

To the Convivial Grave and Back: John Fitch as a Case Study in Cultural Failure, 1785–1792

... but all combined, cannot be put in competition with the distresses I have experienced in my feelings in raising money from my best friends. Could money have been extracted from my limbs, amputations would have often taken place, provided the disjointed part could have been readily joined, rather than to make the demands which I have.

—John Fitch, 1792¹

JOHN FITCH, BEST KNOWN as a pioneering inventor who started running steamboats on the Delaware River in 1786, more than twenty years before Fulton's *Clermont*, described the strain of entrepreneurship in the most graphic terms. Even the enormous suffering of repeated amputation of his limbs could not compete with the distress of his "feelings in raising money from my best friends." At a time when qualities of rationality, genius, and independence of thought were identified with manliness, success with his groundbreaking steamboat project promised to make Fitch an exemplar of masculine virtue. However, Fitch's remarkably vivid language of dismemberment also marks him as a transitional figure, a man caught between longstanding ideals of success and an entirely new kind of project. Relentlessly striving to demonstrate his value as a man through his innovative work on the steamboat project, Fitch stretched the eighteenth century's culture of

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¹ John Fitch, "Steamboat History," in *The Autobiography of John Fitch*, ed. Frank D. Prager (Philadelphia, 1976), 172. *The Autobiography of John Fitch* contains extensive excerpts from Fitch's "Steamboat History" manuscript at the Library Company of Philadelphia. References to Fitch, "Steamboat History" will be from Prager unless otherwise noted.

masculine performance up to and beyond its limits.²

Fitch's work on steamboats between 1785 and 1792 was noteworthy in many ways. His steamboats were the first attempt in the United States to apply steam technology to commercial activity, and he and his partner Henry Voight made important improvements in boilers and condensers that increased the usefulness of steam engines. The steamboat project was also an excellent example of artisan entrepreneurship. Beginning in the 1780s, ambitious artisans began to break away from traditional craft enterprise and move into more speculative ventures. Men like Moses Lancaster and Mathew Carey helped turn Philadelphia's craft economy toward industrialization as their efforts to expand production encouraged the further division of labor, the introduction of machinery, and the reduction of wages. Fitch's steamboat enterprise was even more daringly entrepreneurial. Where other entrepreneurial artisans produced larger amounts or cheaper kinds of traditional commodities and then speculated on their ability to sell them, Fitch's steam-powered water vessel was a wholly new kind of commodity for which demand, pricing, payment for services, and profitability were entirely a matter of conjecture. His efforts to raise money from government bodies and to obtain exclusive rights to his inventions were also an important example of the intersection of private enterprise and government in the new republic. By the time the steamboat project collapsed, Fitch was a minor national figure in his own right. His work on the steamboat was familiar to Congress and state legislatures, he was well known on the frontier, and he had come into contact with such leading figures as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Robert Morris.³

John Fitch and his steamboat project will be considered here as an episode in the history of popular culture in the early republic. Though eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century popular culture are usually dis-

² Fulton referred to his first steamboat as the *North River Steam Boat*, but the boat has traditionally been called the *Clermont*. See Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Fire of His Genius: Robert Fulton and the American Dream* (New York, 2001), 130.

³ For Fitch's improvements on steam engines, see Prager, *Autobiography*, 169 n.; also Thompson Westcott, *The Life of John Fitch* (Philadelphia, 1878), 275–80; for Mathew Carey, see Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic* (Philadelphia, 1996), 1–9, 50–52; for Moses Lancaster, see Donna Rilling, *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism: Builders in Philadelphia, 1790–1850* (Philadelphia, 2001), 15–28.

cussed in relation to parades and holiday celebrations, business materials can also be a useful source for research in cultural history. In her study of Philadelphia merchants, historian Toby Ditz argued that business letters involved a "sustained meditation on the precariousness of masculine identity and reputation" within the conditions of quickly shifting prices, limited information, and relations of "patronage and connection" that characterized late eighteenth-century trade. According to Ditz, merchants often struggled to maintain a sense of masculine honor and independence because of the "womanish" qualities associated with their business experience. When merchants encountered business difficulties, they described their adversaries as monstrous feminine harpies seeking to devour men whole. Struggling merchants also risked being seen by others, and seeing themselves, as "unmanned," reduced to a faint-hearted victimhood, by their misfortunes. Unless they recovered themselves, merchants could find themselves redefined as part of the feminine "other" against which independent masculine selfhood was formulated.⁴

John Fitch's business writings both "juggled existing languages of masculinity" and reached for images to express his experience of masculinity in relation to the particular circumstances of steamboat building. To attract financial support, he wrote conventional testimonies to his own independence, honor, and eagerness to serve, as well as volunteering critical reflections on what he saw as his failures. Fitch credited himself with manly fortitude in dealing with the tribulations of steamboat building, and, when reflecting on the possible significance of steamboats, gave himself credit for potency equal to that of Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, or Peter the Great. At the same time, however, he also likened the difficulties of steamboat building to Indian captivity and suicide. Thus, like Philadelphia merchants, Fitch defined his "self" in opposition to a dangerous "other" that threatened him with irrational violence.

As the project dragged on, Fitch began to develop a second language of self-representation in which he envisioned inflicting on himself the torment that he had previously identified with the techniques of the "other." Portraying himself as offering his neck "to the common executioner" and serving as a "willing sacrifice to the Faggot," Fitch began to embrace the

⁴ Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994), 51, 53-54, 59-61, 66-69.

distress of dismemberment and torture as the core of his identity. At first, Fitch's prose images of embracing torment supplemented his more conventional representations of himself. Gradually, however, the alternative representations began to colonize the vocabulary of previously dominant early modern discourses. Indeed, by 1792, when he drafted an autobiography, Fitch was prepared to narrate his whole life as an exercise in torment and to satirize as foolish and naïve his previous efforts to live according to republican values.⁵

Fitch's business materials also provide a basis for reconstructing his experience of popular culture in relation to the wider popular culture of the late eighteenth century. Within early modern culture, popular leisure sustained what anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu has called a "habitus." An elaborate set of perceptual schemes, imposed through socialization, a habitus becomes the basis for the "routine innovations" of established social practice. The early modern opposition between masculine self and threatening other functioned as a habitus because it was the starting point for comprehending phenomena ranging from virtue and vice to marital fidelity, melancholy, drinking, political debate, military surrender, and the distinctions between social orders.⁶

Early modern popular leisure sustained this cultural opposition because leisure practices helped participants secure a sense of independent selfhood. Artisans and laborers in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Phila-

⁵ For Fitch's conventional testimonies to his own virtues of honesty and eagerness to serve the public, see Fitch to Pennsylvania Assembly, March 1786; for analogies between himself and Caesar and Alexander, see Fitch to Richard Stockton, 1790, undated; for Fitch opposing himself to captivity and suicide, see Fitch to Thomas Mifflin, Sept. 21, 1786; Fitch to the Committee of the Pennsylvania Assembly, 1786; for Fitch offering his neck to the "common executioner" and being a "willing sacrifice to the Faggot," see Fitch to William Samuel Johnson, April 1789; all in Peter Force Collection, Library of Congress (hereafter, Force Collection); Westcott, *Life*, 205.

⁶ For Bourdieu's concept of habitus, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), 72–73, 82–83; for the importance of the opposition between masculine self and threatening "other" in early modern popular culture, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), 9; Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1996), 2–3, 11–23; Janet Adelman, "Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997), 126–44; Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York, 1992), 3–4, 16–17, 147–54; Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, 1992), 207–11; Deanna Shemek, "Circular Definitions: Configuring Gender in Italian Renaissance Festival," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48 (1995), 10–11. For the removal or abjection of the "other" from public space, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, 1986), 53–55.

delphia represented their everyday problems of poor health, bad debts, scolding wives, and unpaid wages through images of men under attack, eaten by sharks, assaulted by devils, and the like. As a result, they experienced their sense of independent selfhood as constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by a threatening otherness. Their workplace and tavern leisure organized around competitive performances provided men with continuous opportunities to experience their own wholeness, distinctness, and success as they displayed their drinking potency, wit, knowledge, and other qualities. By participating in popular culture throughout the day and week, men were able to maintain a sense of independent masculinity and thus continually regenerate the distinction between masculine self and threatening other that oriented their everyday behavior.⁷

Socialized into early modern culture as a boy in the 1740s and 1750s, John Fitch had broad experience of drinking rituals, taverns, "treating," and other aspects of early modern leisure by the time he started the steamboat project in 1785. He used various forms of the masculine self/threatening other opposition to understand his marital difficulties, the virtues of generous friends, his disagreements with business associates, the difficulty of steamboat building, and other issues. His letters, petitions, and other records contain many references to his enjoyment of workplace drinking and tavern conviviality while working on the steamboat project. Fitch also drew up two lengthy autobiographical documents, "Life" and "Steamboat History," that record his familiarity with early modern popular leisure going back to his childhood in Connecticut. But he developed a complex relation with early modern culture as the steamboat project moved forward.

Partly as a result of his enthusiastic participation in popular leisure, Fitch had been able to sustain an early modern habitus through a tumultuous career as a brass turner, silversmith, trader, and land speculator during the Revolutionary War era. However, the steamboat project rendered irrelevant both the traditional reference points of craft enterprise and Fitch's general

⁷ For individual distinctiveness in opposition to "otherness" in popular leisure, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, 1968), 171–75; for competition in popular leisure, see Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1999), 83, 92–102; for the relation between "care" and popular leisure in post-revolutionary Philadelphia, see Ric Northrup Caric, "'To Drown the Ills That Discompose the Mind': Care, Leisure, and Identity Among Philadelphia Artisans and Workers, 1785–1840," *Pennsylvania History* 64 (1997), 465–89; David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, 1995), 22–27, 78–82, 146.

cultural habitus. The steamboat project was a source of painful "embarrassments" and "anxieties" on such a vast scale that he largely gave up identifying himself with early modern languages of masculine independence and began to articulate a language of self-identification that focused on the embrace of torment. Developing a set of images in which he welcomed painful forms of torture and dismemberment, Fitch began to identify himself with "otherness" rather than with independence. In this sense, early modern culture "failed" to sustain Fitch through the strains associated with modern kinds of artisan entrepreneurship. Unable to comfort himself within an early modern habitus, Fitch felt impelled to articulate an alternative language in which he identified himself with images of committing suicide, being executed, or burning alive. Thus the failure of early modern culture pushed Fitch into a cultural limbo in which he was inventing a functioning language of masculinity for himself without a common discourse or established practices to rely on.

Viewing Fitch's case as a failure of early modern culture opens up a new dimension of cultural transformation in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia. The burlesque parades, workingmen's movement, volunteer fire companies, and Washingtonian temperance societies of antebellum Philadelphia all generated symbolism in which men identified themselves with extremely distorted body representations, images of being penetrated, tortured, or dismembered, and themes of helplessness and vulnerability. In their analyses of cultural change, historians like Bruce Laurie, Susan Davis, and Ronald Schultz have either ignored such symbolism or analyzed it as a working class protest against middle-class forms of respectability. However, the men who participated in cultural movements between the late 1820s and the 1840s may have found themselves, like Fitch, struggling with issues of cultural failure as they protested banks and the militia system, engaged in various kinds of rioting, and exposed their degradation as drunkards in front of the Washingtonian societies. In this sense, it is possible that Fitch's experience as an eighteenth-century inventor foreshadowed a wider experience of cultural failure among urban working people in the nineteenth century.⁸

⁸ For an analysis of the burlesque parades as a protest against respectability, see Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power* (Philadelphia, 1986), 73–111; for analysis of the workingmen's movement, fire companies, and temperance movements that ignores distorted body imagery, see Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1980), 40–42, 120–24; for analysis of the workingmen that ignores popular culture altogether, see Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720–1830* (New York, 1993), 221–33.

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Historian Peter Burke has described the eighteenth century as a "golden age of traditional popular culture" in Europe. Despite the many successes of "godly reformers," expanding markets and rapid urbanization had made it possible to start up fairs in new places, develop new games like cricket and boxing, and increase the participation of poor people in early modern leisure. Early modern popular culture also rebounded in British North America. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania were founded by some of the most energetic of the godly reformers and their early governments circumscribed popular institutions like taverns and banned traditional practices like Christmas celebrations and toasting. However, recent scholarship by David W. Conroy and Peter Thompson has shown that the populations of Boston and Philadelphia reasserted early modern forms of popular culture during the eighteenth century. Popular festivities sprang up around training days, court days, weddings, and funerals, and taverns once again became the central institution for daily leisure, political discussion, and meetings of voluntary societies. Thompson emphasizes the extent to which the higher and the lower orders participated together in eighteenth-century tavern life and the ways in which the sharing of cultural space forced even the haughtiest and best educated of elites to give countenance to the opinions of artisans, laborers, and seamen. Revolutionary-era taverns, hotbeds of opposition to the Stamp Act and other British legislation, were a crucial space for the development of sentiment in favor of independence.⁹

In the decades after the Revolution, early modern cultural practices continued to flourish in Philadelphia while opposition to popular culture was limited to the temperance efforts of men like Anthony Benezet and Benjamin Rush. Artisans still stopped work to drink rum, eat sweets, and hear songs. Men of all ranks spent much of their time in taverns and the new holidays of Washington's Birthday and the Fourth of July involved at least as much drunkenness and revelry as the royalist holidays they supplanted.¹⁰

As had been the case since Rabelais, working people participated in early

⁹ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 235, 240, 244–45, 247–49; Conroy, *Public Houses*, 22–23, 31–41, 76–83, 146, 280–99; Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 22–23, 25, 83, 92–102, 153–54.

