate." Others were less careful to restrict themselves to charges with some factual basis (Jesse Olney's 1836 *A History of the United States*: "He was vicious, extravagant, cruel, vain, fickle, luxurious, and mean.") but in by far the majority of the accounts written for school children the lesson is that pride and extravagance lead to a terrible fall.⁸

Of course there are obvious reasons for the similarity of these interpretations. One is that there is more than a little truth to the tale: rumors and outright charges of misuse of public funds followed Arnold throughout his career, and there is no doubt that his tenure as military governor of Philadelphia was characterized by rash, even foolish expenditures to equip and accommodate himself and his family in a manner suitable to his own sense of his station. A second is that, for works that were after all not focused on Arnold, the consensus explanation was quite sufficient to the works' purposes. And indeed this is so. But there is as well a third explanation. If there is truth to the charges of extravagance and pride, there are other, equally damning charges to be brought had these interpreters so chosen. That they chose by consensus this particular explanation suggests strongly that these writers saw in each other's accounts a message they agreed with, a lesson needing to be taught. Concerned as they were with achieving a coherent conception of history, Bancroft and his contemporaries were equally sensible of the special potential of their histories to teach moral values: in subordinating the facts of history to their own conceptions of human progress by divine plan, they kept in mind also the potential lessons that would aid in the progress toward just that prospect. Avid Jacksonian Democrat though he was, George Bancroft was no uncritical observer of the present; in Arnold's story he saw a chance too good to miss, another illustration for a lesson he repeatedly taught.

To Bancroft, Arnold stands convicted of the two cardinal sins. He is "self-willed," self-interested to the detriment of society, and he is "extravagant." Alarmed by what he saw to be the drift of American

society toward selfish and mercenary motives, Bancroft creates in his history a past where the heroes are all remarkably selfless men – most notably William Penn and George Washington – who by their selflessness are instrumental in progress toward a better world. In contrast, self-seekers in Bancroft are thwarted in their ambitions, led by their own vanities to perdition. Thus “extravagance,” the manifestation of Arnold’s fatal flaw of self, “primarily tempted him to speculation and treason,” and Bancroft’s lesson to his readers serves as his warning that, for all the brave promise of the new land, there were still doubts about Americans’ abilities to measure up.⁹ A doubt expressed is no prophesy of doom, but the repetition does suggest concern about very real human failings. From Weems to the final edition of Bancroft, too much self-will and self-indulgence are dangerous things, both for oneself and for society. The consequences can take many forms, but the natural consequences on American soil is selfishness and extravagance – as we are repeatedly told – and it is just these two that America’s first historians, in selecting them from the potential explanations of Arnold’s treason, mirror in their own society as threats to the prospect that a Jackson promises.

ii

As Arnold’s first biographer, and thus the first to attempt thorough coverage of Arnold’s activities during the Revolution, Jared Sparks faced special problems. Thorough coverage meant of course attention to events that Americans preferred to forget Arnold participated in, and also meant some attention to Arnold’s difficulties, before the treason, with Congress and the people of Philadelphia. In histories where Arnold remains a minor figure, these messier issues are ignored in favor of extended treatment of a story much more to America’s liking, the capture, trial, and hanging of Arnold’s unfortunate British accomplice, Major André.¹⁰ Sparks is remarkably evenhanded (far more so than many to follow) in assigning responsibility for the various conflicts, but while he refuses to paint Arnold wholly black, he is careful from the beginning of his biography to assign him some telling traits. Describing Arnold during his days as an apprentice in an apothecary shop, Sparks comments:

To his innate love of mischief, young Arnold added an obduracy of conscience, a cruelty of disposition, an irritability of temper, and a reckless indifference to the good or ill opinion of others, that left but a slender foundation upon which to erect a system of correct principles.¹¹

Tales of great mischief and cruelty follow: Arnold stealing young birds from their nests, and Arnold spreading tacks in the street to injure the feet of barefoot children. No doubt Sparks in his biography simply

reports what others had said before him, the impulse of both the tellers and the collector to explain the adult's acts in the child's behavior: to show Arnold to be a man from the beginning with something inherently wrong with him. Depraved boy becomes depraved man, and thus, regardless of other factors, his fall is all his own responsibility if not altogether his own doing. His treason is decidedly not to be laid at the feet of the state or its citizens, but is a defect of character.

