

A Bumpkin Before the Bar: Charles Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn and Class Anxiety in Postrevolutionary Philadelphia

HILE CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN'S major novels have often been seen as providing social commentary, that commentary does not depend on a well-defined social setting.¹ In Weiland, for example, Brown describes a pastoral and wealthy family so economically and socially insular that, as Elizabeth Hinds notes, they do not "give and

The author would like to thank Carla Mulford, Ian Quimby, and the anonymous readers at PMHB for their helpful comments and criticisms.

¹ For readings of novels not discussed by this paper that examine those novels' commentary on American society see, e.g., Nicholas Rombes, Jr., "All was Lonely, Darksome, and Waste': Weiland and the Construction of the New Republic." Studies in American Fiction 22 (1994), 37–46; Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, "Charles Brockden Brown's Revenge Tragedy: Edgar Huntly and the Uses of Property," Early American Literature 30 (1995), 51–70; Robert S. Levine, Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville (Cambridge, Eng., 1989).

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take in exchange of any sort."² In Edgar Huntly, Brown concerns himself primarily with delineating the nightmarish rural dreamscape of a sleepwalker. In Ormond, the author portrays plague-ridden Philadelphia, yet in this tale of an attempted seduction by an agent of the Bavarian Illuminati, the author strives for a more gothic than realistic tone. This emphasis has lead Ernst Marchand to observe that Ormond's Philadelphia might represent "any plague-ridden city."³

In Arthur Mervyn, however, Brown crafts a novel that reflects in both setting and plot the social and cultural realities of postrevolutionay Philadelphia. While this novel also amply demonstrates Brown's taste for the gothic, the tale of a propertyless bumpkin coming to the new metropolis and struggling to forge a place for himself among its better sort⁴ nevertheless would have resonated for contemporary readers. After 1793, as Billy G. Smith reminds us, upper-class Philadelphia enjoyed the fruits of a booming economy that either could not provide work or could not provide work that paid adequate wages to much of the city's growing population of laboring people.⁵ Consequently, Brown's aspiring farmhand would afford an uncomfortable reminder of the economic disparity and class tensions of the day. Furthermore, that bumpkin's contested and problematic ascent into the better sort would serve to highlight the conflicts among the upper class about what sort of person should be admitted to their circle.

Yet most critical readings of Arthur Mervyn have not focused on the immediate social and historical context of the novel. Instead, critics have found the same general commentary on early American culture detected in the author's other works. Some have noted in Arthur Mervyn a discussion of the individual the new republic was producing, with Warner Berthoff detecting a "native American moral type" who, unfortunately, is a "sharper of the most invincible sort."⁶ Dorothy J. Hale, on the other hand, suggests

² Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, Private Property: Charles Brockden Brown's Gendered Economics of Virtue (Newark, Del., 1997), 104.

³ Ernest Marchand, introd. to Ormond by Charles Brockden Brown (New York, 1937), xxxviii.

⁴ Late-eighteenth-century Philadelphians described the class structure of their city in terms of membership in the better, middling, or lower sort. For examples of the use of these terms by modern scholars, see Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); and Mary M. Schwitzer, "The Spatial Organization of Federalist Philadelphia, 1790," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24 (1993), 31–53.

5 Smith, The "Lower Sort", 199.

6 Warner Berthoff, introd. to Arthur Mervyn, by Charles Brockden Brown (New York, 1962), xvii.

that Arthur could represent either "a selfish hypocrite or a selfless altruist" because he serves as an ambiguous symbol of an ambiguous culture.⁷ Other critics have used the novel to make economic and political arguments about early America. Steven Watts posits that Arthur Mervyn attacks the social evils engendered by commercial pursuits and the "commercial calculus" that often accompanies a market economy in Arthur Mervyn, arguing that Brown's protagonist exemplifies Adam Smith's free-market man, finding success when he turns his stories about himself into a currency that allows him to purchase a place in Philadelphia's upper class.⁹ Somewhat similarly, Jane Tompkins suggests the work promotes Federalist conceptions of a trade-based nation dependent on sound currency and credit for growth and expansion.¹⁰

Despite their cogent reasoning, these examinations of the novel give little attention to the interplay between Arthur and his postrevolutionary Philadelphia context. Yet, as a member of a relatively prominent Quaker merchant family, Brown understood wealthy Philadelphians' anxieties about class boundaries and class mobility and incorporated these fears into Arthur Mervyn. Consequently, this essay will present an examination of Brown's treatment of class anxiety and class self-definition in postrevolutionary Philadelphia.

To better understand Brown's treatment of upper-class anxiety in what was then America's largest metropolis, however, we must first obtain a clear picture of Philadelphia's better sort. As one would expect, members of the elite used their wealth and social esteem to control many aspects of Philadelphia's day-to-day affairs. Both George David Rappaport and Steven Rosswurm note that the better sort dominated not only the city's trade and professions, but also its cultural institutions through financial patronage and

⁷ Dorothy J. Hale, "Profits of Altruism: Caleb Williams and Arthur Mervyn," Eighteenth-Century Studies 22 (1988), 67.