¹⁰ Anthony Benezet, *The Mighty Destroyer Displayed* (Trenton, 1779); Benjamin Rush, *An Enquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors upon the Human Body, and Their Influence upon the Happiness of Society* (Philadelphia, 1791); both at the Library Company of Philadelphia.

modern leisure to counteract the afflictions of "care." In describing their "care," "ills," or "troubles," men personified everyday problems concerning work, family, friends, and the like as invading, penetrating, dividing, or dismembering the male body. In a popular song like "Spanking Jack," for example, the "troubles" of shipboard life were represented through images of an exemplary seaman being drowned, eaten by sharks and spankers, or having his head blown off in battle. In another song, difficulties with debts, smoky chimneys, and noisy children were associated with dreams of "blue devils" invading a man's body.¹¹

For artisans and laborers, many of the problems that gave rise to "care" stemmed from their marginal incomes. Because of falling wages in the late 1780s, poor craftsmen and laborers struggled to pay rent and feed and clothe families even if they and their spouses were fully employed. Winter slowdowns, unpaid wages, and poor health meant financial crisis and led to extraordinary measures like doubling up with other families or eating poorer quality food. Just as merchants in financial difficulties imagined being swallowed up or having their insides eaten by harpies, artisans experienced the difficulties arising from their economic situations as threats to the integrity of their bodies. Artisans who felt themselves overwhelmed by care were in danger of falling into fits of melancholy or hypochondria that could make their problems far worse.¹²

Participation in early modern leisure allowed men to overcome these kinds of cares. Leisure activities in post-revolutionary Philadelphia were organized as situations of performance in which participants either mounted exhibitions or competed before companies of co-workers and friends. Artisan leisure included workplace craft competitions, practical jokes, singing and story-telling, tavern games, street encounters, and holiday celebrations. Such activities provided them with opportunities to overcome various opponents, obstacles, or possibilities of failure that served as stand-ins for care. Consequently, when men succeeded in leisure activity, they experienced their triumphs as a victory over both their opponents and their own sense of care.

¹¹ For the counteracting of care in Rabelais, see Francois Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. J. M. Cohen, (London, 1955), 43; for care and threatening images, see Caric, "To Drown the Ills," 466-71. Also see "Spanking Jack," in "Spanking Jack and Other Songs," bound up with other songbooks in "Songs," Library Company of Philadelphia, 1805; "Hypochondria," in *The Tickler*, Dec. 13, 1809.

¹² For cares and melancholy, see "An Anacreotic," *The Port-folio*, Feb. 23, 1806; for economic conditions among Philadelphia shoemakers and tailors, see Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, 1990), 103, 109, 116-20, 160.

Men who proved themselves the "fastest eater," "most learned," or "wittiest" overcame the challenges associated with specific antagonists. Simultaneously, they identified themselves as distinct individuals as they basked in the huzzahs, cheers, and praise from other members of the company. By participating in a wide range of leisure activities over the course of a day or a week, an artisan could experience himself as overcoming his cares and confirm a sense of himself as an independent and valued member of the community. Just as their everyday struggles led men to feel burdened by care, everyday participation in leisure made it possible for men to lift that burden and identify themselves as independent men.¹³

Although Fitch's documents contain only sketchy accounts of his participation in leisure before starting work on the steamboat project, it is evident that he shared in a wide variety of early modern leisure practices. Born in 1743 in Windsor, Connecticut, John Fitch was the fifth child of a frugal small farmer whose land bordered the property of Governor Roger Wolcott. Taken out of school at the age of nine to help on the farm and kept at farm labor until he was eighteen, Fitch's educational attainments were limited to reading out of the *New England Primer*, writing a legible hand, arithmetic, geometry, and Thomas Salmon's *New Geographical and Historical Grammar*. However, Fitch recorded participating in the culture of performance as early as age nine when he put on an exhibition of his math skills for his neighbors. "[I] could tell how many minutes old I should be when I should be ten years old," he wrote, "but was not able to multiply the figure nine. This I did in the presence of four or five neighbours one rainy day to their admiration." Three years later, he recorded seeking opportunities to demonstrate his geographical knowledge, noting that "no question could be asked of me of any nation but I could tell their numbers [,] religion [,] what part of the globe [,] their latitude and longitude and turn at once to any town marked down in the maps." Fitch was such a "forward boy" at the age of eleven that Governor Wolcott invited him on a surveying expedition and entertained himself by continuously plying young "Johnny Fitch" with questions about surveying and obeying all the boy's orders. Fitch was also

¹³ For emphasis on performance or theatricality in early modern popular culture, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 145–95; Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 83, 102–3; Ditz, "Shipwrecked," 54–57; Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993), 4, 30, 120–24, 134–35; for emphasis on performance in post-revolutionary popular culture in Philadelphia, see Caric, "To Drown the Ills," 466–77.

familiar with training days, weddings, and funerals. Given that he worked on his father's farm nearly full time for almost ten years, Fitch most likely would have been familiar with dram-drinking as a custom during breaks in agricultural labor. His older brother Joseph was drinking drams of rum during rest breaks by at least the age of nineteen, and it seems likely that John Fitch took up the custom during his late teens as well.¹⁴

In his autobiography, Fitch also reports a striking example of a cultural exchange between Joseph and Governor Wolcott that occurred when Fitch was eight. Joseph Fitch was a member of a road-repairing party that offered all of those traveling on the road a dram of rum with the expectation that travelers would pay liberally for the favor. Travelers would often give the repairing party enough money to buy a whole quart of rum. Like Christmas mumming, this kind of exchange was a practice by which the lower orders extorted a kind of ritual tribute from the better-off. The work party expected a man like Wolcott to recognize their service by sharing a drink with them as men and to show his "liberality" and "generosity" by contributing generously to the alcohol fund. In the case of Wolcott, there was also an element of carnivalesque reversal in that the road-repairing party was "taxing" the governor who was responsible for taxes. However, Wolcott defied the custom by sharing the drink and then contributing only one copper to the road party. Writing forty years later, John Fitch believed that Wolcott wanted to "suppress" the custom. He saw Wolcott as believing that the not-so-subtle coercion involved in the custom was an affront to his dignity as governor. Nevertheless, Wolcott did share the drink with the men before he failed to pay for the rum. Therefore, Wolcott himself was engaged in a carnivalesque mocking in which he reversed the reversal, taxing the hospitality of poor men while not paying the customary levy in return.¹⁵

Joseph Fitch did not let the matter end there. Enraged, he returned home to create a "visible commemoration" of the event by punching a hole through the governor's coin and nailing it to a post by the road with a scarlet rag, to signify that it was the governor who was so "mean." From Joseph Fitch's point of view, Wolcott's mocking of the customary "payment" for the drink

¹⁴ John Fitch, "Life," in Prager, *Autobiography*, 20, 24–31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28–29; for carnival, see Burke, *Popular Culture*, 178–204; for mumming, see Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994), 8–9, 71; Susan G. Davis, "Making Night Hideous: Christmas Revelry and Public Order in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia," *American Quarterly* 34 (1982), 187.

insulted the road party by treating them as servants, as mean rather than independent men. By nailing the copper with the scarlet rag through the post, Joseph Fitch was representing the governor as the one who was really mean, publicly advertising his refusal to pay. John Fitch, who accompanied Joseph back to the work site, later criticized his older brother for being so angry at Wolcott despite "being possessed with quite as much meanness as . . . Governor Woolcutt." However, through witnessing and participating in these kinds of events, John Fitch was acclimated into carnivalesque mocking, the ethics of "treating" and being "treated," and the play of qualities like "liberality" and "meanness," all longstanding elements of early modern popular culture.¹⁶

According to literary critics, one of the important characteristics of early modern popular culture was the representation of femininity as alien and degrading. Identifying masculinity with qualities of rationality, independence, and activity, men could be troubled by any association with helplessness, passivity, or the indulgence of passions that might feminize and therefore degrade them. The presence of women could also demean men in several ways. Mark Breitenberg has stressed the ways that wives could appear to "unman" their husbands through adultery, scolding, or assertions of their own independence. Female desirability could likewise stimulate men to such heights of passion that they lost their manly character. According to Stephen Greenblatt, the "Bower of Bliss" in Spenser's *Faerie Queen* presented a picture of female desirability that had to be destroyed "in a violent attempt to secure that principle of difference necessary to fashion the self." As a young man, Fitch was able to place himself and his actions in relation to several of the customary oppositions between masculine and feminine. This can be seen clearly in his account of abandoning his wife and in a satirical poem he wrote about an incident of domestic violence.¹⁷

Having served abortive apprenticeships to two clockmakers in which he learned brass work rather than clockmaking, Fitch set up as a brass turner and a potash manufacturer before marrying Lucy Roberts, the daughter of a prominent Simsbury, Connecticut, man in 1767. Fitch, however, was extremely unhappy in the marriage and abandoned his wife and an infant son in January 1769. Writing later in his autobiographical documents, he

¹⁶ Fitch, "Life," 28–29.

¹⁷ Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity*, 15–20, 23–24; Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 175–77, 189.

characterized Lucy as a "turbulent" wife and portrayed his conflicts with her as "perplexing and vexatious to a man of feelings" like himself. From Fitch's point of view, a man who took pride in his rights and dignity as a man would be "vexed" by any comment that insulted, demeaned, or humiliated his "manly honor." To be degraded in this way by a woman, however, was doubly vexatious in that it implied that Fitch was not man enough even to protect his dignity against those who were supposed to be naturally subordinate. Therefore Fitch decided to leave his family, relatives, and all his friends in Connecticut to avoid being "unmanned."¹⁸

In his autobiography, Fitch described his abandonment of his wife as a rational act, not something done in a fit of womanish passion. He spent the last six months of 1768 bringing his business "into a narrow compass" so that he could be almost debt-free when he left. As he closed his affairs, Fitch also informed Lucy of his determination to leave on a daily basis without the news making any impact that he could see on her behavior. As he was getting ready to set out on the road to Albany, Lucy Fitch "appeared affected and distressed and in the most humble manner implored my stay." This appeal awakened his sympathies and perhaps his attraction to his wife. It also awakened his sympathies for their son Shaler. However, Fitch felt that it was his obligation to resist those affections and he wrote in his autobiography that "my judgment informed me that it was my duty to go notwithstanding the struggles of nature I had to contend with." He viewed freeing himself from the "perplexing and vexatious" situation of his marriage as imperative despite the temptations presented by his attachment to his wife and son. Fitch had exercised what he saw as "cool determination" in settling his business affairs and leaving before his family increased further. At the moment of truth, he decided that giving in to "the struggles of nature" would be weak, self-indulgent, and effeminate. Men were supposed to have the capacity for the "cool reason" needed to make difficult decisions and women to be creatures of their passions. As a result, Fitch followed what he saw as his duty and left his family despite "really [feeling] an inclination to try her once more."¹⁹

Although Fitch justified his decision as an exercise in masculine rationality, he could also satirize himself for lacking masculine courage in

¹⁸ Fitch, "Life," 45-49; Fitch, "Steamboat History," 144.

¹⁹ Fitch later learned that his wife was pregnant with a daughter when he left. See Fitch, "Life," 46.

fleeing his wife. In the seven years after he left his family, Fitch settled in New Jersey, first making a living as an itinerant button-maker, and then taking advantage of an opportunity to purchase a good set of tools to start a silversmith's business in Trenton. Extremely energetic and punctual in paying his debts, Fitch was worth over £800 when the Revolution started in 1776. Nevertheless, as he was walking into New Jersey for the first time, he suffered "the keenest distress thinking of my child my parents and all my relations and connections" and considered returning to Connecticut. Near Woodbridge, New Jersey, however, he happened upon a domestic dispute that drove away any thoughts of returning home. Tired from walking with a pack of clothes on his back during a hot day in May, Fitch stopped in at a small house where an "old woman" was violently reprimanding her husband. Being somewhat offended at the "ill manners" of the couple for not inviting him inside after he knocked, Fitch let himself in and involved himself in the dispute by suggesting that the couple separate in the same way that he had from his wife. However, when Fitch made a flippant remark about giving the whole of his property rather than live with such a woman, the wife began to attack him instead, and drove him out into the street. Fitch finally fled to another lodging.²⁰

When he wrote to a friend back in Connecticut about the incident, Fitch formulated his thoughts in terms of the kind of masculinity it would actually take to live with a turbulent woman.

Sir now I will a story tell which does upon me center.
Near Woodbridge town there I did meet a true but strange adventure.
It was a hot long melting day and I grew almost weary.
To a small house I did repair thinking a while to tarry.
I knocked and entered in the door without eithers permission
And when one minutes space I found I spoke without commission
Said I good woman tell me why that you live so uneasy
Come try some other plan to live and see if that wont pleaseye.
No faith said she no other plan shall ere come in my notion
For since he has a villen grown this shall be his portion.
Well then said I now for your peace let both consent for parting
That the remainder of your days be not so full of smarting.
They both consented to the thing but she was for full hire

²⁰ Ibid., 47-54.