Innate depravity is also the explanation in the few novels before the centennial in which Arnold is represented as a character. In most he is an unseemly part of the historical backdrop, a bit part player to be instinctively recognized by the hero as a villain. Daniel Pierce Thompson's *Green Mountain Boys* (1830) sets out to make something more of the meeting between two legendary characters, Arnold and Ethan Allen, but the confrontation culminates in mere name calling, with Allen of course getting the best of it and Arnold slinking along behind on the expedition to Ticonderoga. Joseph Holt Ingraham's *Arnold* (1840) attempts a more thorough development, but the character remains essentially the same: a "want of moral principle" leads to the vanity and extravagance explanation of the early histories, no doubt Ingraham's primary source of information. Somewhat more daringly, Ann Sophia Stephens' *The Rejected Wife* (1863), has Arnold tyrannize his sister, drug and blackmail a young clergyman, abandon a damsel to a millrace and seduce and cast off a fair if erring young maid. Mrs. Stephens' account of Arnold's activities in the years before the Revolution is entirely fanciful; she even has him growing up in the wrong town. But if her facts are confused, her fiction is clear enough. In making Arnold a seducer—the domestic equivalent of a traitor—Mrs. Stephens is insisting that Arnold's evil is inherent. The same point is made, more simply if somewhat less fancifully, in characterizations drawing upon the physiognomist's arts:

That he was a man of the strongest and most violent passions the discerning physiognomist needed but a single glance to discover; and he could see, at the same time, that he was a man of more daring than principle. . . . That he was vain, proud, arrogant, voluptuous, grasping, tyrannical, revengeful, even to rashness . . . would have been discovered almost immediately by the close observer. . . .

This particular description, from Emerson Bennett's *The Female Spy* (1851), is perhaps more exclamatory than most, but it is most typical in making of Arnold's treason a simple story. Because the faults are innate, the terrible flaws reside in the man, not in the society that fostered him.¹²

Occasionally in these novels Arnold's treason is not quite so simple a matter. In a comparatively minor incident in Bennett's *The Female*

Spy, Arnold's "uncivil hauteur" brings about this response from an old woman in a crowd: "I've heard he was a brave man, but I know he ain't got much manners."¹³ A simply stated complaint, but a condemnation hinting at something more: Arnold the hero acts as he thinks a hero ought to act, and the people cannot stand it. Bennett makes no attempt at development, here, of the special tensions between the man and the society he betrayed. Nor are these developed extensively in other nineteenth-century novels. The special relationship between a military hero and the society in need of his talents, however, was to become a basic concern of the dramatists who chose Arnold for a subject.

Dramatic representations of Arnold as a traitor began almost immediately after his defection,¹⁴ but dramas focused on the fall did not begin to appear until after Jackson's death in 1845 – although several of these dramatists took up the subject at a much earlier date. A scene from George Calvert's *Arnold and Andre* (1864) found its way into the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835, and was included in his *Miscellany* in 1840, suggesting that while Calvert, a grandson of Lord Baltimore and correspondent of Goethe and Wordsworth, did not publish the entire work until 1864, he had conceived originally of his tragedy as a work for an audience concerned with rather different issues from the crisis of the Civil War.¹⁵ The central event in Calvert's drama is Arnold's commitment to treason, but Calvert is less interested in Arnold than in celebrating the character of George Washington. Appearing on stage in opening and closing scenes, Washington – as others extol his virtues – is the picture of a natural hero. A leader raised above others because of unmistakable talents, his imperturbable faith and indomitable will bring grudging acknowledgments even from the enemy. It is just this representation of Washington, the good father, which is the concern of the scene Calvert published separately in 1835, undoubtedly drawing upon the remarkable popularity of Washington to spur interest in what was in itself a plotless excerpt.