⁸ Stephen Watts, The Romance of Real Life: Charles Brockden Brown and the Origins of American Culture (Baltimore, 1994), 109.

9 Hinds, Private Property, 68, 82.

¹⁰ Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860 (New York, 1985), 69.

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personal influence.¹¹ Yet recognition of the power of a city's elite does not begin to give an adequate picture of the membership of that elite.

The upper class of the Athens of America has been seen as a sort of merchantocracy. Richard Miller's observation that in the 1790s most of the city's real property was owned by merchants, landed gentlemen who were often retired merchants, and lawyers who came from merchant families lends credence to this view.¹² As Thomas M. Doerflinger has observed, however, we should not conflate Philadelphia's aristocracy and its merchant community, since many of those who could legitimately call themselves merchants did not have the means or the social polish to move in elite circles.¹³ Furthermore, the better sort was by no means politically united, but was instead marked by what Roland M. Bauman terms "well-established factionalism" by the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁴

Additionally, merchants were not the only occupational group found in the city's elite circles. According to Gary Nash, the better sort in American seaboard cities like Philadelphia and Boston was composed of "two groups, one distinguished by its high social status and the other by its wealth:"clergy, civil servants, teachers, doctors and lawyers on one hand, merchants and retailers on the other.¹⁵ Rappaport qualifies this neat bifurcation somewhat, however, arguing that wealthy merchants had enough leisure time to become educated and take their place in the city's intellectual elite.¹⁶ Yet Mary M. Schwitzer's examination of census and tax records for 1790 gives some economic basis for Nash's claim of a parallel elite. Her study reveals that the small number of Philadelphia's university professors lived in housing that had an average value of £1,063, a figure significantly higher than that for all merchants except for those who dealt in flour, whose average housing value

¹¹George David Rappaport, Stability and Change in Revolutionary Pennsylvania: Banking, Politics, and Social Structure (University Park, Pa., 1996),129; Steven Rosswurm, Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Sort" during the American Revolution, 1775–1783 (New Brunswick, N.J.,1987), 19.

¹² Richard G. Miller, "Gentry and Entrepreneurs: A Socioeconomic Analysis of Philadelphia in the 1790s," Rocky Mountain Social Sciences Journal 12 (1975), 72.

¹³ Thomas M. Doerflinger, A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986), 16.

¹⁴ Roland M. Bauman, "The Democratic-Republicans of Philadelphia: The Origins, 1776–1797" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1970), 574.

¹⁵ Gary B. Nash, Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 17.

16 Rappaport, Stability and Change, 129.

was £1,334. Additionally, the typical physician lived in housing valued at £461, a figure comparable to that for lumber merchants.¹⁷ Consequently, it should not surprise us that physician and professor of medicine Benjamin Rush lived in Society Hill, a neighborhood that included prominent merchants like Thomas Willing, the first president of the Bank of North America.¹⁸

Nash also reminds us that city dwellers in eighteenth-century America shared a preindustrial concept of class that helped structure their society. Not only did individual urbanites "gradually came to think of themselves as belonging to economic groups that did not share common goals," they also developed a "vertical consciousness" that placed these competing groups within a fixed hierarchy.¹⁹ Naturally, those who saw themselves on the top of that hierarchy were much more invested in preserving it. Indeed, Nash argues that almost "everyone of wealth or position in the port towns adhered to the axiom that rank and status must be carefully preserved and social roles clearly differentiated if society was to retain its equilibrium."²⁰

In part because of this desire to maintain class boundaries, the better sort became conscious of various markers of class membership. According to Rappaport, since Philadelphia's elite aped the lifestyles of the British upper class, gentility and cultivation became a mark of class status.²¹ Nash notes that the imitation of the lifestyles of their English counterparts began in earnest in the 1760s, but he places more emphasis on the material manifestations of this Anglophilia—the mansions, country seats, fourwheeled coaches, etc.—than on the less easily discernible intellectual attainments.²² Owen S. Ireland also conceptualizes social boundaries in more pecuniary terms, with wealthier merchants openly displaying a "disdain for the lesser men in their field" that was based primarily on the financial standing of the smaller businessmen.²³

Yet ample evidence exists suggesting that the cultural imports from Britain's upper class formed an important part of the lives of much of

¹⁷ Schwitzer, "The Spatial Organization of Federalist Philadelphia, 1790," 33.

²³ Owen S. Ireland, Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: Ratifying the Constitution in Pennsylvania (University Park, Pa., 1995), 165.

¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁹ Nash, Urban Crucible, x.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Rappaport, Stability and Change, 121-23.

²² Nash, Urban Crucible, 257-58.