One half of all she did demand before she would retire.
Then my judgment soon was made it was without permission
That the whole I'd rather give than live in that condition.
Then quick her eyes like lightning streams began to be aflying
I was apprised of the same methought I was adying
Then a quick a brand out of the fire toward me was coming
And with my pack I made a shield and hindered it from homeing
Then soon I made unto the door sure I was not delaying
And the fume which was behind me was not the least for staying
And when I made into the street she followed me close after.
Had any one but seen the sight I'm sure he would[ve] made laughter
The brand soon coming bout my ears and I for it was dodging
Which made me fly to quit the place and seek for better lodging.
If you think my courage was not good permit me Sir the favour
To tell you true and honestly I'd rather run and leave her
If you will send a hero brave that will make her for yielding
One guiney I will freely give and pay the cost of healing.
But the last which I have said I think is something joking
For womankind cant be subdued without a little choaking.²¹

In this poem, instead of seeing himself as having a stern masculine duty to leave his wife despite the "struggles of nature," Fitch humorously suggested that he did not have enough masculinity to stand up either to the scolding wife in New Jersey or, by implication, his own wife. While Fitch fled the woman's house and sought other lodging, a man with a full allotment of masculine "courage," a "hero brave," would have stayed to encounter the enraged wife and help her beleaguered husband. From Fitch's point of view, a paragon of masculinity would have had to exercise violence in order to subdue the woman and establish domestic harmony—"for womankind cant be subdued without a little choaking." However, Fitch did not see himself as desiring to exercise enough violence to subdue an adult female, and indeed, perhaps did not view himself as capable of such violence. He was emphatic in his autobiography that he never spoke an angry word to his wife Lucy before leaving her "and in all cases appeal to heaven for the propriety of my conduct toward her." Lucy herself might have questioned the propriety of Fitch's telling her every day that he was going to leave. However, Fitch indeed seemed to have viewed physical violence against wives as improper. It also might have been the case that he did not see

²¹ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

himself as being physically capable of coercing adult women. Although six feet, two inches tall, Fitch was extremely thin as a young man and "had the appearance of one being considerably advanced in the consumption." It is therefore possible that he did not believe he was strong enough to engage in "a little choaking" to establish his authority in a household. Whatever the case, Fitch was willing to mock himself as deficient in masculinity if that meant escaping a situation of domestic discord in which his safety and dignity were so much at risk.²²

After Fitch went into business for himself, he perpetuated a variety of early modern customs, including the purchasing of alcohol for workmen and customers, competitive rituals within the workshop, and participation in popular celebrations. During his first trip down the Ohio in 1780, he convinced the other members of his party to adopt the precaution of leashing their boats together by treating the passengers on both boats to a "Drink of Grog." Likewise, he shared a "hot-buttered dram" with the other members of his party an hour after sunrise on the morning that they were all captured by Indians in 1782. Five years later, when Fitch was supervising the steamboat project, he considered a daily allowance of four and a half pence for liquor to be part of the wage for his journeymen and recorded these payments as "finding" his journeymen in liquor. This alcohol would have been consumed during customary breaks in which he and his journeymen would have purchased bread, cheese, and sweets, sung songs, engaged in petty gambling, and held political discussions. Fitch himself boarded at a tavern and reported debating the merits of the steamboat with dockside visitors while "mildly glad in liquor." There is every reason to believe that Fitch was fully engaged in the competitive leisure of the early modern workplace when he was at the workshop and the docks. As the master of the workshop, he would have regularly sought recognition for his own distinctive characteristics as the steamboat inventor and a versatile craftsman, his generosity in meeting his customary obligations, and his skill at various leisure games. Having already led an eventful life, Fitch also would have been able to entertain his journeymen and visitors with a large stock of stories about leaving his scolding wife, running beer to Valley Forge during the Revolution, and his Indian captivity.²³

²² Ibid., 50; for Fitch's height, see Westcott, *Life*, 413.

²³ For Fitch's "finding" his journeymen in liquor, see an undated statement of wages drawn up for the Steamboat Company, Force Collection; for boarding at Mary Krafft's tavern, see Fitch to the Steamboat Company, Dec. 24, 1789, Force Collection; for work breaks in artisan work shops, see Sean

Fitch thus entered upon the steamboat project as a knowing participant in early modern culture. Socialized into it as a boy in Connecticut, he employed conventional oppositions between masculine and feminine to interpret his relationship with his wife, make his decision to abandon her, and rationalize that decision as he determined to stay in New Jersey. At the same time, Fitch also reinterpreted his sense of masculinity in terms of the events surrounding his abandonment of his wife. In this way, he carried his early modern masculine identity forward into his career as a button-maker and silversmith in New Jersey, continuing to elaborate on it through his four trips west as a trader and surveyor, and his Indian captivity. As a result, Fitch was being guided by an early modern version of masculinity when he began his work on the steamboat project.

From 1785 to 1787, for the first three years of the steamboat project, Fitch continued to participate in early modern popular culture and represent himself through early modern languages of masculinity. He initially embraced the steamboat project as a way to demonstrate his unlimited capacities and outshine men of higher status. However, attracting financial support required a more deferential attitude, and Fitch exercised a good deal of manly forbearance as he figured out ways to flatter the self-importance of investors and legislative bodies. After raising money and setting to work on a small steamboat in 1786, Fitch used an early modern opposition between masculine self and "other," to represent the technical difficulties of working with steam engines, the burden of fund-raising, and disputes with rival Arthur Donaldson as analogous to "Savage captivity" and suicide. Fitch's sense of the threatening character of the steamboat project intensified as he became increasingly dependent on the Steamboat Company, but through 1787 he could calm himself by using early modern drinking imagery to experience triumph over these difficulties.

In April 1785, Fitch was living in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and waiting to hear from Congress about the disposition of lands he had surveyed in Ohio for his land-jobbing company. On his second trip as a trader down the Ohio River in March 1782, Fitch and his party had been captured by Indians and marched to the Detroit where they were handed

Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York, 1984), 256; for "frequently getting mildly glad in Liquor" with visitors to the docks, see Fitch, "Life," 120-21.

over to British authorities. After spending a further six months as a British prisoner of war outside Montreal, he organized a land-jobbing company among his friends. With this company, he took two more trips to the area around the Muskingum River to survey more than 250,000 acres worth of land claims.²⁴

While Congress deliberated on how to dispose of land north of the Ohio, Fitch began to formulate his ideas for steam-powered vehicles. One Sunday, after hearing a sermon, he and James Ogilbee were walking down a road when a "Gentleman" and his wife passed them in a "Chair with a Noble Horse." Fitch reports in his autobiography that he then came to the idea of steam-powered vehicles in a sequence of three thoughts. Having been bothered by rheumatism in his legs, his first thought upon seeing the Gentleman was "that it would be a noble thing if I could have such a carriage without the expense of keeping a horse." Fitch then formulated a query: "what can you not do if you will get your self about it" as if to assert an infinite capacity within himself. At that point, Fitch thought of steam as a source of power first for carriages, and then boats. Unaware of the existence of steam engines, he thought that he was introducing an entirely new source of power into the world. It was only two or three weeks later that Fitch saw a drawing of a steam engine in a book owned by a friend.²⁵

The juxtaposition between Fitch's first thought of having a carriage and the idea of steam-powered vehicles suggests a connection between the inspiration for steamboats and a wish to surpass gentlemen as a class. Wishing to have a carriage "without the expense of keeping a horse," he wanted to be like the gentleman he had seen in not having to walk, even though he could not himself maintain a horse. For Fitch, walking was a sign of social inconsequence or "meanness." Indeed, the association between walking and humiliation ran deep in Fitch's adult life. His first long-distance walk from central Connecticut to Albany and then to New Jersey in 1769 was dominated by his "distress" over leaving his wife and child. His inner turmoil over forsaking his duty as a husband and father, his anger at his wife, and his impulses to return home was reinforced by his lowly status as an itinerant clock-cleaner dependent on the good will of strangers for work and board. The circumstances of his march from the Ohio River to Detroit in

²⁴ For Fitch's captivity and surveying in Ohio, see Fitch, "Life," 69–111.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111–13.

1782 were even worse. His party had foolishly surrendered itself to a smaller group of Indians and Fitch was forced to endure the humiliation of captivity as he walked toward Detroit, troubles made keener by continual hunger and fearfulness over his ultimate fate.²⁶

In many ways, however, Fitch's third distance walk was even more sharply humiliating. When he returned to the Ohio River country as a surveyor in 1783, he spent considerable time walking around the territory with a party of gentlemen who treated him like a servant. Fitch felt enormously demeaned by this treatment, partly because he was paying the men for their services and partly because he considered them to be far beneath him in energy, diligence, and sense of honor. He characterized the leader of his gentleman companions, Colonel Anderson, as "a sociable well-meaning old woman," and observed that Anderson so loved "moderation and ease" that he took longer to ride a horse back from the Ohio River to Philadelphia than Fitch did to walk. Fitch also noted that the gentlemen would not start work before eight or nine in the morning, and then would only work for an hour or so before complaining of tiredness and calling for Fitch to give them grog. Moreover, he was appalled that he was the only member of the party who made any effort to fulfill their contractual obligation to survey 100,000 acres for the land-jobbing company. Nevertheless, though Fitch considered himself superior as a man to any of these gentlemen, they all could well afford to ride horses while he himself could not. Thus he had to suffer the double shame of being humiliated by people he considered to be inferior. The idea of a steam carriage not only solved the problem of riding in a carriage without the expense of keeping a horse, but also allowed Fitch to imagine himself as outstripping gentlemen of "moderation and ease" as the inventor of a steam-powered vehicle.²⁷

Fitch's initial idea for inventing steam engines to power carriages and boats was also a logical outgrowth of his conviction that he could accomplish anything he set himself to do. Before his British imprisonment, he had lived his entire adult life as a craftsman who sought prosperity but had little or no ambition for large-scale wealth or social and political consequence. Working at brass work, potash manufacturing, cleaning clocks, silversmithing, and as a modest trader, Fitch had always been an active and enterprising artisan.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-48, 69-81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 104-6.

Even as a prisoner of war outside Montreal, he had improvised a brass-working shop out of spare parts like an ax and a handsaw and practiced his original trade. At the same time, Fitch was also very much a traditional craftsman, showing no interest in any kind of business other than making a single shop prosper in a given locality. Even as a wealthy silversmith in Trenton, he had not endeavored to set up shops in other towns, sell goods in more distant markets, or invest in mercantile ventures. However, when Fitch formed his land-jobbing companies, he pitched his ambitions on a much larger scale. Believing that he was "the only land-jobber for the Lands Northwest of the Ohio," he initially planned to claim 15 to 20,000 acres and eventually envisioned himself as a "man of fortune," claiming at least 250,000 acres. Congress ultimately decided to sell that land at public vendue rather than allow individuals to stake out claims. In April 1785, however, Fitch still assumed that he was the lord of a "mighty fortune" whose projected accomplishments would testify to his limitless ability.²⁸

Fitch soon dropped the idea of steam-powered carriages but developed a consuming passion for building steamboats and acted with enormous energy to move the project forward. Entertaining "Exalted Ideas of the Rationality of my Scheme, and the inconceivable advantages it would be to the United States," he quickly built a miniature model of a steamboat and developed plans for a larger one in consultation with friends like Nathaniel Irwin and John Ewing. In May 1785, Fitch learned that Congress had decided to sell lands north of the Ohio at auction and that he had been reduced "from an immense fortune . . . to nothing at one Blow." Thus if he were to pursue the steamboat project, he would have to raise money from some source to begin the work. Unhappily, as soon as Fitch began to seek financial support for the project, he once again found himself being treated with the contempt reserved for those who lacked property and connections. In August he journeyed to New York and submitted a petition to Congress with a description of his plan and a proposal for Congress to subscribe to four thousand of his maps as a way to encourage his effort to build a steamboat. However, the committee appointed to consider the matter did not even draw up a report, a failure that Fitch viewed as an enormous "indignity," especially given the exalted value he attributed to his steamboat plans. Undeterred though, he resolved to carry forward with the steamboat

²⁸ Ibid., 53–54, 89–102, 114.

project as a way to revenge himself on the "ignorant boys" in Congress.²⁹

In September, Fitch presented his plan for a steamboat to the Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and sought the patronage of Benjamin Franklin before traveling to Virginia and Maryland. Franklin spoke very "flatteringly" about Fitch's plan, but then decided to develop his own plan for a steamboat rather than support Fitch. Fitch again sought Franklin's "patronage in promoting a subscription" for helping to build the steamboat upon his return to Philadelphia the next January. However, Franklin's only response was to offer Fitch five or six dollars without signing any kind of endorsement. Because Franklin was offering his money as charity, Fitch considered the offer an insult of such magnitude that he was still fuming about it four years later as "the greatest indignity that was ever offered to me." Recounting the incident in his "Steamboat History," he wrote that "the Indignation which Inflamed my Blood could hardly be suppressed" as he politely declined the offer.³⁰

Although Fitch had exalted ideas about the value of his steamboat plans and a strong sense of outrage over his initial rejections, he conducted himself with what he would have called considerable masculine forbearance. In particular, he was willing to suspend both his sense of dignity and his resentment of gentlemanly pretensions as he searched for an effectively deferential mode of address for raising money. In his first petitions to Congress, Fitch employed the deferential gesture of laying his petition "at your feet," but called attention to himself by explaining the machinery of his proposed steamboat in great detail. Despite feeling insulted by the failure of the congressional committee to respond, he decided to adopt an even more deferential tone in subsequent letters and petitions. In some letters, Fitch sought to flatter the self-importance of his audience. For example, he sent a letter to the ambassador of Spain on September 2, 1785, that contained a flowery pledge of his desire to "serve the best of Kings His Most Catholick Majesty with my life and best services." Although not so ornate in their deference, Fitch's letters to the Pennsylvania legislature still magnified the importance of the legislators by addressing them as "the Honorable the Representatives of the Freemen of the State of Pennsylvania in General

²⁹ For Congress's decision on the disposition of lands north of the Ohio and response to Fitch's first petition, see Fitch, "Life," 113-14; Fitch, "Steamboat History," 148, 153.

³⁰ For Fitch's encounters with Franklin, see Fitch, "Steamboat History," 154-55, 165-66; Westcott, *Life*, 108-9.