Whatever Calvert's motivation, there can be no doubt that the virtues extolled would have reminded the dullest of Jackson's followers of their own leader. While Calvert makes no such explicit comparison, Jacksonian Democrats had no qualms about making just that comparison themselves – regularly referring to their leader as "the second Washington" and responding during the election of 1828 to Whig alarms that military men make dangerous political leaders with "As WASHINGTON, first President,/ No tyrant proved to be,/ So JACKSON, our next President,/ Will keep our country free."¹⁶ So, too, might Jacksonians have delighted in another parallel between Calvert's Washington and their candidate: as Calvert explains things, a primary cause of Arnold's treason is that he is too much of an untamed nature, all self and no social obligation; conversely, Calvert's

André falls because he is the overcivilized European, effete and corrupt. Towering over both is Washington, a triumph of the best of both nature and culture—the new American man. Just the symbol, according to John William Ward, that Jacksonians saw in their leader.

If all of Calvert's drama had been available in 1835, Jackson's opposition might have discovered a much different political lesson within it. From their perspective Jackson shared his most notable trait not with Washington but with Arnold. It is Arnold's too proud spirit, his over-reliance upon his own understanding of things, which makes him a threat to the society fostering him. Just that huge will making Jackson a hero to the masses makes Calvert's Arnold a traitor to his country; when within Calvert's tragedy Arnold rails against what to him are needless fetters to his activities, exclaiming "strong men are their own law," the discerning Whig or Federalist might register his uneasiness by noting the comment to serve as a gloss on the critical decisions of Jackson's own career.

Others were to agree with Calvert (and Weems) that Arnold's significance in American history was very much tied to Washington's. "As Washington was the good principle, so Arnold was the devil of the Revolution" writes Horatio Hubbell in his introduction to *Arnold, or Treason at the Point* (1847), implying by his comparison what might be called a Manichean theory of social history. On stage, Washington can become, as he does in Joseph Addison Turner's *West Point: a Tragedy* (1862), a counselor to Arnold, advising him by word and example to bear up under unwarranted public disapproval. More often he becomes the source of Arnold's dissatisfaction. William Gilmore Simms' *Benedict Arnold, the Traitor* (1863, but begun "nearly forty years before") openly ignores the truth to create what Simms believed to be a better fiction, a tragedy of ambition and pride. Jealous of Washington's preeminence, Simms' Arnold attempts to get from under the cold shadow cast by his commander; thwarted, envy and despair drive him to the British with a plot that will turn over West Point and bring down Washington.¹⁷

More typically, the source of Arnold's difficulties is not Washington but the people, difficulties having much to do with the nature of Arnold himself. Hubbell's Arnold is representative: vain, haughty, isolated and defiant of the public will; indeed, he is a familiar figure in the popular literature of the period, the rebel hero—a hyperactive, Americanized version of the Byronic hero who, believing himself ill-used, plots vengeance on his detractors regardless of personal cost. It is an American type which will, four years after Hubbell's drama, receive its most noteworthy presentation in *Moby Dick*. While Ahab overwhelms the anemic versions of popular literature, Melville's colossus is surrounded by a group of Arnolds conceived by lesser talents who had in mind, nonetheless, a similar magnitude of character, com-

mitted similarly to a self-destructive revenge. Indeed, at times even the language suggests Melville's creation. From Joseph Addison Turner:

Don't talk to me of friends: I've got no friends:
Mankind are all my enemies, and God,
And fate, and devils, too, are all my foes,
And I am theirs. Friendship and friend are words
With which the young and foolish cheat themselves:
The old and wise know there are no such things. (p. 1)

And from Hubbell:

Would that dear Gates, and all my enemies,
Within reach of this keen weapon stood,
With a single neck; I'd clip it, as this foul
Corrupted limb, and like the bird of Jove,
Soar unencumbered upward to the sun. (p. 25)

And from Simms:

I tell thee, Jamison — talk of humbler heights! —
That I would struggle to unsphere the sun,
And seize his eminence, if it were given
The mortal to attempt immortal crowns,
By any desperate challenge of the Fates. (p. 226)

Simms may have read *Moby Dick* before penning these lines, but the similarities seem more probably those of tradition than of source. Each of these dramatists portrays a naysayer, a man whose only real success, and often only attribute for which he can be admired, is his refusal to choose between the various limitations of personal freedom that life offers, and to say, instead, No! in thunder. This is of course no Jacksonian notion of the hero, but a depiction of the Jacksonian hero gone awry, the self-willed individual who, instead of channelling his remarkable talents into selfless service, chooses rather to strike out against the source of his restrictions.

