A SPECULATION CONCERNING
CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN

Did Charles Brockden Brown have a hand in the production of the first periodical directed exclusively to ladies in the United States—a periodical issued in Philadelphia in 1792–1793 and known as The Lady’s Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge? Did he also, some three years later, assist in launching a similar publication in New York—The Lady and Gentleman’s Pocket Magazine of Literature and Polite Amusement? Although it is not possible to answer either of these inquiries with a clear affirmative, several interesting facts and coincidences seem to suggest the possibility of his having had a connection with these eighteenth century offerings, and some speculation upon the subject, therefore, may not be entirely profitless.

In 1798 Brown published his first sustained work, Alcuin, or the Rights of Women, a treatise obviously influenced by the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. He followed this during the next few years with the five novels upon which his literary reputation rests. When his efforts to live as a professional novelist did not produce an income sufficient for the needs of a growing family, he turned his attention to editorship and for about ten years devoted himself to the production of various short-lived magazines. Just what Brown’s preparation was for this literary career has never been fully established. It is well known that he was a thoughtful and studious boy, ambitious to become a writer, and eager to have a part in the intellectual life of the new republic. But the scanty details of his early life in Philadelphia and New York during the decade preceding the appearance of Alcuin, or the Rights of Women, supply few clear impressions of the activities through which he was gaining his literary experiences.

The most simple method of entering the world of letters in the America of Brown’s youth was as a contributor to one of the literary periodicals which were springing up from day to day. Publishers
hopeful of gain and ardent young enthusiasts intent upon spreading culture more broadly over the land were alike active in establishing new journals. Readers everywhere were being importuned to support these enterprises and thereby to prove that intellectual interests had a substantial place in their particular region, whatever might be the sad state of less enlightened localities. Biographers have pointed out that Charles Brockden Brown's earliest journalistic work was done in connection with one of these struggling publications—*The Columbian Magazine* of Philadelphia. From August to November in the year 1789, Brown, then eighteen years of age, contributed to this periodical a series of four essays which appeared each month under the title "The Rhapsodist." Examination of the series shows that to each of the brief effusions the mystery loving youth affixed, not his name, but an initial. Rhapsodist number one was signed "B;" number two, "R;" number three, "O;" and number four, "W." Obviously a fifth essay had been contemplated, which, with the signature "N;" would have brought the name "Brown" to a triumphant conclusion.

There is little substance to these rambling contributions. With youthful egotism the writer proposes to converse with his readers, "not as an author, but as a man," and then proceeds in regulation fashion to give some account of his tastes. Yet trivial as they are, the essays do emphasize one of Brown's well known characteristics—his love of solitude. In "Rhapsodist No. II" he makes a special point of this. He describes himself as one who, in general, cares little for the conversation of the world; one who indeed is "incapable of lasting pleasure" in the presence of beings other than those of his own imaginative creation. He confesses that it is "only when alone that he exults in the consciousness of his own existence," and declares that it is "in his fondness for solitude that the singularity of his character principally consists."2

After his entrance into the literary world, Brown was, it would seem, constantly associated with some one of the various groups or clubs which sprang up in Philadelphia and New York for the purpose of promoting the intellectual activities of those cities. During the days of his legal studies in Philadelphia he made one of a group

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1 *The Columbian Magazine*, III. 464 (August, 1789).
2 *The Columbian Magazine*, III. 537 (September, 1789).
known as the Belles Lettres Club; in 1799 he was one of the Friendly Club, a literary coterie in New York which helped him launch his *Monthly Literary Magazine and American Review*; and still later he belonged to the Tuesday Club of Philadelphia, a group closely associated with Dennie’s *Port Folio*. His earliest participation in such groups may well have come about through his youthful connection with *The Columbian Magazine*, for that publication was issued from 1790 to 1792 by a “Society of Gentlemen” who dispensed their anonymous contributions in its columns until the restrictions of a new postal law made it unprofitable to continue the periodical. It seems altogether probable that Brown was one of these “gentlemen,” and that he, with other members of the “Society” might naturally turn his attention to some new venture when the *Columbian* was given up in 1792.

Now the outstandingly new venture which appeared in Philadelphia in the year 1792 was an offering to ladies—*The Lady’s Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge*—issued, according to its title page, by “A Literary Society,” and printed for the proprietors by W. Gibbons. In an opening address the ladies of the city were informed that a society of “literary characters” intended to publish, if sufficiently encouraged, a magazine devoted to the Fair Sex, a magazine that would contain everything requisite to “the dissemination of knowledge of real life and the portrayal of virtue.”

A frontispiece emphasized the ambitious purpose of the new publication by displaying an engraving in which the Genius of the *Lady’s Magazine* accompanied by the Genius of Emulation with a laurel crown in her hand was shown kneeling before Liberty and presenting her with a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft’s recently published *Rights of Women*.

An examination of this *Lady’s Magazine* reveals several things that suggest the probability of Brown’s having had a part in its production. A feature of the opening number (June, 1792) called “The Essayist Number One” bears a resemblance to Rhapsodist Number One of *The Columbian Magazine*, for the writer of this essay, like the Rhapsodist, declares himself to be a lover of solitude

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*The Lady’s Magazine*, June, 1792.

and one who doubts the power of society to stimulate thought. He quotes the poet Young only to differ with him:

Good sense will stagnate, thoughts shut up want air,
And spoil, like bails, unopened to the sun.

The contrary is true, the Essayist maintains: "Solitude gives contemplation scope, and is rather friendly than injurious to thought." Moreover, this contribution, like Rhapsodist Number One, is signed with the initial "B." Essayist Number Two, in the July issue of the magazine, also bears this signature, but after that the articles remain unsigned. There is nothing distinctive about these later essays, except the writer's obvious interest in literature and his constant quotation from or reference to English writers.