Assembly met." In other letters, he deferred to his audience through gestures of humility. In introducing his plan to the Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, Fitch belied his own high opinion of his abilities by informing the Society that he "[doubted] not but there are much greater refinements in the cut than my present plans which are as yet almost too confused to give a draft of the machine." In a petition to the legislature of Maryland, he sought both to flatter the legislators and to communicate his own lack of self-importance or vanity.³¹

The Subscriber humbly begs leave to inform this Honourable Legislature that he has proposed a Machine for promoting Navigation which has been approved by the Honourable A[s]semblies of Virginia and Pennsylvania and by many men of Science who have examined the same and certified their Approbation.³²

In this petition, Fitch played to the self-importance of the Maryland legislators by "humbly" begging leave to communicate with them and referring to their "honourable" offices. He also deflated his own presence by refusing to make any of his own claims for the steamboat project. Instead, Fitch merely mentioned that he had "proposed a Machine for promoting Navigation" and relied on his letters of recommendation from John Ewing, William Houston, and Samuel Smith to inform the legislature concerning the nature of the steamboat and Fitch's virtues as a promoter. Thus the steamboat plan would deserve the legislature's support because individuals who were the equals of the legislators—"men of science" and Assemblies in Pennsylvania and Virginia—gave their approval. If the Maryland legislature did wish to support the plan, Fitch proposed that they allow Andrew Ellicott, Esq., to draw money out of the Maryland treasury, and noted that Ellicott, rather than Fitch, would have practical control of the money. Thus the Maryland legislature would be engaged in a transaction with a fellow gentleman like Ellicott. Fitch may have thought himself superior in "Philosophy" and "Mechanical Genius" to the men from whom he was seeking money. However, he was more than willing to suppress his sense of

³¹ Fitch to the Committee of Congress, Aug. 30, 1785; to the Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Aug. 1, 1785; to the Ambassador from Spain, New York, Sept. 2, 1785; to the Pennsylvania Assembly, 1786; all in Force Collection. The Library of Congress dates this petition as March 23, 1786, but this dating is mistaken because of the references to the system of cranks and paddles that was developed in July 1786.

³² To the General Assembly of the State of Maryland, Jan. 5, 1786, Force Collection.

self-importance to promote the steamboat project.³³

Fitch's campaign of deferential self-representation had success, if not quite the kind of success that he intended. Despite the anger and indignation he suffered in dealing with Congress and Franklin, he was well received by two governors and one former governor during his trips through Maryland and Virginia, granted a subscription by the Virginia legislature, and granted exclusive rights in 1786 by the New Jersey legislature. Still not having an immediate source of funds to begin work on the steamboat, Fitch organized a company of investors in Philadelphia who purchased twenty shares in the company for twenty dollars apiece. The Steamboat Company wanted him to choose John Nancarrow as his chief engineer, but Fitch, dissatisfied with Nancarrow's outmoded design for an "atmospheric" steam engine, chose Henry Voight instead. Fitch had met Voight, a clockmaker, by chance, but was immediately impressed by his "Mechanical Genius" and gave him a share in the project. Having never seen a steam engine, Fitch had been extremely "distressed" about how an engine for his projected steamboat was going to be built. Giving the project to Voight greatly eased his anxiety and he wrote in his "Steamboat History" that he "could look up to [Voight] with the pleasing assurance and confidence that a Wife can to her Husband." Having recruited a partner and being in command of several hundred dollars, Fitch was now ready to purchase a boat and contract for boilers, cylinders, and valves for the steam engines that he and Voight wanted to construct.³⁴

As he undertook the risks of creating a steamboat, John Fitch unwittingly began to distance himself from the culture and business practices of eighteenth-century artisans, even those who worked closely with him. While the strain on Fitch's temperament would increase, the cultural supports he relied on to soothe and relieve him would become less and less potent. His artisan suppliers, like brass craftsmen Jacob Anthony, Samuel Parker, and Richard Skelthorne, confirmed their independence through strong attachments to their shops and their knowledge of craft, fellow craftsmen, and

³³ For recommendations of Fitch by John Ewing (provost of the University of Pennsylvania), William C. Houston (professor at Princeton University and former member of Congress) and Samuel Smith (provost at Princeton), see Fitch "Steamboat History," 145-48; for Fitch's reference to members of Congress lacking in "Philosophy" and "Mechanical Genius," see *ibid.*, 6.

³⁴ For Fitch's trips through Maryland and Virginia where he met with Thomas Johnson (former governor of Maryland), William Smallwood (governor of Maryland), Patrick Henry (governor of Virginia), George Washington, and James Madison, see Westcott, *Life*, 139-45; for Fitch's rejection of Nancarrow and choice of Voight, see Fitch, "Steamboat History," 166-68.

customers.³⁵ Even if Richard Skelhorne had never made a cylinder for a steam engine before, he could demonstrate his distinct competence as a brass founder by drawing on his knowledge of working with brass to meet the specifications of Fitch's order. Then, he could use the money gained by selling the cylinder to Fitch to fulfill his obligations to his family, workmen, and suppliers, and thereby contribute to the common good. In this sense, Skelhorne's command of a traditional knowledge would have allowed him to display his capacities to innovate and to serve others.

For Fitch, the link between his desire to be a benefactor to the nation and his operations in building the steamboat was much less secure. He wanted to serve the nation and mankind by building a steamboat. But in spring 1786, Fitch was preparing to work on steam engines and steamboats without ever having seen a steam engine. Unlike traditional craftsmen, he and Voight had no reference points in craft knowledge or craft experience for working with the parts of a steam engine or mechanical modes of powering watercraft. Moreover, even if Fitch had succeeded in producing a functioning steamboat, he had as yet identified no means of either selling or profitably employing such boats. As of 1786, his representation of himself as a benefactor had no connection to either craft, community, or product.

Fitch and Voight first experimented with steam engines and propulsion concepts on a small scale. After some work with a small model engine, they embarked on experiments with a larger engine (with a three-inch cylinder) and a small skiff to test concepts of steam propulsion. The engine worked well, but attempts to propel a boat forward with "a screw of paddles, an endless chain, and other modes" all failed and the inventors were "jeered and scoffed at" by spectators. Fitch felt "truly distressed" at his highly public failure and sought to "remedy" his suffering that night by being "pretty free . . . with West India Produce [rum]." However, after a day of casting about for ways "to get free of the scheme with honor," he, during a sleepless night, thought of a system of cranks and paddles for propelling a boat forward. Now as "equally Ellivated with the Scheme as I was depressed before," Fitch eagerly brought the plan to Voight at dawn and later wrote in his

³⁵ Fitch's records list Jacob Anthony, Samuel Parker, and Richard Skelhorne as supplying him with brasswork for the steamboat project. See Fitch, *Account and Receipt Book, 1787-1791*, Force Collection. Jacob Anthony was listed as a turner and instrument maker, Samuel Parker as a brass founder, and Richard Skelhorne as a brass founder in a 1785 Philadelphia directory. See Francis White, *The Philadelphia Directory* (Philadelphia, 1785).

autobiography that "[I] was equally glad to see daylight as if I had been in the most distressed storm at sea that I might go and acquaint my Friend Voigt of our Relief." After ordering a small crank and setting the paddles on arms to minimize friction, Fitch and Voight ran the skiff successfully on the Delaware River. The trip of Fitch's steam skiff in July 1786 was the first instance in North America of steam power used for any purpose other than running pumps, and it was also the first example of Fitch's capacity for extemporaneous invention. Faced with public failure and humiliation, he came up with the concept of cranks and paddles, establishing the first tentative connection between his "enthusiasm for the wonderfully elastic powers" of steam and the working of an actual steam-powered mechanism. "Believing [them]selves to be Engineers," Fitch and Voight successfully persuaded the Steamboat Company to build a steam engine capable of propelling a boat of twenty tons burden through the water.³⁶

That same year, Fitch was able to defeat a challenge to his claim to priority in inventing the steamboat. Upon his return from Virginia and Maryland in February 1786, he discussed his steamboat plans with Arthur Donaldson, a ship's carpenter and ferry operator who had previously invented a horse-powered crane for dredging rivers. A month later, Fitch heard by accident that Donaldson was now claiming to be the inventor of the steamboat and planning to seek exclusive rights to it from the Pennsylvania legislature. Quickly asserting his own rights, he began a petition war with Donaldson that lasted until the end of the year. Donaldson's plan was to build a steam-vehicle that moved forward by expelling water out the back, on the same model as the scheme Franklin had submitted to the Philosophical Society in December 1785. However, Fitch's petitions argued effectively that he merited exclusive rights to all forms of steam-powered water transportation because his petition to Congress in August 1785 was the first published plan for a steamboat in the United States. Donaldson, according to Fitch, did not merit any rights as a steamboat inventor because his plan had been published previously by Franklin in December 1785. Fitch was also able to contrast his own work with the skiff boat that summer favorably with Donaldson's limited experiments with using a steam engine to turn a wheel. By the end of the

³⁶ For Fitch's initial experiments with the skiff, see Fitch, "Life," 116-18; Fitch, "Steamboat History," 169-70; for Fitch's enthusiasm for steam, see Westcott, *Life*, 158.

year, Donaldson was beaten, reduced to making plaintive claims that Fitch was calling him a "fraud" in "all companies" and ruining his reputation. Indeed, Fitch most likely sought to display himself by abusing Donaldson's claims in tavern companies, among the craftsmen gathered in other shops, and in street gatherings. Even in his petitions, Fitch mockingly characterized Donaldson as someone who was always late in his inventions. Finally, in January 1787, the Pennsylvania legislature awarded Fitch exclusive rights to the steamboat on the terms that he had proposed, without reference to Donaldson.³⁷

In the midst of the petition war with Donaldson, Fitch returned to the awkward business of raising funds for the larger vessel he and Voight intended to build. After his success with the skiff boat, Fitch's customarily deferential gestures were overlaid with contrasting images of the benefits of the steamboat project and burdens of steamboat building. In a September letter to Thomas Mifflin, president of the Pennsylvania Assembly, he introduced himself by pairing an expression of his own burden with a deferential gesture: "Nothing gives me such extream pain as to occasion unnece[s]sary Trouble, but i am persuaded the Honourable Mr. Mifflin will pardon me for this intrusion." Though deferentially acknowledging the generosity with which he expected Mifflin to greet this "unnecessary trouble," Fitch posed his own suffering at bringing his problems to Mifflin as at least equal to Mifflin's trouble in hearing them. He then reinforced the impression of his burdens by treating the idea for the steamboat itself as a burden: "Permit me Sir to inform you that the subscriber was so unfortunate . . . as to have an accidental thought that the force of Steam could be applied to many useful purposes, and amongst the rest to propel Vessels forward thro the Water."³⁸

Unlike his letters over the previous year, Fitch also made specific claims for the prospective performance and benefits of the steamboat. He asserted that the boat would travel "six, seven, or Eight miles per hour" and that steam-powered vessels would not only "make the Mississippi as navigable as a Tide River, but would make our Vast Territory on those waters an inconceivable fund for the Treasury of the United States." He then prepared

³⁷ For Fitch's arguments against Donaldson, see Fitch to the Pennsylvania Assembly, March 1786, Force Collection. For the legislature's failure to mention Donaldson in the bill granting exclusive rights, see Fitch, "Steamboat History," 170. Fitch commented that the legislature treated Donaldson "with the contempt which he had merited."

³⁸ Fitch to Mifflin, Sept. 21, 1786, Force Collection.

Mifflin for his next claims by acknowledging the difficulty of accepting them. "And should I say that we could always outrun any of the Piratical cruisers on the Costes of Barbary, so as to give them proper chastizement perhaps I should not be thought more extravagant than I have already been." In acknowledging the possible extravagance of his claims, he alluded to the force of credulous public opinion. Not only had spectators "jeered and scoffed" at the initial skiff experiments but Fitch also had apparently met with hostility from prominent men who pointedly refused to subscribe money and ordinary people who derided him along the dock, in the workshops, and in taverns and grog shops. As he stated later in the year, he had "set [himself] up as a mark of derision, & suffered every insult that the disdain & contempt which the populace have for projectors could inflict . . ." To acknowledge the possible extravagance of his claims for the steamboat implied that Fitch thought Mifflin himself might have heard others scoff at Fitch's boasts.³⁹

The burden of financing further work on the steamboat drove Fitch to depart severely from his former deference and strain the credulity of his audience. Work on the skiff had exhausted the original contributions to the Steamboat Company and he needed to raise more money to build the larger steam engine now needed. However, he did not want to return to the Steamboat Company subscribers for new funds, noting that "to request those gentlemen who have subscribed so generously to give more would hurt my feelings too much." What hurt Fitch was that his independence was endangered by the continuing "embarrassments" of the steamboat project. Most of the contributors to the Steamboat Company were his friends, men who contributed to the project out of public spiritedness and a belief in Fitch rather than with confidence in any ultimate success. To go back to them and ask for more money would be making him dependent on their patronage in a way that he had not been before. Thus, in seeking financing from the legislature, on which he would feel no personal dependence, Fitch was attempting to maintain a practical independence. Compelled to speak in his own behalf outside the protection of his patrons, he felt himself "for the want of money to be under the necessity of giving [his] opinion, and resquing [his] reputation on the succefs of the Schem[.]"⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Given the practical difficulties of the skiff experiments, the financial problems, the dispute with Donaldson, and adverse public opinion, it is little wonder that Fitch viewed the steamboat project as a burden. Indeed, he compared the events that had already transpired to his one real loss of independence, his captivity at the hands of Indians during the Revolution.