Whatever the fascination of Americans with the Byronic or rebel heroes, these dramatists understood that the source of rebellion within each of these Arnolds was an inability to accommodate himself to the restrictions of society. And they understood that, though the fictional creations were interesting enough, the real thing would be unendurable. Indeed, evidence of such potential is — as these recreators of the Arnold story would have it — reason enough to exorcise the dangerous individual for the good of all others. Before commitment to revenge, the stage Arnolds are most useful and necessary men. All of these dramatists recall Arnold's battlefield heroics, and all acknowledge that his leadership and personal courage were truly exceptional. But while he fought courageously, his commitment was altogether to himself. Simms suggests that Arnold is the Hector of the Revolution, Washington the Aeneas. The choice of Ajax — or Shakespeare's Corio-

lanus—might have been more apt: an Aeneas will as a matter of course subordinate his own desires to the needs of state, but there is always the danger with an Ajax that, once denied what he believes to be his just reward, he will turn his awesome talents against the society he has championed. Because he will subordinate himself to the larger will, a Washington is dependable and the people secure. An Arnold, however, at the first signs of his inability to accept the popular will, becomes dangerous and expendable. Such is the reasoning of this group of writers, and there is no reason to believe their separately arrived-at assertions to be anomalous to the prevailing thought of their contemporaries. For Americans the answer to the debate over the efficacy and value of heroes was that, however fascinating the one, only the other was tolerable in a democratic society. There is no place for the Homeric hero in a Virgilian world.

This is not to say that these playwrights take altogether the historians' view that Arnold is inherently a threat to an innocent and unprotected society. Hubbell's *Arnold!* restricts Arnold's railings to tirades against the demagogues who represent the unthinking mass, not the people themselves. Thus it is Congress, not the people, who have turned Arnold against the cause, and by his version the spirit of the people remains undefiled. In other dramas the matter is less simple. Elihu Holland's *Highland Treason* (1852), focuses on the crucial conflict between Arnold and the representatives of the people, Arnold arrogantly insisting he has been slighted, and Congress, torn between the expediency of keeping the successful general's services and its anger at his irascibility, is pushed by the people into action. After stoning Arnold in the streets of Philadelphia the mob revels in its victory with a song beginning "The law of might is always right," and Congress enters into a resolution of its problem in which justice is sacrificed to the demon order, and Arnold becomes—and so Holland names him twice—an Ishmael, an outcast.

Holland's mob turns on Arnold because it finds his arrogance an insult to its own posturings; his best course, Arnold is counseled, is to fight self and to attempt to accept whatever place society chooses for him. His answer is the crux of the matter:

At Rome, the individual in the state
Was lost; but I am no Roman. 'Twas man
That made the state, and is he less than it?
Nay, man is more, and *I* am man.¹⁸

Given a real moral issue and something less of the petulant tone of a malcontent, Arnold's rejoinder would sum up a basic political issue with a comment putting him squarely on the side of, among others, Cooper, Emerson and Thoreau. But the issue is not a moral one, it is rather Arnold's own outrage at what he thinks have been slights by both Congress and the people—an issue exacerbated by charges that,

as a guardian of public funds, Arnold has been no better a steward than he ought to have been. In the end, neither justice nor expediency is served well enough to stave off Arnold's personal disaster and his loss to the state. From the ambiguities of a drama not wholly worked out comes a less-than-optimistic vision of the exceptional man's place in American society: either the individual goes bad, perverted by excesses of the talents—most notably will—making him valuable to the state, or lesser men band together against him because his talents are an affront to their own sense of self-importance.