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Philadelphia's better sort. Because of their exposure to the ideals of John Locke and the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, the educated elites, whose "unified intellectual community," as Eve Kornfeld observes, helped make their city "the crown of American culture,"24 believed that everyone possessed an educable moral faculty. Possession of a developed moral faculty thus became both a mark of membership in the better sort and something that its members sought to develop. As Hyman Kuritz notes, the Edinburgh-trained Benjamin Rush promoted an educational theory based on Scottish moralist notions of the moral faculty and of sympathy that was designed to help people cope with an ethically vague culture strongly rooted in an emergent market economy.25 Rush's ideas, furthermore, were not the esoteric musings of an isolated intellectual, but instead reflected assumptions widely held in some upper-class circles. Jacqueline S. Reinier reminds us that didactic children's literature based on Lockean child-rearing principles was quite popular among Philadelphia's upper-class parents.²⁶ These stories, which read like a Lockean rewriting of Horatio Alger, taught children that poor little boys and girls could succeed in life if they had proper moral training. This advocacy of success through proper education represented an implicit endorsement on the part of a sizable element of the better sort of judging social worth by character and not solely by financial ability.

In addition to this emphasis on a moral education, Philadelphia's upper class also largely adhered to the concept of republican motherhood. This new political ideology, according to Linda K. Kerber, gave mothers the task of preserving America's moral fabric and encouraging civic virtue through their influence in the home.²⁷ While not without its problems, republican motherhood did create a space for social utility in the home and away from the marketplace. Furthermore, a republican mother and a home in which she could practice her beneficent office became another mark of membership in the better sort.

Yet just as we cannot cast Philadelphia's elite as merely a merchantocracy,

²⁷ Linda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (Chapel Hill, 1988),199.

²⁴ Eve Kornfeld, "Crisis in the Capital: The Cultural Significance of Philadelphia's Great Yellow Fever Epidemic," *Pennsylvania History* 51 (1984), 190, 193.

²⁵ Hyman Kuritz, "Benjamin Rush: His Theory of Republican Education," History of Education Quarterly 7 (1967), 434.

²⁶ Jacqueline S. Reinier, "Rearing the Republican Child: Attitudes and Practices in Postrevolutionary Philadelphia," William and Mary Quarterly 39 (1982), 154.

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neither can we view them solely as cultivated moralists and republican mothers. Men like Stephen Girard, a wealthy flour merchant who began his career as a boy on one of his father's West Indian trading expeditions, did not have the advantage of an extensive formal education. Even though these men amassed fortunes large enough to live the opulent lifestyle of the Philadelphia elite, they could only defer to what their business dealings had taught them and view the world through a commercial prism, judging their fellow men on the basis of their use value or credit rating. David S. Miller reminds us that Girard cruelly neglected his family but left diaries and correspondence that excitedly described both his flour trade with the West Indies and the ship he used to conduct that trade.²⁸

Philadelphia's better sort, then, emerges as a class with a curious contradiction. Though most elites viewed themselves as such and were greatly concerned to maintain the division between the better, middling, and lower sorts, the elites did not have a clear definition of what constituted membership in their ranks. Instead, they were forced to make do with two distinct-though not mutually contradictory-standards: financial worth and gentility. This ontological dilemma would not have been important if Philadelphia's classes were relatively stable, yet in spite of a concern for maintaining class distinctions, class boundaries were relatively permeable. Both Nash and Rappaport have noted the high class mobility existing in Philadelphia in the latter part of the eighteenth century, with Nash observing that all along the eastern seaboard "movement up and down the social ladder never stopped."29 Furthermore, Robert J. Gough's examination of the marriage patterns of upper-class Philadelphians demonstrates that, relative to other seaboard cities, Philadelphia's elite did not consist of a small and unchanging group of families. Unlike their counterparts in New York and Boston, prominent Philadelphians seldom married their first cousins, making it easier for newcomers to penetrate the city's upper social ranks.³⁰

The economic growth of the 1790s—in addition to the physically and culturally devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1793—further complicated matters as a significant number of outsiders sought a place within the city's

²⁸ David S. Miller, "The Polly: A Perspective on Merchant Steven Girard," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (hereafter, PMHB) 112 (1988), 119-208.

²⁹ Nash, Urban Crucible, x; Rappaport, Stability and Change, 133.

³⁰ Robert J. Gough, "Close-Kin Marriage and Upper-Class Formation in Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," Journal of Family History 112 (1989), 127.

upper class and a share of its prosperity. This social instability, in turn, brought to light the contradictory standards of judgment held by members of the upper class as they sought to decide whom to admit and whom to shun. Because of their commitment to maintaining social hierarchy, all of the city's elite could agree on the general proposition that only the right sort should be admitted into their circles. Unfortunately, a person of refined sensibility may not have the best credit and the individual comfortable in the marketplace may not measure up to more genteel standards.