I am thus obliged in some measure to make myself liable for the success of the Scheme for the Pitiful sum of £150; which the original unfortunate thought has given me more trouble than my Savage Captivity. Yet I cannot indure since it is so nearly compleated to give over the persuit[.] I ask the subscription only till I can get my Boot compleated, when I will return the money again.⁴¹

The steamboat project, though more frightening and humiliating even than Indian captivity, yet compelled Fitch to proceed. For Mifflin, Fitch was invoking an early modern language of masculinity to formulate the burdens he felt in pursuing the steamboat project. For men of Fitch's time and station, being the captive of an Indian band was analogous to living with a scolding wife or enduring a storm at sea. It was a constant state of exposure in which the integrity of his person was under assault. In the case of Fitch's Indian captivity, the threats included nearly being tomahawked, being forced to run a gauntlet, continual hunger, and apprehensions of being tortured and executed. In claiming that the steamboat project gave him "more trouble than his Savage Captivity," Fitch was indicating that he experienced the difficulties of working with the steamboat mechanism, popular derision, and his humiliations by Franklin and Congress as even more threatening. In both cases, he was in the grip of the "other." To become financially dependent on the Steamboat Company as well would have added to Fitch's sense of exposure and undercut his masculine pride ("would hurt my feelings too much"), creating more of a burden than any man could reasonably be expected to bear. Fitch made the same point in a letter to the Pennsylvania Assembly when he argued that "unless there is proper encouragement for these things, men will sooner be guilty of suicide than run into a project the certain consequences of which were sure to make him a dependent wretch all his days."⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² For Fitch's Indian captivity, see Fitch, "Life of John Fitch," 70, 73–75. Fitch and his party believed that they would be tortured and killed in retaliation for the massacre of Moravian Indians earlier in 1782. For the comparison with suicide, see Fitch to the Committee of the Assembly, Sept., 1786, Force Collection.

Throughout the summer of 1787, Fitch continued to maintain an early modern mode of self-representation as he encountered the difficulties of building a full-sized steamboat. During the winter and spring of 1787, he had secured laws in four more states for exclusive rights to the steamboat and reorganized the Steamboat Company to provide fresh infusions of money for building a larger steam engine. Nevertheless, the technical and financial problems of building the boat itself threatened to scuttle the project. Trials of the new engine revealed that the cylinder, piston, and steam valves had design defects. Fitch and Voight remedied these, with Voight inventing a double cock for the steam valve. However, fixing the cylinder and piston made it necessary to take the entire works apart and rebuild from scratch, all of which took considerable time and was enormously expensive. Because few members of the Steamboat Company attended meetings, Fitch was obliged to visit the houses of each member himself to solicit money. This mortified him, seeming to confirm the sense of dependence that he had dreaded the previous September. When the cylinder was finally repaired, Fitch and Voight encountered difficulties with the condensers that Voight resolved by inventing a pipe condenser. But then the boiler had to be strengthened to supply more steam. All of this required more money. Fitch and Voight were learning the business of building steam engines through a process of continually inventing new designs for new components for the engines. However, this process of invention made Fitch ever more dependent on the generosity of a company whose members had not bargained on supporting an extended project of mechanical invention. Having continually to pay out new sums of money for repairs proved discouraging and several members of the Steamboat Company became resistant to requests for renewed contributions. As Fitch later wrote in "Steamboat History," the absent members "would esteem their money taken from them by me, and would much prefer seeing a common beggar come to their doors than myself."⁴³

Without the financial backing of the Steamboat Company, however, it was impossible for Fitch to continue the project. So, in 1787, he wrote a lengthy letter designed to breathe life back into the company and save the project. Formulating the letter as a farewell to the city, Fitch argued grandly that God's own law guaranteed the ultimate success of the steamboat. "[T]he laws of God," he began, "are positive" and such laws "are equally positive in

⁴³ Westcott, *Life*, 150–51, 173, 175–76; Fitch, "Steamboat History," 171–74.

every branch of mechanism, and in all sciences, as in other things . . ." The "laws of God" were the principles by which the objective world was organized. According to Fitch, his own first principle, that "two vessels of equal dimensions and weight . . . must go equally fast" under equal forces applied in an equal manner, conformed strictly to divine law. Thus grounding himself, he applied himself to the potential for profit. If a steamboat could generate the force required to travel up the Mississippi, Fitch could take a boat of sixty tons burden from New Orleans to the Illinois River for \$2,000, just one third of the cost of hiring men to row.⁴⁴

Fitch again discussed the benefits and burdens of building steamboats. As in his letters to the Pennsylvania Assembly, he posed his claims for the benefits of the steamboat against the hostility of public opinion. After repeating his argument that the steamboat would make America "the most opulent empire on earth" and allow American ships to "chastize the pirates of Barbary with impunity," Fitch derided public hostility to the steamboat as a failure to recognize divine law. "The Laws of God in Machinism" permitted "a steam Engine to work on board of a small Boat equally as well as if it had been placed on Land . . ." Ignorant of the nature of the world formed by God's hand, the public inevitably accused Fitch of insanity: "let these things be ever so well founded on reason and fact, at this day they cannot be looked upon but as delusive, and the effects of Lunacy."⁴⁵

By cloaking himself in the laws of God, Fitch gained the upper hand against the public, and enabled his investors to participate in a human enterprise of the first rank. "When future ages shall rever great Lewis the 16, for promoting the happiness and interest of Mankind," Fitch wrote, "will there be no sons of Columbia to eclips some of those dazzling rays of that Mighty Monarch, and introduce one of the first powers of Nature into our Empire."⁴⁶

Fitch also guaranteed the company a profit based on the government's desire to promote expanded settlement in the West. He reminded his readers that Congress had promised a large tract of land to James Rumsey of Virginia if he could run his pole-boat fifty miles upstream in one day on the Ohio River. Fitch believed that he had already beaten that standard in his trials and that, as a result, "whoever will patronize my scheme will lay out

⁴⁴ Westcott, *Life*, 186–88.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 188–90.

their money on as sure a ground as the Honor of our Empire . . ."⁴⁷

However attractive this grandiose vision might be to investors, it failed to repay Fitch for his own pains. Having stated his case, he ended with a dramatic statement of his desire to abandon the steamboat project and leave Philadelphia. His gesture of farewell, though composed more for rhetorical effect than as a real wish to leave town, is striking for its assimilation of steamboats and early modern leisure pursuits. Turning from the theme of the profitability of the steamboat project, Fitch asked:

But why those earnest solicitations, to disturb my nightly repose, and fill me with the most excruciating anxieties; and why not act the part for myself, and retire under the shady Elms on the fair banks of the Ohio, and eat my coarse but sweet bread of industry and content, and when I have done, to have my body laid in the soft, warm, and loomy soil of the Banks, with my name inscribed on a neighboring poplar, that future generations when traversing the Mighty Waters of the West, in the manner I have pointed out, may find my grassy turf, and spread their cupboard on it, and circle round their chearful Knogins of Whiskey, with three times three, till they should suppose a son of misfortune could never occupy the place.⁴⁸

Posing the rhetorical question of why he should not retire to a more simple life, Fitch revealed that, besides being a practical burden, the trials of steamboat building had been emotionally devastating as well, causing him to lose sleep and suffer "the most excruciating anxieties." For men like Fitch, the emotional state of "anxiety" was a kind of external force acting on the mind to cause high levels of pain, like the "care," "troubles," "ills," and "woes" that popular songs and poems imagined invading, tearing apart, oppressing, or otherwise attacking the minds of pre-industrial Philadelphians. For instance, the sign of the Philadelphia's Union Hotel attributed the same malignancy to woes and ills that Fitch attributes to his anxieties:

Whatever may tend to soothe the soul below
To dry the tear and blunt the shaft of woe,
To drown the ills that discompose the mind—

⁴⁷ Ibid., 190.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

All those who seek at Warwick's shall find⁴⁹

Like the sign and other sources, Fitch's letter posed leisure as the ultimate resolution to anxieties, but did so in a way that allowed him to treat the steamboat's success as a *fait accompli*. While he had previously proclaimed future benefits for the steamboat and linked them to his own efforts, he now treated those benefits as inevitable with or without his involvement. Even if he retired to Kentucky, he proposed, and lived out his days in the simple, contented life of pioneer industry, future generations would travel up and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in steamboats (i.e., "in the manner I have pointed out"). Such travel would be possible because steamboats had lowered transportation costs, facilitated trade, and encouraged settlement, all the accomplishments that Fitch had claimed for the steamboat. He viewed himself as communing with this happy future public when he imagined that travelers "may find my grassy turf, and spread their cupboard on it, and circle round their chearful Knogins of Whiskey with three times three . . ." Where Fitch's current work on the steamboat was creating "excruciating anxieties," the steamboat's inevitable success would make it possible for him to rest easy in his grave and serve as a ghostly host to future festivities. By substituting a convivial grave for the local tavern, Fitch was able to imagine his ultimate reconciliation as occurring in the same early modern drinking rituals that allowed other artisans to overcome their anxieties, but at the cost of his own death. This was early modern ritual, and the masculinity it sustained, strained to the limit.

Fitch's letter to the Steamboat Company had the desired effect. He had a steamboat working at about four miles an hour on the Delaware, to considerable acclaim, during the summer of 1787. However, the emergence of James Rumsey as a competitor, the support for Rumsey in Philadelphia, and the continuing financial problems of the Steamboat Company raised his distress and anxiety to such high levels after 1787 that he began to represent himself in new ways. Instead of exclusively opposing conditions of intense pain and death by fire to a triumphant self, he developed a second language of self-representation in which he was at the disposal of external forces and

⁴⁹ John Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *A History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1884), 3:989.

could only gain relief by accepting his own suffering and torment. In this new language, Fitch attributed the difficulties of the steamboat project to various kinds of deities and other external forces, and began to describe his own agency using dramatic images of the suffering he would accept to escape the steamboat project. Fitch's original early modern modes of self-representation were failing, too weak to support the strain of continuous invention and entrepreneurship. In his autobiography, he attempted (with some success) to subordinate early modern languages of masculinity to a new master narrative of vaguely divine forces creating his world for the express purpose of tormenting him. While Fitch's particular vision of actively malign deities may be extreme and personal, his experience of being pushed toward cultural innovation by extraordinary practical strain was shared by other men of his time, and became widespread in the next generation.⁵⁰

Of the conditions stimulating Fitch's anxieties, the claims of James Rumsey were the most important. Rumsey, from western Virginia, was the inventor of a pole-boat that employed a mechanical apparatus to move a boat against the current of rapid streams. Rumsey's idea was that the force of the current itself would turn a wheel and put setting poles in motion to move a boat against the current. In September 1787, as Fitch was successfully demonstrating his first full-sized steamboat, a story circulated in Philadelphia that Rumsey now claimed to be the steamboat inventor. Although Fitch later wrote that he gave no credence to the stories, he quickly began to draft counterarguments to what he understood as Rumsey's claims. Rumsey ended the suspense in March 1788 by coming to Philadelphia and distributing a pamphlet claiming to have invented the steamboat in 1784 and accusing Fitch of plagiarizing his ideas. Rumsey's plan for a steamboat was the same model as Franklin's and Donaldson's but his claims were plausible enough to put Fitch under a cloud of suspicion. Not only did leading figures like Benjamin Franklin and Levi Hollingsworth (both of whom had previously supported Donaldson) join the "Rumseian Society" to promote Rumsey's work, but Fitch adherents like Richard Wells also came to doubt Fitch's honesty.⁵¹

Rumsey's claims threatened Fitch because they could destroy the value of his work on the steamboat project. Because Fitch could only get his larger boat

⁵⁰ Westcott, *Life*, 191-94; Fitch, "Life," 178-80.

⁵¹ Westcott, *Life*, 194; Fitch, "Steamboat History," 181-82; Fitch to Dr. William Samuel Johnson, Sept. 14, Nov. 21, and Nov. 24, 1787, Force Collection.

up to a speed of four miles an hour in 1787, it was still not useful for any commercial purpose. Despite its limitations, though, Fitch's steamboat had shown enough promise that the expectation of its success, and with it its value as an investment, had grown significantly. After exhibiting the steamboat for the Federal Convention, Fitch received endorsements from Dr. Johnson of Virginia, the famous astronomer David Rittenhouse, and Andrew Ellicott of the Episcopal Academy. All three emphasized Fitch's merits as an ingenious and persevering inventor and Ellicott stressed that he was "now fully of [the] opinion that steamboats may be made to answer valuable purposes in facilitating the internal navigation of the United States." Fitch had overcome his "excruciating anxieties" and addressed the difficulties of the steamboat project in such a way that it looked like his expectations of wealth and fame could be realized. If Rumsey's claims succeeded now, Fitch would be viewed as a dishonest man who had imposed fraudulently on his friends, supporters, and the public, while the value of his work over the previous three years would be reduced to nothing and his humiliation redoubled and made permanent.⁵²

Fitch responded vigorously and effectively. He walked from Philadelphia to Fredericktown (now Frederick), Maryland, to collect affidavits supporting his claim that Rumsey had neither published plans nor built a steamboat before his own. Rumsey appears to have had parts cast for a steamboat in March 1786, about the same time that Fitch was working on the skiff. However, Rumsey did all his work in great secrecy and did not have a functioning steamboat until December 1787, while Fitch was "notorious" for his steamboat plans and had a successful trial of the steam skiff in July 1786. After showing Richard Wells a draft of his response and once again convincing Wells of his honesty, Fitch obtained Wells's editorial assistance to publish a pamphlet, *The Original Steamboat Supported*, that effectively refuted Rumsey's claims and reestablished Fitch's reputation with the Steamboat Company. Franklin and the other members of the Rumseian Society continued to back Rumsey, but Fitch had regained the initiative. He began to build a new steamboat for trials on the Delaware and to promote new petitions for land in Congress and exclusive rights in Rumsey's state of Virginia.⁵³

⁵² For the performance of the steamboat and endorsements from Johnson, Rittenhouse, Ewing, and Ellicott, see Westcott, *Life*, 191–93.