More suggestive of Brown's particular interests, however, is an enthusiastic ten-page account of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Women*, with copious excerpts from the book, which appeared in the September issue of the magazine. This work, first published in England earlier in the same year, had been attacked in various quarters for its advanced views on the emancipation of women, and it is interesting to find in a newly established periodical for ladies this early American review giving support and praise to utterances generally regarded as dangerously radical. Brown we know to have been greatly stirred during his formative years by the political and social discussions precipitated by the French Revolution. It is clear from his later work that he was very familiar with *The Rights of Women* and with William Godwin's *Political Justice*, which appeared the following year (1793). His own first publication in book form, we remember, was to be *Alcuin, or the Rights of Women*, a fact that testifies to his immediate interest in this controversial subject. The introduction of Mary Wollstonecraft's book to an American audience might well, therefore, have come from the young Philadelphian most obviously interested in its subject matter, a journalist who must have been contributing to some local magazine, and one who later was to make significant use of this very material.

After twelve months of attempting to improve and amuse the Fair Sex of Philadelphia, the *Lady's Magazine* ceased to exist, and the members of the Literary Society who had sponsored it were forced to turn their attention to other matters. Brown's life from
1793 to 1796 cannot be definitely charted. William Dunlap’s *Diary* gives us occasional glimpses of him after 1797, but as Dunlap himself remarks in July, 1797, “As usual it is difficult to learn what he is about.” During these obscure years he was sometimes in Philadelphia, sometimes in New York, and when in New York he made one of the literary group known as The Friendly Club. Not until 1799 did he embark upon a periodical of his own, but he wrote busily for various publications.

Among the new popular undertakings of the decade one New York periodical stands out as particularly devoted to advancing the position of women—*The Lady and Gentleman’s Pocket Magazine of Literature and Polite Amusement*. Only four numbers of this publication exist today but they are sufficient to show that some one interested in emphasizing Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideas had a part in the paper. A Preface, in the opening number, explained to the public that the *Lady and Gentleman’s Magazine* hoped “to blend articles of amusement with those of science,” but, the editors asserted,

To distinguish works offered in part to the Fair by making them trifling and insignificant, however sanctioned by custom, would, in our opinion, at this period be inexcusable. The rights and duties of woman (which have lately been ably pointed out by one of the sex) begin to be better understood and more generally acknowledged.

In spite of this assurance readers of the magazine would not have found the paper entirely different from the earlier English offerings to ladies. There were bits of biography and history, imitations of Ossian and Sterne, brief tales, and “select poetry.” But there was also another feature of the magazine. Clearly some earnest contributor was zealous to improve the status of women and to arouse interest in the subject. An article on “Female Universities and academies” presented radically advanced ideas on the question of higher education for women; some “Reflections on What is Called Amiable Weakness in Women” offered arguments directly from Mary Wollstonecraft to persuade women out of the “prevailing opinion

* Diary of William Dunlap (New York, 1930), I. 124.
  'Ibid., I. xviii.
  * In The New York Historical Society.
  * The Lady and Gentleman’s Pocket Magazine, August, 1796.
  * Ibid., September, 1796.
  * Ibid., October, 1796.
that they were created rather to feel than to reason." This was not the sort of amiable advice that the current English periodicals for ladies were offering to their patrons, even when those papers devoted some space to the popular subject of female education.

Brown’s interest in the whole matter of a more dignified status for women we know to have been especially keen at this time, for early in 1797 William Dunlap records in his Diary: “Called on Smith. . . . He shewed me two dialogues called Alcuin sent on by him [Brown] to be forwarded to Dennie’s paper. There is much truth, philosophy, accuracy, and handsome writing in the essay.”

Dunlap’s Diary also shows that Brown had been living in New York in 1796, for there are references in the 1797 entries to some misunderstanding between the two men “last winter.” It seems plausible to think that if Brown had been in the city when a new periodical like the Pocket Magazine was being projected by persons known to him, he would have had some part in the enterprise; and that if he had had a part in it, comments on the position of women might well have come from him. That he did know the persons who were experimenting with this new publication seems clear when we note in the November issue a brief article presenting “Specimens of the talent of a young Bard of this city,” for the “bard” was John Blair Linn, whose sister Elizabeth Brown was later to marry. This young poet was a member of the literary group with whom Brown formed an intimacy in New York. A sketch of Linn, written by Brown, showing his admiration for the work of his friend later appeared as an Introduction in an edition of one of Linn’s poems. Both writers were eager to advance the prestige of American literature and were closely associated in their literary interests. Linn’s appearance in the Lady and Gentleman’s Pocket Magazine of Literature and Polite Amusement invites the supposition that Brown also was a contributor to the paper, while the nature of the articles on the position of women gives further weight to the probability.

Neither the Philadelphia nor the New York magazine for ladies achieved any success. Writers who contributed to the brief existence of the papers could have gained little except experience from their

12 Diary of William Dunlap, I. 133.
13 Ibid.
14 John Blair Linn, Valerian (Philadelphia, 1805).
connection with them. No prestige was attached to writing for this type of periodical, and little notice would have been taken of such efforts. Oblivion was their immediate portion, and no proud spirited journalist like Brown would have advertised his part in the short-lived offerings. Dunlap would probably have regarded an association with these papers as too trivial for mention in his biography of Brown, even if he had had any knowledge of it. But that Brown did have some part in the experiments, such as they were, seems not improbable.

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