A most dim view of things, one echoed in Jason R. Orton's *Arnold* (1854), where once again the focus is upon Congress' difficulty in deciding between punishing improprieties and protecting necessary talents, between principle and practical compromise. Orton's Arnold is as unlikeable a character as these dramas portray, railing at slights others (including Washington) simply put up with. There is also the matter of the stains on his reputation, here not wholly the slanders of his enemies. But he is a successful battlefield leader: rather than allow proofs of misconduct to necessitate his removal, Congress ignores the charges against him. On the other hand, rather than anger his politically powerful accusers, Congress passes him over for promotion to major general. Given the man, the results are more or less inevitable. In a play about the perils of political faction and excessive ambition (not only Arnold's but that of almost everyone around him) Orton sums up his fears in the comment of a discerning Congressman: "If thus our oaks are broken / In wanton folly by our own mad hands, / Farewell to freedom! we're not worthy of it." The *we* is Congress, but it is also the general populace—a rabble easily roused, and once roused as dangerous to Congress as to Arnold. It is at both populace and Congress that Peggy Arnold aims her charges when she cries hysterically to George Washington, upon the discovery of her husband's defection:

If Arnold be a traitor, your injustice
Has made him one. His soul was full of high
And noble thoughts; and he did love his country
Only too well! . . .
But you did league against him, and did drive
His fiery mind to frenzy, and repay
His faithfulness with infamy and wrong.¹⁹

However distorted her vision of her husband, Orton and these dramatists agree that, because there is some truth to her lament, Peggy's claims against her country are powerful ones.

iii

All these dramatists but William Gilmore Simms make at least something, by innuendo if not more specifically, of the slanders and

protests of shady dealings in money matters that trailed after Arnold wherever he went. In an 1845 essay in *Southern and Western Magazine* on the possibilities of creating a tragedy from the Arnold-André affair, Simms decides that not avarice but ambition is the more appropriate fatal flaw for a tragic hero. Thus as Simms conceives of the tragedy, Arnold serves as a hero when his ambition and talents operate for the good of the state, a terror when vaulting ambition turns him against it. In prefacing his drama on the subject, Simms returns to the need for the same modification of history. "Arnold was no imbecile in action," writes Simms. "He was only so in morals. Had his culture been a better sort, in a community of higher moral, [his appetite for praise] would have been the most impassioned love of glory."²⁰ Perhaps so, but of course Simms, writing from the South during the Civil War, had his own points to make at New England's expense. The change from avarice and extravagance to ambition might make a better subject for a tragedy, but it did so at some cost to the story itself. The vaunting ambition of the hero, the temptations of pride to seek power and position, are inextricably bound to Arnold's money problems and to his special relationship to the society he championed on the battlefield. Just this connection is explored in the most successful of these dramas, William Wilberforce Lord's *André* (1856).

As Lord represents him, Arnold is a man obsessed by the insults to his honor he has been made to suffer. "Once you know my wrongs, you know me; for I / Am made up of them" he says in the first act, and he broods on those wrongs throughout the play. The result of all this brooding is some competently written blank verse and an inductive leap on Arnold's part that carries him into treason. Lord's *André* attempts not one tragic hero but two, each manifesting a variant of the deadly sin of pride. André reveals his flaw in his quest of fame and honor; Arnold reveals his in his commitment to revenge and, the result of his generalization from his own plight in particular to the human condition in general, a pursuit of wealth. When Arnold asks André how the New York Royalists have reacted to the charges of peculation against him, the following exchange occurs:

André: Why, royally; and will not think the hand
Which holds the best and brightest sword amongst you,
Soiled with dishonest gold.

Arnold: My real crime
Was lack of it— was poverty. My hand
Held naught but iron, to the state not useless,
But to me worthless. My opponents' hands
Were stronger armed— with gold. I was a limb
They were the heart and vitals of the war,
And could not be denied so slight a thing
As my humiliation. . . .

André: Their attempt was strange,

Not their success in it. Gold has the power
In popular counsels fame and honor have
In camps and courts: it is in monarchies
An aid to tyranny; in commonwealths
'Tis the sole tyrant.²¹

Here is a somewhat more complex explanation of Arnold's money worries than the version repeated virtually unchanged through the histories. Lavish tastes and avarice have not driven Lord's Arnold to speculation and finally to treason, but rather his view of mankind, directly the result of his own discovery that courage and strength are fools' weapons, no match against the man who most loudly rattles his coins. Since his own greatness has been so vulnerable to those wielding gold as a weapon, gold itself—"omnipotent and all-desired"—must alone compel the "involuntary adoration" his wounded pride now seeks. The act of treason will give him revenge, for the fall of West Point will crush the Continental forces, and British gold will lift him forever above the insults of smaller men. Thus he needs no special urging from André to accept the ignominy of his traitorous act; if gold is the "soul tyrant" he will unremorsefully take the gold and the power and leave the honor to others.