⁵³ See the comprehensive review of the Fitch-Rumsey dispute in Westcott, *Life*, 196–205, 207–48; Fitch, "Steamboat History," Library Company of Philadelphia, 57, 180–82; John Fitch, *The Original Steamboat Supported* (Freeport, N.Y., 1971).

The quickness and energy with which Fitch responded to Rumsey is strong testimony to his considerable strength of character. In the midst of his high hopes of reward for his accomplishments with the steamboat, Fitch faced immense anguish over being confronted with public accusations of fraud, suspected by his best friends of exploiting them, and being unable to pay for his lodging and meals. Many eighteenth-century men, perhaps most, would have developed symptoms of hypochondria or melancholy when confronted with the kind of crisis that Rumsey's claims represented for Fitch. In *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind*, Benjamin Rush, a prominent Philadelphia physician and contemporary of Fitch's, argued that business reverses were a leading cause of such low-grade mental illness. For example, when the printer-bookseller Mathew Carey was unable to persuade distant customers to pay for his *American Museum* magazine, his distress over his debts led to imaginary heart pains that kept him from putting his full energy into his business for more than two years. Because they kept him from completely applying himself to his business, Carey's chest pains lessened his anxieties by relieving him of the work of seeking new loans from friends, turning away creditors, and failing to pay journeymen.⁵⁴

Fitch, however, sailed into the teeth of the storm. He had the emotional resources to walk more than one hundred miles into Rumsey's home territory to collect information, write a bold document justifying his position, and patiently work to convince his friends once again of his personal honesty and priority as steamboat inventor. Rather than becoming "crafty-sick" or abandoning the project, Fitch fought hard and effectively to overcome the immediate problems caused by Rumsey.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the controversy with Rumsey had an enormous impact on Fitch's representation of himself in relation to the steamboat project, the larger community, and divinity. The first evidence of this change came in a June 3, 1788, letter to Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812; reprint, New York, 1962), 41–42. For Carey's hypochondria, see Mathew Carey to Christopher Carey, Dec. 16, 1788, Lea and Febiger Collection; Mathew Carey to William P. Carey, May, 22, 1789, Mathew Carey to James Carey, Sept. 12, 1791, and Mathew Carey to Margaret Murphy Carey, Sept. 13, 1797, Edward Carey Gardiner Collection; all Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is discussed further in Caric, "To Drown the Ills," 465–66.

⁵⁵ For "crafty-sick," see William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part II*, in William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* (New York: Random House, 1975), 455.

... why Heaven permits such amazing injustice is equally as unaccountable to me, while I was imbarassed with all the difficulties that were possible for an unfortunate Projector to encounter, even to such a degree that not a day passed but I could have wished myself into non existence, then the great Characters of this Town could with Sovereign scorn and heart felt pleasure look down upon one with contempt, but as soon as I had ellucidated the matter so far as to make the scheem promise succes, cruel and invious ambition excited a desire in them to become the promoters . . .⁵⁶

In many ways, this statement carries forward an early modern language of masculinity into Fitch's representation of the Rumsey controversy. As was the case when Fitch likened the steamboat project to Indian captivity, he experienced the difficulties of the steamboat project as assaults on the integrity of his self so intense that he might "have wished myself into non-existence." He had overcome those difficulties and the sense of danger they entailed, and had now "ellucidated the matter so far as to make the scheem promise success." However, the idea of wishing himself into nonexistence also implied a different logic of self-representation. By using the image of the suicidal wish to measure his anxiety over work on steamboats, Fitch raised the possibility of acting upon himself to address the difficulties of the steamboat project instead of acting directly on the business. Underlying this image was the likelihood that he might not prevail in his efforts to overcome the excessively difficult problems of the steamboat project. Thus Fitch might only be able to relieve the anxieties associated with these problems by acting on himself, i.e., by rendering himself into "non existence." Where early modern masculinity articulated the self as opposing and conquering whatever was perceived as threats, Fitch was posing the idea of embracing self-destruction as a response to his difficulties. By articulating the option of dealing with the threatening "otherness" of the steamboat project by becoming an "other" to himself, and allowing himself to be destroyed by that "other," Fitch was posing an alternative moral relation to the world.

The logic of embracing suicide was reinforced by the concept of deity that Fitch formulated in the phrase "why Heaven permits so much injustice is unaccountable to me." From his point of view, he should have been given credit for his accomplishments with the steamboat and acknowledged as a benefactor of both the community and nation. But Rumsey's appearance and

⁵⁶ Fitch to St. Jean de Crèveceour, June 3, 1788, Force Collection.

the work of the Rumseian Society had subjected him to even more vilification and ridicule than before. To Fitch, such "amazing injustice" could not be only the product of the vice of men like Joseph Barnes, Levi Hollingsworth, and Benjamin Franklin. It had to have been the doing of a higher power, even if he could not understand why "Heaven" would authorize such injustice. Thus, where Fitch had previously portrayed a deity as the objective guarantor of the success of his efforts to construct a profitable steamboat, he was now posing "Heaven" as at least "permitting" his destruction. If heaven had authorized the injustices of the Rumseian Society, then it was beyond his capacities to counteract or overturn the Rumseian Society's influence. If that was the case, then an early modern language of masculinity was not applicable to Fitch's situation with the steamboat project. Fitch could not have been manifesting his ingenuity as an inventor and his passion for the public welfare in his efforts to overcome the difficulties of the steamboat project. Instead, he would have been helplessly caught in an almost comical effort to defy the will of heaven. In his state of turmoil, Fitch represented the will of heaven in a way that precluded identification with the old-fashioned manly fortitude of his own performance against Rumsey.

In another letter to St. John de Crèvecoeur written at the end of the summer of 1788, Fitch was still employing an early modern language of masculinity to represent himself in relation to the Rumseian Society. However, he was not able to identify himself with such language. Instead, he used the idea of a malevolent deity that had been implicit in his previous letter to enunciate an alternative vision of his relation to the world.

The imprudence which I have been guilty of in undertaking a Business so far beyond my abilities I am persuaded will never happen to me again, and if the world can forgive this one blunder of my life, I am sure I shall not have occasion to ask their pardon for the like offence afterword . . . yet I thank God that he has enabled me to wade thro one summer more, not for the enjoyments of life, but because I hope my life may be useful to others, if not in promoting useful Arts, it will undoubtedly be a Valuable lefson. I have not only a most potent wicked and cruil enemy to content with, but Creditors to turn away unrelieved, and altho this is severe to a man of feelings, it is unfair [not] to mention them amongst our other difficulties . . .

[*written in margins*] I know Sir when you consider my long series of unremitted difficulties and that my life seems designed by the gods for no other purpose

than to give mirth to others without any relief from any quarter like the savage mind rejoicing to see his victim enclosed in faggots . . .⁵⁷

In the first paragraph, Fitch arranged an early modern vocabulary of masculinity to reconcile himself to the Rumsey controversy and that summer's efforts on the steamboat project. He sought to repair his ties with the social "world" by confessing errors of judgment and failure to pay debts. Fitch admitted that the steamboat project had been far beyond his abilities and implicitly conceded that many of the difficulties had been his fault. Indeed, results that summer were mixed. Disaster befell Fitch and Voight right at the beginning when a forge mistakenly broke up their new cylinder for "pig mettle." However, Fitch and Voight were able to fit an engine around a smaller cylinder and get a boat running up to six miles an hour on a twenty-mile trip to Burlington. That would have been another signal accomplishment if Fitch and the company had not believed that eight miles per hour was needed to carry passengers profitably on the Delaware. Thus, though Fitch had worked for three years, his efforts still possessed only a speculative value and he remained dependent on the Steamboat Company for his subsistence. By apologizing and seeking forgiveness for his "vanity" in undertaking the steamboat project, Fitch hoped to reconcile himself to hostile public opinion. He also sought consolation for his failures by expressing appreciation to God for his ability to carry on and a hope that his efforts might have some social benefit. Representing himself as reconciled to God and the community bolstered Fitch as he confronted the threat posed by Rumsey and his allies, a "most potant[,] wicked[,] and cruil enemy." Consequently, Fitch was able to portray himself in classically early modern terms, as manfully carrying on despite the dishonest efforts of those "others" who would deprive him of the fruits of his labor.⁵⁸

However, the early modern language of masculinity turned out to be unsatisfying, so Fitch undertook to represent himself according to a different cultural logic as well. After ending the first statement quoted above, he added a second paragraph in the margins of the letter. In this marginalia, Fitch depicted his life as a scene of torment and his gods as "like the savage mind rejoicing to see his victim enclosed in faggots." By portraying his life as the equivalent of burning alive, he cut the symbolic ground out from

⁵⁷ Fitch to St. Jean de Crèveceour, Oct. 25, 1789, Force Collection.

⁵⁸ Westcott, *Life*, 249–52, 256.

under the early modern culture of masculine contention and performance. If the gods had arranged Fitch's life as a series of difficulties analogous to being burned alive, then his displays of masculine energy, ingenuity, and fortitude could never lift him above his suffering and pain. They could only provide amusement for the gods. In this sense, he was representing his life as an object used in the performances of others—a way that the gods could "give mirth" to other gods—rather than as a context within which he himself might perform and distinguish himself. In comparing his life to being burned alive, Fitch was projecting the emotional torment he associated with Rumsey's claims back to his whole existence in a way that eliminated any hope of relief from either his own or divine agency.

Thus Fitch's marginal statement rejected his own previous effort to use an early modern language of masculinity to ally himself with God and the social world. At this point, early modern culture certainly remained a powerful force in his life but it was failing as a basis for his self-representation. Fitch employed early modern languages of masculinity to generate bold and decisive action to counter Rumsey's influence and continuously improve the steamboat. However, Fitch's experience of the steamboat was so painful that he could no longer fully identify himself within a matrix that emphasized performance in overcoming others. Instead, he experimented with locating himself through representations of himself as the gods' plaything and of his life as a space and time of undifferentiated torture. In a sense, Fitch was generating action from the cultural template or habitus of his youth but reflecting on those actions from another template that he was inventing as he went along.

Another sign of the weakening of early modern culture was the ongoing development of Fitch's second language of self-representation. His analogizing his life to being burned alive expanded the logic of agency found in his previous daily wishing himself into nonexistence. If Fitch's practical reality was so painful that it could be compared to being burned alive, then there was no basis for expecting his performances to provide either triumph or relief. In such a context, suicide would be a logical course of action; ending one's life would be less painful than continuing to live. If the idea of wishing himself into nonexistence had defined a sense of agency in need of a language, the notion of his life as being "enclosed in faggots" connected that agency to an empirical understanding of the world.

Fitch's second language of self-identification continued to develop even though early modern masculinity remained a strong element in his self-

understanding. This can be seen in an April 1789 letter to William Samuel Johnson. Fitch first characterized his life as a plaything, of Congress this time, then made himself the agent of his sacrifice to torture and torment.

... but as age and infirmities are advancing fast upon me if my *just* Rights must be taken from me without being heard by either Branch of the Legislature may I not as well be delivered over to the Rude Savage of my Native Country to sport with and put an end to my wretched Existence to quench their thirst for Blood and serve my Country in my Death as well as my life that my Enemies might be benefited in both [emphasis added].⁵⁹

Fitch was writing to Johnson about his petition to Congress for a patent as the original inventor of the steamboat. Rumsey's allies were also petitioning Congress to have Rumsey recognized as the steamboat's inventor and Fitch believed that if Congress gave Rumsey a patent, they would be taking away the exclusive "rights" to the use of steamboats that Fitch had received from state legislatures. For Fitch, those rights were "just" because he *had* been the first to propose a plan for the steamboats and because he and Voight had overcome enormous technical difficulties to bring the steamboat to a point where it could travel twenty miles at six miles per hour.⁶⁰ In early modern terms, Fitch had shown ingenuity, honor, and an ability to benefit the public, and therefore deserved to keep his exclusive rights. From his point of view, the question of whether his rights should be overturned or not put Congress in a god-like position. If Congress recognized the rights that Fitch had been granted by Pennsylvania, Virginia, and others, then he could interpret his conditions in terms of an early modern language of masculinity and contend with the painful difficulties of the steamboat project in order to benefit the public. However, he would have to interpret Congress's overturning of those just rights according to a logic of embracing torment and represent them as making his life so unbearably painful that it would be equivalent to being handed over to the "Rude Savage" for torture and death. In giving Fitch's rights to Rumsey, Congress would have been like the prankster gods in the letter to Crèvecoeur, treating Fitch as a toy to be played with for someone else's amusement. In such a context, it would make no sense to think of Fitch's work on the steamboat

⁵⁹ Fitch to William Samuel Johnson, April 1789, Force Collection.

⁶⁰ Westcott, *Life*, 249–52.

through the early modern language of masculine virtue. To the contrary, if Congress refused Fitch his rights, his work would be significant primarily as an entertainment for Congress and his enemies, and he might as well be tortured and executed so that he could "serve my Country in my Death as well as my life that my Enemies might be benefited in both[.]"

Later in the letter, Fitch then made himself the author of his own putative sacrifice when he stated that he "would rather become a willing sacrifice to the Faggot than to wear out the evening of my days in wretched existence to the Eternal Dishonour of the first acts of our Empire." If Rumsey received a patent, Congress would not only have removed Fitch's capacity to pursue the steamboat project, but dishonored the nation as a whole by committing a gross act of injustice. Congress would not only be harming Fitch, it would be undermining the moral status of the national community. If Fitch had been representing himself through an early modern language of masculinity, he would have posed himself as either finding a way to contest or console himself for such an injustice. Here, however, Fitch posed the consequence of Congress's giving a patent to Rumsey as worse than being burned alive and consequently beyond his or anyone's ability to remedy. Given that Fitch could not envision lifting himself above such a "wretched existence," he now asserted a capacity to choose willingly a painful death in preference to that existence. Attributing such agency to himself was another step in the creation of an alternative language of self-representation. When Fitch represented the gods as treating his life as an object, he implied the impossibility of identifying himself with early modern values through participation in his work and leisure. Now that he was representing himself as an agent disposing of his own life as a way to overcome his sense of torment, Fitch was engaged in a cultural practice that ran counter to the early modern logic of overcoming symbolic threats.