Seizing on this cultural uncertainty, Brown devotes a major portion of Arthur Mervyn to a trial of the competing value systems of upper-class Philadelphia.³¹ He creates in Arthur Mervyn a character who plays on many of the fears held by Philadelphia's better sort. Arthur then undergoes a judgment of his personal worth that also reflects a judgment of these two standards of valuation. Some of Philadelphia's elite condemn the impoverished Arthur based on a commercial standard. More genteel elites, on the other hand, defend Arthur on the grounds of their sentimental impressions about him and his own sensibility. Arthur's ultimate admission into elite society thus argues that those who base judgments of individual worth on the teachings of the Scottish moralists and other exponents of sentiment are more adept at determining the qualities needed for membership in the better sort.

To fully understand the cultural anxieties Arthur Mervyn evokes, we must first explore both the social instability occurring after the Revolutionary War as the city entered a period of rapid development and the upheaval caused by the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. And while Rappaport reminds us that a general decline in Quaker influence combined with a rise in Anglican prestige represented the major change in upper-class Philadelphia's social structure in the second half of the eighteenth century,³² we must also examine the effect of these changes on the Quaker members of the better

³¹ Both David M. Larson in "Arthur Mervyn, Edgar Huntley, and the Critics," (Essays in Literature 15 (1988), 207–19) and Norman Grabo in a historical essay prepared for the bicentennial edition of Arthur Mervyn (Kent, Ohio, 1980) have argued that the novel lacks structural continuity because of its publication as a first installment followed some months later by a thematically unconnected sequel. Consequently, I have avoided a reading designed to provide a neat explication of the entire work and will instead focus on Brown's comparison of the two value systems.

32 Rappaport, Stability and Change, 124.

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sort because of Brown's membership in that group.

Many readjustments in political and economic life occurred in Philadelphia after the Revolutionary War. As the city once again became a prosperous trading center, it began attracting a greater number of immigrants. Susan E. Klepp, relying on United States Census data for Philadelphia and its suburbs during the last decade of the eighteenth century, demonstrates that the area's population grew from 44,096 to 67,811 between 1790 and 1800. Klepp's research also indicates that 13,007 of these new Philadelphians were immigrants.33 Smith observes that many of these immigrants were not European but from rural areas of the United States.34 Daniel A. Cohen further notes that Chester County, Arthur Mervyn's birthplace, provided Philadelphia with many of its new citizens during that period.35 Brown thus created a protagonist who would strike contemporary readers as a typical migrant to the city fleeing typical rural troubles. Consequently, Arthur's declaration that the scheme foremost in his mind was to go to the city and apprentice himself to some mechanical trade when his father and stepmother evicted him36 should be understood to signal a commonplace quest.

The reasons for the presence of so many Arthur Mervyns in 1790s Philadelphia can be found in the economic realities of the time. As Nash has noted, at the end of the Revolutionary War, farmers in rural counties saw the tightening of British credit and a reduced number of export markets,³⁷ leading to a dearth of agricultural employment. Philadelphia, however, offered a growing number of nonagricultural jobs. The economic pull of the nascent metropolis thus led to a migrational pattern which, according to Cohen, forced many rural youths to try their luck in the city, sometimes more than once, in an effort to establish themselves.³⁸ This economic unsteadiness underlies the "cyclical reality of the lives of many eighteenth-

³³ Susan E. Klepp, Philadelphia in Transition: A Demographic History of the City and Its Occupation Groups, 1720–1830 (New York, 1989), 336–38.

34 Smith, "Lower Sort", 60.

³⁵Daniel A. Cohen, "Arthur Mervyn and His Elders: The Ambivalence of Youth in the Early Republic," William and Mary Quarterly 43 (1986), 362–380.

³⁶ Charles Brockden Brown, Arthur Mervyn, eds. Sydney J. Krause et. al. (Centennial edition, Kent, Ohio, 1980), 23. All subsequent references to Arthur Mervyn will be to this edition.

³⁷ Gary B. Nash, Class and Society in Early America (Englewood Cliffs, N.J, 1970), 179.

38 Cohen, Arthur Mervyn, 367.

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century urban laboring people" discussed by Smith.³⁹ Consequently, these rural seekers often found themselves buffeted by the same economic competition faced by all in the "intensely insecure"⁴⁰ environment of Philadelphia.

Clearly, Philadelphia did not present ideal economic conditions to its rural newcomers. But why would the better sort worry about this? In addition to the previously noted fluidity and concern for class boundaries Doerflinger notes that even wealthy merchants had great reason to fear newcomers, since all merchants, settled or wildcat, had access to the same suppliers and paid the same prices.⁴¹ Established Philadelphians, then, distrusted the "Arthurs" in their city because each of these men represented only one small wave in a rising flood of people seeking livelihoods and social positions in a city where social and market economies were increasingly unstable.