As Lord's drama explains it, Arnold's treason implies a very different relationship between the hero and his society than does the "alarmingly successful irrationalism of Jacksonian democracy."²² If for many Americans Jackson served as the figural embodiment of their best hopes for a society of self-reliant individualists (led by the great man who rejuvenates his people in time of crisis),²³ Lord's Arnold is Jackson's antithesis. There can be no doubt that Lord saw in Arnold a man capable of heroic action, nor that he understood that the very nature of Arnold's individualism, that which made him capable, made him incapable of the self-restraint of another kind of heroic figure, a George Washington—a father figure whose slight smile implies a well-digested social commitment and a tolerance for the petty acts of those beneath him. Indeed, Arnold's individualism marks him out from other men; his deeds, before his treason, are no affirmation of similar possibility in lesser men, but rather an affront to them.

What is arresting here is not another version of the rebel hero, of which the nineteenth century offers a surfeit of examples, but rather the representation of a failed hero. Depending upon the tragedy, Arnold is at various times Satanic, Homeric or Byronic in his peculiar kind of heroism, but he is always a failed hero. Either he is the tragic representation of a man who has served society well until goaded by that same society to turn the force of his will against them, or he is a man who, although endowed with tremendous potential, has failed from the first. Granted fame, he covets money, power and position—selling his honor to achieve them, and finally selling himself to bring revenge on the society that has denied them to him. Active, coura-

geous and unrelenting in his force of will — qualities that in a Jackson make for martial greatness — he is arrogant in his pride and blinded by his ambition, brooding in his anger and, finally, committed to a tragic revenge.

It cannot be said of these six dramatic retellings of Benedict Arnold's defection to the British that they reached a wide audience, nor can it be said that they participated significantly in molding a representation of Arnold that the public took for its own. All six are closet dramas, virtually unstageable and decidedly not the fare to attract audiences or even readerships. Indeed, one can suppose that at least four were written with a select audience in mind, a presumed literate elite, an intelligentsia harboring some fear of the excesses of popular democracy — even as had the avid Jacksonian, George Bancroft. Motivations for attempting works of such high seriousness and low sales potential are not difficult to discover: there is the continuing interest in the Revolution and the notoriety of the treason itself; moreover, many more than these six had noted the potential in the Arnold-André affair for high drama, even tragedy, and the subject itself was truly an American one, worthy of the talents of American writers. But however ordinary the motivations of these tragedians, neither limited success nor limited readership lessens the curiosity of six recreations within forty years, all in an improbable format and all remarkably similar, however varied their plots, in interpreting the meaning of Arnold's disaffection with America.

These are not works that were hastily drafted, and every indication suggests that these dramatists took their subject most seriously — the form itself, the lofty diction of the blank verse, the allusions to the major works of western civilization. Such high seriousness befits works exploring the crucial themes of the dangers of an unstratified (and as yet unproven) society, the potential decline of democracy into mobocracy, the peril of demagoguery, the conflicting impulses toward self and toward social stability and the potential for heroes and heroic ideals on American soil. In taking themselves so seriously, each of these (however faltering) dramatists takes the story itself to be important, attempting to register through these retellings that the tale is a warning against the worst possibilities of self-government by the common man, and, at the same time, a fable for democracy: a truly egalitarian society must exorcise the demon of unfettered individualism, the impulses to serve self instead of society.

It is odd that while these dramatists allude to almost every conceivable tragic hero, none has remembered Coriolanus; Shakespeare's noble Roman general is the same kind of military hero, and he also is sacrificed to the needs of state.²⁴ But if these dramatists fail to utilize one parallel story, they were fully aware of the potential parallels to the Biblical and Miltonic versions of the first fall. If America is the new Eden, then Arnold is the snake, or Lucifer undisguised, or per-

haps Arnold is only Adam driven by an inner devil of unchecked self-will—and his treason marks us all with the taint of his sin. These representations of Arnold serve as a warning not altogether different from the versions offered by the first historians of the Revolution, but the story as these dramatists choose to tell it gives a very different picture of America and her prospects than the uncritical optimism of Jacksonianism.