The fact that Fitch was now representing himself in ways that were distinct from early modern culture did not mean, however, that he had abandoned early modern motifs. Later in 1789, he also formulated an explanation of the current problems of the steamboat project in terms of masculinity. During the summer, he placed an eighteen-inch cylinder in the steam engine as part of an effort to seek more speed. However, the subsequent experiments with condensers and air pumps proved to be expensive and he had evidently failed to seek additional funds in a timely manner. According to Fitch, the origin of his current financial difficulties was in his failure to press the company harder for money, the result of having

been emasculated by gratitude: "when you paid me your Subscriptions, [you] looked upon it more as money given to me . . . which totally unmanned me, and Gratitude forbid my askeing for livies laid till almost too late to save our credit . . ." It was much more likely that he balked out of shame at his dependence than out of any swelling of gratitude. From the beginning of his work on steamboats, Fitch experienced his dependence on the Steamboat Company for financial support as an affront to his masculine dignity and compared such dependence unfavorably to suicide and being burned alive. Nevertheless, he had demonstrated his "manly fortitude" by enduring the shame of dependence and aggressively seeking funds from the company whenever money was needed. This time, he viewed his failure to seek money as a redoubled failure of masculinity that put him into debt and left him open to threats, insults, and imputations against his character. "Thus being obliged to act beneath the dignity of a man, and Consequently beneath the dignity of myself, I have laid myself liable to indignities from every quarter . . ." Fitch was forced once more to bear the humiliation of being repeatedly dunned by his landlady, workmen, and suppliers, threatened with lawsuits, and visited by the sheriff. As he stated later in the letter, he was treated "more like a slave than a freeman."⁶¹

Fitch's failure to seek funding for continued work on the steamboat during the summer of 1789 was the first evidence of melancholy or hypochondria during the four years he had worked on the project. Feeling "unmanned" as he contemplated the prospect of soliciting more money from the Steamboat Company, he avoided the painful task. If Fitch did indeed suffer from melancholy, however, it was the mildest possible form. The closest things in his correspondence to the "morbid thoughts" ascribed to melancholics by Benjamin Rush were his frequent comparisons of work on the steamboat project to being "enclosed in faggots" or sacrificing himself to the "faggot." It is important to remember, however, that Fitch distanced himself somewhat from images of being burned alive by employing them as analogies rather than as direct descriptions of the steamboat project. He was also able to represent himself in terms of traditional languages of masculinity, criticize himself when he failed to meet standards of male behavior, and experiment with a language of embracing suffering and torment. Thus what most characterized Fitch even

⁶¹ Fitch to the Directors of the Steamboat Company, Dec. 17, 1789, Force Collection; Fitch, "Steamboat History," Library Company of Philadelphia, 62, 96-97.

at this point was the flexible way that he bore the enormous technical, social, financial, and political stress of the steamboat project. All the same, the minor melancholia involved in his failure to seek money from the Steamboat Company in the fall of 1789 may have been an indication that his ability to cope with such high levels of distress was waning.⁶²

At the same time that Fitch was struggling with melancholy, he was also developing images of himself as exercising masculinity on a world-historical scale. His claims to be a benefactor of civilization are particularly interesting. In a letter to Congress written in the late summer or fall of 1789, he argued that the efforts of projectors like himself had raised humanity out of "Savage Barbarity" and that he, in particular, ought to be rewarded because the steamboat had ended "six thousand years" at the "Toisom Oar." Based on his success in getting his steamboat to travel at six miles an hour, Fitch was expanding his vision of his contribution to the community. Not only could he and his steamboat raise the value of western lands in the United States but they could also lift up human civilization in general.⁶³

In 1790, Fitch had even more success. Having procured an eighteen-inch cylinder and redesigned his condensers and pumps, he got the steamboat to run at eight miles an hour, started a regular steamboat service on the Delaware River, and received widespread praise for his accomplishments. As a result, Fitch renewed his portrayal of himself as a founder of civilization by asserting that the steamboat was "more useful than any Art that has been introduced into the World this two Centuries past" and "will probably cause a revolution in the Western World more astonishing than the Introduction of Arts into Muscova by Peter." From Fitch's point of view, he had now overcome all the problems with the steamboat and exceeded Franklin, Washington, Louis XVI, and the other great figures of the early modern world as a benefactor of humanity. However, such a rarified view of his own manliness can be seen as increasing his vulnerability. From such a high perch, Fitch would have to experience any renewal of the technical or financial difficulties of the steamboat project as even more threatening and degrading than ever.⁶⁴

⁶² For the significance of fixed ideas in melancholy, see Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, 86–90.

⁶³ Fitch to Committee in Congress, listed by the Library of Congress as written in 1789; Fitch to Robert Morris, Sept. 20, 1790 (unmailed), Force Collection.

⁶⁴ For the performance of Fitch's steamboat in 1790, see Westcott, *Life*, 280–91; Fitch, "Steamboat History," 189–93.

In fact, difficulties quickly re-emerged after the heady summer of 1790. The Steamboat Company authorized work on a new boat, the *Perseverance*, without securing funds from the members in advance and Fitch found himself once again begging money from the members, falling behind on his rent, and failing to pay his journeymen. His political initiatives were also stymied. He was disappointed when representatives from western Pennsylvania rejected a proposal to build steamboats at Pittsburgh. He was even more disappointed when Congress referred his application for exclusive rights to the steamboat to the Patent Commissioners and the commissioners themselves delayed their hearings on the competing claims of Fitch, Rumsey, and John Stevens until the spring.⁶⁵ By 1791, Fitch's heightened sense of masculinity was now both reinforcing a deeper melancholy and spurring him to further develop his alternative discourse of embracing torment. In a letter to Richard Stockton and the Steamboat Company, Fitch explained,

Why sir to tell you the Truth these six weeks past i am nothing better than an Old woman and a mear Cypher when money could raise me above the dignity of a Nobleman and effect greater things than ever Ceasar or Alaxander did[.] My deprefsed spirits is certainly not for the want of an inclination to serve you for I know that I could with freedom this evening sacrifice my life to gratify your wishes[.]⁶⁶

The shift from an early modern language of masculinity to an alternative discourse occurs in the explanation of the first sentence by the second. When Fitch stated in the first sentence that he had been "nothing better than an old woman and a mear Cypher" for six weeks, he indicated his inactivity and evaluated that inactivity as a deficiency in masculinity. At this point, his melancholy had become generalized enough that he could not bring himself to do anything in relation to the steamboat project. Experiencing work on the steamboat machinery, raising money from the steamboat company, and pursuing legislative initiatives as pervasive threats to his sense of self, he now avoided these activities and cited his "depressed spirits" as the reason for his

⁶⁵ Fitch, "Steamboat History," 197; Westcott, *Life*, 294, 295–97, 301. John Stevens, a New Jersey gentleman, was an original member of Fitch's Steamboat Company in 1785. Stevens began to work on his own designs in 1788, however, and eventually launched a steamboat in competition with Fulton in 1808. *Ibid.*, 151; Sale, *The Fire of His Genius*, 36, 148.

⁶⁶ Fitch to Richard Stockton, undated 1790, Force Collection. Internal evidence indicates that the letter was written between the time that the steamboat stopped running for the year and Christmas.

evasion. Given that masculinity meant confronting and overcoming obstacles, he viewed his failure to face up to the obstacles of the steamboat project as "femininity." Fitch emphasized this point by also calling himself a "mear Cypher," someone who does not act on his own initiative. Had he had money (and been able to pursue the steamboat project without the burdens of raising money or taking advice from gentlemen like Stockton), he would be more potent, more manly, than the greatest men in history. At the same time, however, Fitch's belief that he could "effect greater things than . . . Caesar or Alaxander" would have magnified the humiliation of his poverty and thus reinforced his depressed spirits.

In the second sentence, Fitch's explanation of his failure to act indicated a shift away from early modern standards of masculinity. If he viewed himself as unable to work on the steamboat project, he did portray himself as capable of acting "with freedom" to sacrifice his life to gratify Stockton's wishes. Fitch mentioned the sacrifice of his life as evidence of a desire to work on the steamboat, but the freedom with which he would sacrifice his life was also a freedom that he no longer attributed to himself in relation to the steamboat. Where he could readily arrange and execute his own death to satisfy Stockton, he could not bring himself to go about his work on the steamboat out of gratitude to Stockton, a desire to overcome his difficulties, or any other motive. Representing himself as willingly sacrificing his life provided Fitch with a kind of "practical orientation" toward self-sacrifice, whether that self-sacrifice be suicide, letting himself be subjected to torture, or some other kind of self-chosen death. As a result, Fitch only felt a freedom to act in terms of the alternative language he had developed. He could attribute some kind of agency to the god-like figures whom he viewed as making his world so painful and tormenting. However, he himself could only act to embrace or enfold himself in that torment. In this case, Fitch was provocatively, almost mockingly, proposing that Stockton serve as a deity figure whose wishes could define Fitch's life, inviting Stockton to feel responsible for his death. Fitch's alternative language of self-representation limited his agency to embracing the dictates of the prankster gods or god-like entities like Stockton and the Congress. Within that language, but no longer within the norms of early modern manhood, he could pose himself as acting with freedom.

The summer of 1790 turned out to be the high-water mark of Fitch's steamboat project. In April 1791, the Patent Commissioners, headed by

Rumsey supporter Thomas Jefferson, granted Fitch and Rumsey equal patents in the steamboat, an event from which the steamboat project never fully recovered. Fitch was prevailed upon to renew his efforts, but the work was now controlled by the penny-pinching Richard Stockton, who refused to advance Fitch adequate money and insisted on installing a wooden rather than a metal case to the boiler, a strategy that proved disastrous. Fitch was only fitfully active, writing in April that he would "willingly Struggle one year Longer but it seems that the Laws of Nature and my Country seems to [forbid] it and demands one year of rest." Although working steadily after September, he was unable to fix the enormous leaks that had resulted from Stockton's wooden case experiment, and fell into a pattern of alternating mild efforts on the steamboat in Philadelphia, proposals to build steamboats in Kentucky or France, and work on his autobiographical manuscripts in preparation for committing suicide.⁶⁷

While writing the "Life" and "Steamboat History," Fitch changed from representing himself as exchanging his life for an end to the steamboat project to actively planning to commit suicide. In July 1792, he completed the manuscripts and his will and deposited them with the Library Company of Philadelphia as part of his plan. On July 30, Fitch referred to his intended suicide in a letter to the Library Company: "Some few days before my death, I wrote the enclosed copy of a letter to Mr. Jefferson; but being persuaded from it by some of my Friends, who did not know *in what manner I designed to die* [emphasis in text]." Fitch's efforts to complete the "Steamboat History," and especially the "Life," are strong evidence for the growing power of his alternative language of male representation and the further weakening of early modern culture. Most importantly, his extensive preparation for committing suicide was an indication that he was acting in terms of the alternative cultural logic of embracing torment rather than the early modern logic of confronting and overcoming "otherness." Fitch's "Life" and "Steamboat History" also involved considerable critical reflection on early modern values and in these documents he established a kind of critical distance from that culture.⁶⁸

First, Fitch ridiculed his attachment to early modern values of serving the

⁶⁷ Fitch, "Steamboat History," 143, 197-99; A. Brodeau to William Thornton, Dec. 19, 1791; Fitch to the Steamboat Company, April 26, 1791; Richard Stockton to William Thornton, Sept. 6, 1791; all in Force Collection; for the dates of writing the "Life," see Fitch, "Life," 135.