More obviously, however, Arthur Mervyn calls upon the fear of outsiders generated by the great yellow fever outbreak that occurred in Philadelphia in 1793. The epidemic, which eventually killed some 5,000 people, close to a tenth of the city's population, was the worst Philadelphia had seen and caused great political and social upheaval. During the plague, members of the federal, state, and municipal governments joined a general exodus from the city as the attention of those left behind turned to caring for the sick and burying the dead. As Kornfeld observes, from the first day of the epidemic, "business, education, medicine, charity, fellowship, filial duty, and civil government broke down in the City of Brotherly Love."⁴²

Of course, the city had dealt with the fever from its founding. According to J. H. Powell, Philadelphians regularly and wrongly blamed the existence of yellow fever on immigrants or foreigners. They called it the Barbados distemper in William Penn's time and then shifted the blame to German immigrants, changing the name to Palatine fever. Eventually, they decided that the disease originated in the West Indies and took measures to quarantine travelers from those parts.⁴³ It should come as no surprise, then,

39 Smith, "Lower Sort", 138.

40 Ibid., 39.

⁴¹ Doerflinger, Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise, 46.

42 Kornfeld, Crisis in the Capital, 195.

⁴³ J. H. Powell, Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793 (1949; reprint, Philadelphia, 1993), 13.

that during the epidemic of 1793, many Philadelphians laid the blame on a group of French political refugees newly arrived from the slave revolts in Santo Domingo. Obviously, then, while Arthur is not literally equated with the group some believed responsible for the epidemic, he nevertheless embodies the same liminal status and potential for social disruption.

And finally, as Peter Kafer observes, we cannot discuss the class anxieties embedded in Arthur Mervyn without taking into account Brown's membership in Philadelphia's Quaker community and, by extension, his share in that community's political misfortunes.⁴⁴ During the Revolutionary War, the Quakers' political and religious rivals used the Friends' pacifism to exile Quaker merchants like Brown's father Elijah to Virginia. Thus an understanding of the anxieties of inclusion in Philadelphia society that Brown draws upon in Arthur Mervyn is incomplete without a sense of the very real loss of political power, wealth, position, and personal liberty experienced by elite Quakers.

We can read in Brown's novel, then, a tale of an unknown and menacing outsider who plays upon several hobgoblins of Philadelphia's cultural and economic elite: the anxiety caused by the flood of rural and foreign immigrants, the terror of social collapse through external contagion brought on by the yellow fever epidemic, and to a much lesser extent, the Quaker's loss of power to ethnic and class rivals. Nevertheless, in the face of strong opposition, this outsider seeks admission to the social class able to participate in Philadelphia's booming economy and stimulating intellectual scene on the basis of his moral capacities.

An awareness of Arthur's dual status as both a petitioner for entrance into society and a potential disrupter of the fragile status quo of that society thus facilitates an understanding of the trial-like structure of the first two-thirds of the novel. Robert A. Ferguson has observed that Brown, who once trained to be a lawyer "admired the intellectual nature of the law."⁴⁵ It follows that in *Arthur Mervyn*, the author draws attention to the judgment Arthur must undergo by relying on legal metaphor and structuring most of the novel as a trial not only of Arthur but also the upper class's competing value systems.

⁴⁴ Peter Kafer, "Charles Brockden Brown and Revolutionary Philadelphia: An Imagination in Context," *PMHB* 116 (1992), 467–98.

⁴⁵ Robert A. Ferguson, Law and Letters in American Culture (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 132.

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Led by prosecuting attorney Wortley, a merchant who views life through the commercial spectacles of the marketplace, Dr. Stevens's neighbors and associates, in effect, bring charges against Arthur and attempt to expel him from elite circles. Ably defended by Dr. Stevens's wife, a republican mother who has received the genteel education befitting a woman of her situation in life, Arthur is able to respond to the charges in a way that demonstrates his capacity for moral sympathy and proves his worth to the better educated elite. Brown completes his courtroom tableau by providing Arthur with a judge. The altruistic and well-thought-of Dr. Stevens, who must ultimately decide whether or not to admit this possibly dangerous outsider both to Philadelphia's marketplace and its exclusive social circles by making Arthur his apprentice, represents the part-time writer and genteel professional man Brown felt best suited to guide society.

When Stevens brings Arthur into his home, his act of charity is not well received by his peers. They were, he relates, "loud in their remonstrances on the imprudence and rashness of my conduct. They called me presumptuous and cruel in exposing my wife and child as well as myself to such immanent hazard, for the sake of one whom most probably was worthless, and whose disease had doubtless been . . . rendered incurable."46 Of course, Arthur does have yellow fever and his presence does threaten the health of the Stevens family. Consequently, Arthur evokes an immediate, physical fear that Brown's readers would easily recognize. The Stevens's neighbors, however, do not limit their criticisms to medical concerns. Instead, they remark that Arthur is "most probably worthless," not simply ill but also not worth saving since his apparent poverty indicates that he has not been able to prove his social worth by amassing capital. This assessment of Arthur squares with Doerflinger's observation that Philadelphia's merchants kept each other under constant surveillance, attempting to determine each other's wealth and creditworthiness as well as that of relatives and friends.⁴⁷ Clearly, the indigent bumpkin Stevens brings home could not withstand such scrutiny and would seem another example of the plague of wealth and status seekers infecting the city.

Obviously, then, Stevens's neighbors not only fear for the well being of the Stevens family but also worry about bringing another pestilential

⁴⁶ Arthur Mervyn, 8.