So Arnold reverses Jacksonianism. While *nature* is for Jackson a source of moral instruction, a cradle of right feeling, for Arnold *nature* teaches selfishness and justifies lawless behavior (just the point Lord has his André make in his acknowledgment that, if born on this side of the Atlantic, he too would have rebelled against lawful rule: nature's fierceness entices men to it). While for Jackson *will* provides the agency for social service, and divine guidance keeps self-will from becoming self-indulgence, Arnold's *will* is what makes treason possible, even inevitable, and is either the demon within, or Arnold because of it the devil himself. Most telling of all, in answer to Jacksonian America's notions of divine guidance toward the millenium, the *providence* upon which such hopes are founded becomes in these tragedies not providence but *fate*, disinterested in all mankind, Americans included. To the historians' assertions that the path of mankind is a progress, a spiral ever upwards, these dramatists oppose an equally coherent view of history: in the universe of Arnold tragedies, not spiral but cycle explains man's condition, and cycle of course precludes the possibility of more than temporary improvements in the primary circumstances of living. Old errors return; it is not vigorous and youthful morality defeating decadent oppressions, but the repeated tragic tale of man and mankind succumbing in the struggle against his own vices and the inameliorable nature of things. "You have robbed me of my trust in manhood," laments an Arnold aide in Lord's *André*; he could just as easily have said "mankind."²⁵ If for the historians Arnold is a monster of wickedness—monstrous because unnatural in his actions—for the tragedians he is all too natural a manifestation of the order of things.

The first historians of the American Revolution attempt to use Arnold's treason as a warning, a lesson for Americans dangerously predisposed toward selfish and mercenary motives. Their underlying assumptions about progress, however generally they inform the histories, do not preclude worries about immediate social ills—ills they attribute in part to improper assertions of will. As they would have it, if individual strength of character is necessary to successful democratic government, also necessary is the self-discipline—an assertion of will over socially irresponsible urgings of self—for which throughout these histories they celebrate Washington. In the tragedies of Arnold's fall, the dramatists appear far less concerned about immediate social circumstances; indeed, immediate issues and political events appear

scarcely to the point at all. Whatever the ostensible motives for publishing these tragedies, the story repeatedly told has little to do with the increasing sectional tensions and the consequent Civil War. Simms, Turner and Calvert, publishing works during the war itself, may have intended partisans to see lessons in Arnold's treason, but their works speak to other matters first. These writers have not the particular but the universal in mind; if they are writing American tragedy, they are nonetheless building their cases upon assumptions about the nature of all mankind, not on their conviction of a special relationship between God and American man. Perhaps these assumptions explain in part the allusions throughout the Arnold tragedies to the great works of Western literature. Of course just this reliance upon other works brings the charge that the Arnold tragedies are derivative, falling short of the first rank because the dramatists rely upon the conventions of others instead of creating the new American drama they themselves had in mind. However accurate such a judgment of literary merit may be, the attempt to compare Arnold's plight to those of characters in other works, to explain his treason within the long tradition of tragedy, insists on their belief in the similarities of human motivation—however idiosyncratically it may manifest itself—throughout all cultures. America the new land is tied to the old; the conflicts between man and man, man and society, are timeless. Tragedy remains tragedy even in America.

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notes

1. Scholars have not, however, been so ready to accede to Ward's explanation of just what Jackson symbolized. For an opposing view, see Marvin Meyers' *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (Stanford, 1957), in which Meyer argues that, through the symbol of Jackson himself, "Jacksonian democracy sought to recall agrarian innocence to a society drawn fatally to the main chance and the long chance, to revolutionizing ways of acquisition, emulative consumption, promotion and speculation." Meyers' interpretation of the spirit of the age is given considerable support by Fred Somkin's *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca, New York, 1967).

2. The utilization of the past was not limited to historical and fictional interpretations, as Fred Somkin's account of Lafayette's triumphal return makes clear in "The Greatest Man in The World," chapter IV of *Unquiet Eagle*. According to Somkin, Lafayette's reception served a "patently sacramental function," thus operating as a symbolic reaffirmation of American confidence in the "moral continuity of American history" (168-169).