⁶⁸ Westcott, *Life*, 342.

common good. In the "Steamboat History," for example, he characterized his early efforts to promote the steamboat as a comedy of self-defeating misjudgments caused by his attachment to the national interest. He reported that he was so "intoxicated" with the steamboat that he believed it was impossible for Congress to "think otherwise than I did, and that they would at once raise money enough to effect it, for the sake of raising the Value of their Western Teretory." When the petition was rejected, Fitch did not easily get over his anger, but he now viewed the intensity of both his commitment to serving the country and his concern with "honours and immoluments" as ridiculous. Even more absurdly, Fitch's ideas of serving the United States and mankind led him to reject an offer of assistance from the Spanish ambassador. "The strange Ideas I had at that time of serving my Country . . . and to do it at the displeasure of the whole Spanish Nation is one of the most impolitic Strokes that a Blockhead could be guilty of." Here, Fitch not only raised questions concerning his own zealotry but also cast doubt upon the good of benefiting one's nation, doing one's duty, serving the common good, and other early modern formulations of commitment to the collective. Viewing oneself in terms of duties and obligations to the collective was for "blockheads." Fitch completed his self-burlesque by emphasizing the obvious foolhardiness of his "strange ideas" of "serving my country" by concluding that "the Trouble that I have taken to prove [the Spanish ambassador] a Statesman and myself a Blockhead, is totally unnecessary, as neither of them can be doubted."⁶⁹

If Fitch's overheated desire to serve his country was absurdly self-defeating, his assistance to Harry Voight and Mary Krafft was even more irrational. Although both Voight and Krafft were the parents of several children, they had had a long affair that resulted in the births of children in 1789 and 1791. Fitch went to "great lengths" to save their reputations, offering to marry Krafft when she first became pregnant, assisting in the birth of the first child, and finally allowing Krafft to claim him (Fitch) as the father of the second child. In his autobiography, Fitch began his narration of this episode by treating his attempts to help his friends as a crime, claiming that he "ought almost to suffer by the common Executioner" for his involvement. When he responded to the first pregnancy by arranging for a midwife and assisting in the birth, he emphasized that he acted "beyond the

⁶⁹ Fitch "Steamboat History," 145, 148-53.

limits of prudence" in arranging for the midwife and "degraded the man" by serving as a nurse. When he actually came under suspicion of murder when the baby died a year later, Fitch emphasized that he "highly deserve[d] to suffer" because it was his duty not only to "keep clear of a fault but also the suspicion of one." In a sense, Fitch still invoked early modern standards of masculinity by referring to himself as having "degraded the man." However, he narrated the incident as a whole in terms of demonstrating that the supposed virtue of steadfastly serving friends was actually a fault for which he could be rightly punished. At the end of his narration of his involvement with Voight and Krafft, Fitch ridiculed himself again for having "far Exceeded Quixot in releaving Destressed Ladies" and warning his audience "how injudicious it is to do anything on account of Friendship."⁷⁰

The fact that Fitch took a critical distance from early modern values of service to community and friends is evidence of a failure to maintain his identification with early modern virtues in general. He also declined to make claims for the steamboat project in terms of those virtues. In contrast to the tone of his correspondence, Fitch claimed only once in his autobiographical narratives that the steamboat would contribute to America or the world. In his report of the first successful voyage undertaken by him and Voight in 1790, he proudly repeated his assertions that the steamboat would "make our Western territory four times as valuable" and that the steamboat was "one of the Greatest and most useful arts that was ever introduced into the World." However, that was the only assertion concerning either the value of the steamboat or his own worth as steamboat inventor in more than four hundred pages of manuscript. Fitch's autobiographical writings did not seek to represent his contribution as steamboat inventor, compare him to world-historical figures like Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Peter the Great, or estimate the steamboat's importance in comparison to other inventions. He did make such allusions in relation to his deist society (the Society of Deist Natural Philosophers), claiming that deism could displace Christianity and that he (Fitch) could have done "more than ever Jesus Christ or George Fox did" if his appearance and speech were more appealing. But instead of identifying himself with the individual accomplishment, reputation, and service to mankind represented by these figures, Fitch placed his hopes for deism on his Bucks County friend, Rev. Nathaniel

⁷⁰ Fitch, "Life," 124, 126, 136–37.

Irwin. Having given up the early modern world of accomplishment himself, Fitch urged Irwin to take up the work of deism and assured the minister that deism was "now the greatest opening for a man of Talents equal to yours to make himself the Greatest which ever lived."⁷¹

The final evidence of Fitch's withdrawal from early modern culture was the combination of images of a cruel fate with his desiring his own execution, torture, or dismemberment in response to that fate. In his "Life," he often used images of a difficult fate to frame key moments of his life history. Fitch characterized his birthday as the "fatal time of bringing me into existence at which time all nature seemed to shrink at the convulsed elements," and expounded on how his father "had to go about four miles for the mid-wife and to worry thro' the snowbanks on his return perhaps with nearly the same difficulties that I have gone thro' life . . ." In this sense, the narrative significance of his birth was the inauguration of the difficulties that tortured him throughout life. The same was the case when Fitch saved his house from being burned at the age of six only to be suspected by his older brother Joseph of starting the fire and unjustly beaten. This example of injustice in "what I may call the first act of my life seemed to forbode the future rewards that I was to receive for my labours thro' life." He was even more explicit in viewing his earlier life as an indication of later torment when he recounted a narrow escape from injury while climbing a tree. For Fitch, the fact that he was not "crushed to pieces by the fall" meant that "heaven had designed me for some cruel fate whose only pleasure should be to sport and tyrinize with me as if he had been educated amongst savages for thousands of years for the very purpose . . ."⁷²

There were cases in Fitch's "Life" where he purposely subordinated early modern languages of masculinity to a master narrative of subjection to a cruel fate. Retelling his capture by Indians in 1782, he stressed his own prudence and courageousness compared to the overall cowardice of the party. Fitch's party as a whole "ran aground for want of Judgment and gave ourselves up prisoners to savages for want of courage . . ." Fitch himself, however, risked his life to cut his boat loose from its moorings in order to effect an escape and only gave up after most of the rest had already surrendered. However, he folded this justification of his own masculinity

⁷¹ Fitch, "Steamboat History," 193; Fitch, "Life," 120–21, 130.

⁷² Ibid., 21, 23, 29–30.

into a narrative of how a narrow escape from execution saved him for the future tortures of steamboat building. Almost immediately after his capture, an Indian he called "Capt. Buffaloe" drew a tomahawk to kill him, "[b]ut Capt. Crow . . . stopped the fatal Blow that the fates might be fully satisfied and have no reason to complain that they had not ever an individual delivered up to them to sport with them as they pleased." Thus Fitch was saved from "the savage blow" of one Indian so that his whole life could be a series of savage blows delivered by divinities (heaven, the fates) whose enjoyment of Fitch's torment was analogous to the most highly cultivated savagery.⁷³

It is within this "objective" context that Fitch's critical reflection on early modern values ultimately had resonance. If his life was best understood as an endless series of torments, efforts to live a cohesive life ordered by virtues learned during childhood was inevitably ridiculous. That loyalty to his friends would ultimately bring him under a cloud of suspicion for their misdeeds would only be logical if heaven were toying with him. Likewise, Fitch's attempt to seek fame, acquire wealth, and benefit mankind through the steamboat would only result in his own ruin. Seeking to identify himself with early modern values was futile from Fitch's point of view because of the cruelty of the fate he was destined to suffer.

However, as was the case in the correspondence, Fitch found that he could exercise an agency in his life by giving himself the status of "heaven" or "fate" and "sporting" with his life for his own purposes. Given that he completed the "Life" and "Steamboat History" as part of a plan to commit suicide, these texts as a whole should be viewed as part of an effort by Fitch to manipulate his life by ending it. This was his "dying speech." In the "Steamboat History," Fitch also viewed acting on his life as a whole as a logical response to the worst trials of the steamboat project, and by far the worst of these trials was the continual necessity of raising money. In characterizing his fund-raising efforts in 1787, he portrayed asking his friends for money as more distressing than leaving his family, his Indian captivity, or his bouts with the "gravil" and rheumatism, though these illnesses were "quite sufficient to pacify Heaven for all the crimes that ever I committed." Instead of making such demands, Fitch would rather have undergone repeated amputation. "Could money have been extracted from

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 70.

my Limbs, amputations would have often taken place, provided the disjointed part could have been readily joined, rather than to make the demands which I have." Unable to imagine himself at that point as overcoming his financial dependence or his experience of that dependence as a threat to his human integrity, Fitch imagined himself as choosing to sacrifice his bodily integrity as an alternative. He invoked the same kind of self-mutilation as a response to the forced withdrawal of his petition for a land grant to Congress in 1788. "When I received information of that . . . could I have recalled my life back for four years, I would gladly have offered my neck to the common executioner."⁷⁴

What ends did Fitch seek to obtain through either the suicidal gestures of repeated amputations and offering his neck to the common executioner or his overall plan to commit suicide? Some evidence is given in the will that he drew up in July 1792. The focal point of the document is a short song that Fitch seems to have written himself.

The Song of the Brown Jug

With my jug in one hand and my pipe in the other
I'll drink to my neighbor and friend
All my cares in a whiff of Tobacco I'll smother
My life I know shortly must End
While Ceres most kindly refills my Brown Jug with Brown Ale
I will make myself mellow
In my old Vicar Chair I'll set myself snug
Like a jolly and true-hearted fellow

I'll ne'er trouble myself with the Cares of my Nation
I've enough of My own for to mind
All we see in this World is but grief and vexation
To Death I am Shortly Resigned
So we'll laugh Drink and Smoke and leave nothing to Care
And Drop like a Pair [Pear] Ripe and Mellow
When Cold in my Coffin I'll leave them to Say
He's gone what a True-hearted Fellow⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Fitch, "Steamboat History," 171-72; Westcott, *Life*, 205.

⁷⁵ Fitch, "Will," July 13, 1792, Force Collection.

In "The Song of the Brown Jug," Fitch now conceived death as having a positive role in combating care. He poses the acceptance of death as the fundamental condition for the reestablishment of a psychological integrity that had been disrupted by the distresses of the steamboat project. When he wrote that "my life I know Shortly must end" and "to Death I am Shortly Resigned," he indicated that he was aware of imminent death, but imagined his death as a horrible but still preferable alternative to the steamboat project. Unlike early modern drinking songs, Fitch's song did not view leisure as a process through which care could be violently overwhelmed. He had no sense that "if any care or pain remains / why drown it in the bowl." Rather, it is because death offered the prospect of definitively ending his cares that Fitch could feel the sense of comfort and wholeness expressed when he states that "While Ceres most kindly refills my Brown Jug with Brown Ale / I will make myself mellow / In my old vicar Chair I'll set myself snug / Like a jolly and true-hearted fellow."

Fitch's portrayal of his death as the primary condition for overcoming his sense of care represents another fundamental shift out of early modern culture. Where he had previously stepped out of this culture by representing the conditions of his life as beyond practical or symbolic redemption and himself as choosing torture and torment over facing his particular difficulties, he now portrayed himself as identifying with his own death before joining in rituals of drinking, smoking, and laughing with his friends. Instead of presenting death as an external threat, Fitch now portrayed himself as "practically dead"; his awareness of himself as about to die guides the actions of his life. Indeed, Fitch also made his death into the premise of his future interactions, mandating that funds from his estate be devoted to "the person who shall go to my Grave on said Day at 4 o'clock in the afternoon . . . and sing the Song of the Brown jug . . . which shall be shared by him in equal proportions to all present either in Liquor or money . . ." By killing himself, Fitch was hoping to create a "convivial grave" where honor was done to his name and memory. The convivial grave that he projected had the features of heavy drinking, singing, and praise that were typical of early modern culture. However, it is important to remember that the "pre-identification" with death that anchored Fitch's image of the convivial grave took place outside the languages of masculinity that were typical of early modern culture.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Fitch, "Will."

Although the processes by which his thoughts turned toward the embrace of his death were obscure, Fitch was engaged in a mode of self-identification that was distinct from early modern culture.

Fitch did not commit suicide during the summer of 1792. Perhaps not yet brave enough to carry out such intentions, he worked on a horseboat project, got involved in disputes with Voight, and travelled to France to promote the steamboat project. Unfortunately, political turmoil frustrated his efforts in France and he ultimately drifted to Bardstown, Kentucky, in 1796. There, he first attempted to drink himself to death and finally killed himself by taking an overdose of opium.⁷⁷

Twenty years after the launch of Fitch's first full-sized steamboat in 1787, Robert Fulton took his first famous trip from New York to Albany. Although less inventive, less energetic, and less committed to steamboat building than Fitch, Fulton had the good fortune to have a generous financial backer in Robert Livingston, access to one of Boulton and Watt's steam engines, and relatively little competition from sailing vessels going up the Hudson River. As a result Fulton's steamboats were almost immediately profitable and, by 1814, they were traversing the Ohio in the manner originally envisioned by Fitch.⁷⁸

Like his work on steamboats, Fitch's development of an alternative language of identification may have been significant primarily as a foreshadowing of future pressures on early modern popular culture. When he began the steamboat project, Fitch represented himself through early modern languages of masculinity and participated in the established practices of early modern popular culture. However, the steamboat project turned away from traditional modes of craft enterprise and subjected him to the unaccustomed demands of constant fund-raising, pressures to invent new processes and components for the steamboat, and disputes over priority of invention. As a result, his inherited sense that men confronted and overcame circumstances that they experienced as threatening could no longer support his identity and he began to develop a second cultural logic focusing on the embrace of torment and suffering.

A generation later, by the 1820s and 1830s, traditional modes of craft

⁷⁷ Wescott, *Life*, 364–70; Fitch to August Thornton, Force Collection.

⁷⁸ Sale, *The Fire of His Genius*, 27, 30–33, 86–88, 99–100, 120–128, 130–31, 154.

business had been abandoned in trades that had dramatically expanded their markets. Master artisans were hiring large numbers of unskilled apprentices, engaging in extensive subcontracting, and putting downward pressure on wages. Some of the best-known trends in the popular culture of those decades used as Fitch had languages of self-representation that embraced "otherness." For example, participants in both the Colonel Pluck militia parades of the 1820s and the burlesque parades of the late 1830s embraced images of distorted bodies, dramatized by wearing enormous boots, hats, and swords, and dressing up as cornstalks. Readers of the *Mechanics Free Press*, a workingmen's newspaper, enjoyed reading "The Nighthawk," a fictional column in which apprentices, participants in dances, casual gamblers, mantua makers, and others were portrayed as part of an undifferentiated stream of pollution descending into drunkenness, *mania a potu*, prostitution, and a painful and isolated death. Historians have interpreted the symbolism of the Colonel Pluck parades and the workingmen's movement primarily as a protest against the initial emergence of industrial capitalism. However, such symbolism might also have involved the ongoing failure of early modern culture and the search for alternative modes of self-representation. This could especially have been the case with the hundreds of men each year during the late 1820s and 1830s who suffered from *mania a potu*, an illness in which extremely heavy drinkers suffered hallucinations of walls falling down on them, snakes crawling on their skin, and being attacked by devils. In this sense, Fitch might have been a very early example, a harbinger even, of the cultural consequences of the first stages of industrialization in Philadelphia.⁷⁹

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⁷⁹ For Colonel Pluck parades, see Davis, *Parades and Power*, 73–111; for the "Nighthawk" columns, see the *Mechanics Free Press*, 1828–1830; for *mania a potu*, see Ric N. Caric, "To Drown the Ills," 482–85.