⁴⁷ Doerflinger, Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise, 18.

immigrant within the domestic circle of an established family. Here, the yellow fever epidemic works metaphorically, describing the manner in which Philadelphia's elite class views the influx of rural and foreign immigrants who threaten their already turbulent social and economic order. Arthur, who allegedly brings a socioeconomic sickness as the Santo Domingan refugees allegedly brought the deadly yellow fever, could not only infect Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, but also the upper class itself if his presence in the Stevens's home destroys carefully preserved class boundaries and opens the door to a flood of unworthy individuals.

The general disapproval of Arthur turns into open charges of misconduct when Wortley accuses him of knowingly aiding the confidence man Welbeck, asking Dr. Stevens to "turn him forth from" his home.48 While Wortley does have a very legitimate reason to confront Arthur, the vitriolic nature of his accusations and his intense desire to see Arthur exiled rather than held for questioning or punishment represent the community's desire to preserve class distinctions. Wortley wishes to remove Arthur from the city rather than to imprison him, representing a desire to remove a contagion from an infected body. Yet the financier, who later claims that his experience in the marketplace has given him "some knowledge of the world, a knowledge which was not gained in a moment and has not cost a trifle,"49 refuses to consider that Arthur, with whom Wortley had no direct dealings, may himself have been duped by Welbeck. Wortley's knowledge of the world seems to have come primarily from his business dealings, and this knowledge consequently leads him to suspect the worst of one with no financial evidence of social usefulness.

Brown is careful, however, not to place his protagonist entirely at the mercy of a financially-based standard of worth that will surely find him wanting. Arthur has a defender in Stevens's "luxuriously educated"⁵⁰ wife. Yet this luxurious education was more rigorous than it sounds and in fact prepared her to prove Arthur's worth. As Kerber has observed, upper-class women in early America were often given a relatively extensive education to equip them for the marriage market.⁵¹ Yet this education did not concentrate solely on subjects intended to lend social poise, but also sought to train the

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⁴⁸ Arthur Mervyn, 14.

⁴⁹ Arthur Mervyn, 249.

⁵⁰ Arthur Mervyn, 7.

⁵¹ Kerber, Women of the Republic, 208.

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young ladies to employ reason and instill values like benevolence and selfreliance, thus making them conform more to the ideals of republican motherhood.

In Philadelphia, as Ruth Gordon demonstrates, this new educational approach for women found a home at the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia, where the teenaged daughters of the upper classes followed a curriculum first designed by Benjamin Franklin. Borrowing heavily from Locke and Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, the course of study was originally intended to instill in young boys the moral sensibilities productive citizens needed: and the Young Ladies' Academy adopted it with little modification.52 Of course, the prominent male Philadelphians who founded the school did not envision the young students having the same careers as the boys who attended the city's male academies, but instead saw other uses for educated women. For example, trustee Benjamin Rush, as Jean S. Straub notes, felt that the education of women would lead to the creation of a group of ethical guardians who would "contribute to the general uplift of the morals and manners of the country."53 With all this in mind, it is interesting to consider that Stevens's wife, a new mother with an infant in the fall of 1793, could have attended the Philadelphia academy, which opened its doors in the fall of 1787.

As Straub's commentary on Rush suggests, this attempt to produce virtuous women who were not merely ornaments for their husbands stems from the new republic's desire to regulate the development of its character, to create republican mothers who would nurture young citizens. When we read that Mrs. Stevens has a luxurious education, then, we should not envision her playing the piano while wearing a fashionable dress. Rather, we should realize that her education gave her the ability and the duty to act as the moral guiding force in her home and, by extension, to preserve the morals of her social circle by determining Arthur's worthiness.⁵⁴

⁵² Ruth Gordon, "The Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia," in Women of America: A History, eds. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (Boston, 1979), 73.

⁵³ Jean S. Straub, "Benjamin Rush's Views on Women's Education," *Pennsylvania History* 34 (1967), 154.

⁵⁴ This placement of Mrs. Stevens in a position of ideological power, qualified though it may be by her ultimate submission to patriarchy, represents an important difference in emphasis when compared with Hinds's assertion that in *Arthur Mervyn* women are "defined by bodies and houses" (*Private Property*, 96). We must consider, however, that Hinds's reading largely ignores the function of these bodies and houses as class markers and that Hinds bases this reading on considerations of other

Furthermore, in creating his model republican woman, Brown, also a champion of women's right to an education and place as moral guardian of society,55 drew on the literary conventions of sentimentalism to argue that as a woman Mrs. Stevens had a specifically feminine virtue that would further qualify her to evaluate Arthur. As Ruth Bloch explains, in eighteenthcentury sentimentalism women were thought more sensitive to spiritual matters than men and possessed of refined sensibilities that would make them excellent judges of character.56 Consequently, Mrs. Stevens's female virtue, combined with her status as republican mother, uniquely qualify her to see Arthur's worth and then stand as his advocate. Because of Mrs. Stevens's sympathy and her place as his moral guardian, Dr. Stevens listens to his wife in spite of the urgings of Wortley. Immediately after their neighbor suggests throwing Arthur into the street, Mrs. Stevens tells her husband that she "would vouch . . . before any tribunal, for [Arthur's] innocence"57 and convinces him to let Arthur tell his side of the story. If it were not for this intervention, Arthur would have been judged unworthy because of his poverty. Instead, the attempt to determine the worth of one young man becomes a contest between gentility and financial standing as the best indication of one who belongs in the upper sort.