3. George C. Calcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860* (Baltimore, 1970), 31-32.

4. David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (Stanford, 1959), 25, 27, 34. Calcott, Chapters VIII-X, confirms and amplifies Levin's interpretation.

5. James Thatcher, *Military Journal of the American Revolution* (Hartford, 1862), 465; Isaac Q. Leake, *Memoir of the Life and Time of General John Lamb* (Albany, 1857), 269.

6. William Allen, *Biographical and Historical Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass., 1809), 353; *Annals of the American Revolution* (Hartford, 1824), p. 4 of appendix; *History of the United States* (New York, 1850), 319.

7. *The Life of Washington* (Cambridge, 1962), 100.

8. *History of the United States of America*, 6 Vols. (New York, 1885), IV, 427, *History of North America* (Lansingburgh, 1795), 130; *History of the United States* (New York, 1825), 222; *First Book of History* (Boston, 1832), 137; *First Lessons in the History of the United States* (Boston: 1856), 100; *History of New York, For Schools* (New York, 1837), 240; *History of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1859), 207; *A History of the United States* (New Haven, 1837), 125.

9. My reading of Bancroft draws primarily upon "A Priesthood of Democratic Believers," Chapter V of *Unquiet Eagle*.

10. The preference for André's tale to Arnold's is a curious one; perhaps the primary reasons are that André's tale, though sad, affirms the role of Providence in America's destiny; and André's demeanor throughout his short incarceration makes sufficiently lofty the role of both sides in the rebellion. Arnold's clearly does not. For an illuminating article of the imaginative retellings of André's tale, see Robert D. Arner, "The Death of Major André: Some Eighteenth Century Views" *EAL*, 11 (1976), 51-67.

11. Jared Sparks, *The Life and Times of Benedict Arnold* (Boston, 1835), 5; George C. Hill, *Benedict Arnold, A Biography* (Boston, 1858) repeats Sparks' assertion and takes essentially the same argument.

12. *The Green Mountain Boys* (1830; rpt. Boston, 1848), 174-179; *Arnold, or The British Spy* (1840; rpt. Boston, 1844), 8; *The Rejected Wife* (Philadelphia, 1863); *The Female Spy* (Cincinnati, 1851), 3.

13. *The Female Spy*, 6.

14. Arnold's earliest stage appearance is in Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *The Death of General Montgomery, at the Siege of Quebec* (Philadelphia, 1777), a drama written four years before Arnold's treason. Philip Freneau's fragment of a drama, *The Spy*, unpublished until *The Poems of Philip Freneau* (1903; rpt. New York, 1963) Vol. 2, 39-72, was apparently composed immediately after Arnold's flight. Record remains, but no copy is extant, of one *West Point Preserved*, by William Hill Brown. To be mentioned also are the two dramas of William Dunlap, *André; A Tragedy, in Five Acts* (New York, 1798) and *The Glory of Columbia* (Philadelphia, 1803). Arnold is mentioned in *André*, and briefly appears on stage in *The Glory of Columbia*.

15. *Arnold and André* (Boston, 1864); *Miscellany of Verse and Prose* (Baltimore, 1840).

16. Quoted in John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1955), 189.

17. *Arnold, or Treason at The Point* (Philadelphia, 1847), 4; *West Point: A Tragedy*, in *The Countryman*, 4, 1-9 (Dec. 22, 1862-Feb. 24, 1863) 1-66 *passim*; Benedict Arnold, in *The Magnolia Weekly*, I, 32-43 (May 16-Aug. 1, 1863), 165-254 *passim*.

18. *Highland Treason*, in *Essays and a Drama in Five Acts* (Boston, 1852), 324.

19. *Arnold* (New York, 1854), 7, 72.

20. *Southern and Western Magazine*, I (April 1845), 257-261; rpt., *Views and Reviews of American Literature, History and Fiction* (Cambridge, 1962), 68.

21. *André* (New York, 1856), 48-49.

22. *Unquiet Eagle*, 194.

23. Such, at least, was the historians' view; see *History as Romantic Art*, 49-51.

24. For a thorough analysis of just this interpretation of *Coriolanus*, see Kenneth Burke, "Coriolanus—and the Delights of Faction" in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, 1966), 81-97.

25. *André*, 136.