Confronted not only by Wortley's commercial calculus and class anxiety but also by his wife's sensibility and training, Dr. Stevens will ultimately decide the fate of Arthur and the contest between sentiment and finance. But to understand the judge Brown has chosen, we must briefly look at Brown's attitude towards writing and writers. Ferguson quotes a passage from Brown's *Literary Magazine and American Register* which suggests that the struggling author felt that professional men who wrote in their spare time could better influence society, since one "who devotes to composition the leisure secured to him by hereditary affluence, or by a lucrative profession or office, obtains from mankind an higher, and more lasting, and more genuine reverence, than any other class of mortals."⁵⁸ Taking this statement into account, it becomes clear that Brown brings Arthur before one of his

characters—Clemenza Lodi, Achsa Fielding, and Eliza Hadwin—and not on a reading of Mrs. Stevens. ⁵⁵ See, e.g., Brown's "The Rights of Women: A Dialogue," serialized in the Weekly Magazine in

 <sup>1798.
&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," Signs 13 (1987), 37–58

⁵⁷ Arthur Mervyn, 14.

⁵⁸ Ferguson, Law and Letters, 133.

most revered mortals, capable not only of discerning Arthur's intentions but also of making a judgment that would refine the better sort's sense of itself and of its class boundaries. The compassionate, sympathetic physician and man of letters-Stevens can, after all, put Arthur's story into prose-has the respect of his neighbors and associates. And despite Stevens's demure protestation that the gains of his "profession were slender"59 he seems to move in circles that demonstrate his secure place among the city's better sort. Stevens is a friend to the financier Wortley and seems to be at least passingly familiar with the money men Welbeck defrauds. Additionally, after Welbeck deserts Mrs. Wentworth's mansion, Stevens joins the party of prominent citizens that searches for the swindler.60 But the good doctor, as suggested above, does not represent a historical impossibility. Instead, he is one of those Philadelphia physicians-not unlike Benjamin Rush-fortunate enough to live among the wealthy and influential as a genteel member of the elite. Brown has empowered a benevolent and well-connected noncommercial author to judge both Arthur and the competing value systems and then record the experience in his own words.

When Arthur begins the "tedious but humble tale"⁶¹ that serves as his defense, he cannily attempts to provide plausible explanations for his actions and associations. He also continually refers to his honesty, at one point noting that he "had hitherto preserved [his] lips untainted by prevarication or falsehood."⁶² He responds to Mrs. Althorpe's accusations of immoral conduct and theft with a studied, point-by-point refutation of these charges, in which the legalistic formality of his rhetoric leads him to begin three consecutive paragraphs with the phrase "[i]t is true that."⁶³ The accused's attempts to represent himself as a man possessed of a sympathy similar, though inferior, to Mrs. Stevens's form the most interesting aspect of Arthur's defense. This employment of the behavior promoted by the Scottish moral philosophers indicates that he does not try to convince Stevens of his value by employing Wortley's commercial and financial standards, but instead pleads his case by demonstrating the gentility valued by Mrs. Stevens. Indeed, Arthur goes to great lengths to demonstrate his

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⁵⁹ Arthur Mervyn, 220.

⁶⁰ Arthur Mervyn, 122.

⁶¹ Arthur Mervyn, 16.

⁶² Arthur Mervyn, 135.

⁶³ Arthur Mervyn, 341.

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usefulness by arguing that he is by nature "incapable of any purpose that is not beneficent."⁶⁴

Arthur's representation of himself draws on conceptions of right conduct that Scottish moralists like Adam Smith were promoting during the late eighteenth century. Smith and his contemporaries believed that those possessed of moral sympathy would exhibit the proper emotional response to environmental stimuli. As Carla Mulford argues, this effectively equates sympathy with social amelioration since "[s]entimental or sympathetic responses, when appropriately aroused, could assist rather than interfere with sociability and culture."⁶⁵ Arthur's employment of this rhetoric of sentiment thus represents an appeal to the genteel members of the upper class. He argues that he meets their standards for a socially useful individual and that, despite his poverty, he would contribute if given a place within their milieu.

Because Arthur's testimony presents several highly charged scenes to which he responds with beneficence, he can offer the Stevenses a strong argument that he will be a force for good if admitted to Philadelphia society. A rather extreme example of Arthur's sympathetic set pieces comes when he tells of Mrs. Villars shooting him in the head. Arthur does not let his minor wound deter him from benevolence. Instead, he relates that he "needed no long time to shew me the full extent of the injury which I had suffered and the conduct which it became me to adopt. For a moment I was bewildered and alarmed, but presently perceived that this was an incident more productive of good than of evil. It would teach me caution in contending with the passion of another, and shew me that there is a limit which the impetuosities of anger will sometimes overstep."66 Arthur then goes on to instruct his assailant on how to deal with her anger and admonishes her to show care around firearms. While this scene may strike modern readers as absurd, a contemporary audience would realize that Arthur was demonstrating popular notions of sympathy to suggest to the Stevenses that he would contribute to Philadelphia society. A man possessed of a fully developed and socially responsible sensibility who could turn an extreme situation into an opportunity to better understand himself and others, would attempt to turn the situation to the benefit of society and would not give way to violence.

64 Arthur Mervyn, 330.

45 Carla Mulford, introd. to The Power of Sympathy by William Hill Brown (New York, 1996), xxii.

66 Arthur Mervyn, 330.

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As the trial proceeds, Stevens finds himself more and more convinced by Arthur's argument and eventually dismisses the charges Wortley has brought on the grounds that his friend's commercial activities have not taught him how to judge the worth of an individual. In a key scene, Stevens explains to Wortley why he is rejecting his advice in favor of Mrs. Stevens's:

I want a councilor; but you, Wortley, are unfit for the office. Your judgment is unfurnished with the same materials; your sufferings have soured your humanity and biased your candor. The only one qualified to divide with me these cares, and aid in selecting the best mode of action, is my wife. She is mistress of Mervyn's history; an observer of his conduct during his abode with us; and is hindered, by her education and temper, from deviating into rigor and malevolence.⁶⁷

Stevens clearly implies that he decides in favor of the arguments made by his wife because of her status as republican mother and her education, not because of personal affection. More importantly, however, Stevens decides against Wortley because he does not have the education—the sensibility —that his wife does. Obviously, then, Stevens decides in favor not only of his wife and Arthur, but also of the position they argue from. Thus, the judgment that takes place is not simply a judgment about the character of one Arthur Mervyn of Chester County. Because Brown has allowed Arthur to overturn the charges of worthlessness and menace by a convincing demonstration of his sympathy and benevolence, he has also allowed Stevens to rule favorably on the larger claim that Wortley's commercial standard does not trump Mrs. Stevens's sympathy when it came to judging whether or not someone should belong to Philadelphia's better sort.

By the time the second part of Brown's novel abandons the trial structure set out in the first, Arthur has convinced Stevens that he is not the dangerous menace Wortley describes. The good doctor, who had been preparing to take Arthur as his apprentice, thus giving him both a marketable skill and the potential to become part of upper-class Philadelphia, seems eager to believe in the young man. Here, Brown's novel reads like John Newberry's Little Pretty Pocket Books, the didactic children's

67 Arthur Mervyn, 251.

literature popular among upper-class Philadelphia mothers in which, as Reinier notes, the "poor but good boy" becomes a "great man."⁶⁸

Of course, Arthur could still be the facile lout Berthoff claims he is, but at this point in the narrative questions about Arthur per se are much less important than the stakes involved in questions about what "sort" should make up the better sort. By altering the narrative perspective found in Newberry's rags-to-riches children's stories, Brown places the good but poor boy within the gaze and under the judgment of the wealthy society he aspires to enter. This, in turn, allows Brown's rags-to-riches story to say more about the dominant class than about the one who desires to enter it.

Of course, we should not conflate the Stevenses' appraisal of Arthur and the grounds they employ for this appraisal with Brown's opinions about the value of the Scottish moralists. Indeed, Brown's Edgar Huntly blames "the impulse of a misguided, indeed, but powerful benevolence" for his inability to correctly read the madman Clithero.69 Instead, in Brown's portrayal of the trial of Arthur Mervyn, we see a key dilemma of upper-class Philadelphia delineated and then fictively resolved. Berthoff calls Brown "primarily a stage manager of contending forces,"70 an observation that accurately describes the author's work in the first two thirds of Arthur Mervyn. Brown allows the largely unacknowledged tensions between financial and genteel definitions of the members of the better sort to play against the backdrop of an economically prosperous Philadelphia that nevertheless could not share that prosperity with the large numbers that prosperity attracted to the city. By the final curtain, however, Brown has let his altruistic professional and man of letters Dr. Stevens judge moral capacity a better indicator than financial solvency for entry into the better sort. Brown's staging, therefore, of the battle between Mrs. Stevens's genteel education and Wortley's commercial calculus over the question of whether or not to admit a potentially dangerous newcomer to the ranks of high society preserves for us a valuable record of upper-class anxiety in postrevolutionary Philadelphia.

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69 Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker (New York, 1988), 281.

⁶⁸ Reinier, "Rearing the Republican Child," 153.

⁷⁰ Berthoff, introd. to Arthur Mervyn (1962), ix.

