

# *Federalist Decline and Despair on the Pennsylvanian Frontier: Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry*

**B**RACKENRIDGE'S *MODERN CHIVALRY*<sup>1</sup> (1792–1815), an eight-hundred-page picaresque novel that lacks romantic interest but features extended discussions on animal suffrage, has long been one of the unclassifiable oddities of American literature. Published in seven volumes between 1792 and 1815, *Modern Chivalry* describes the adventures of Captain Farrago and his servant, Teague O'Regan, on the Pennsylvania frontier. Teague seeks advancement of any sort, while Farrago acts to moderate Teague's ambition and quest for political truths. The flexible picaresque structure of *Modern Chivalry* allows Brackenridge to guide readers through much that is unfamiliar and often forgotten about the early years of United States nationhood.

In particular, *Modern Chivalry* traces the path of the Federalist elite in early national America, from desperate struggle in the 1790s to gradual decline into irrelevance. Americans typically remember the Federalist configuration, if at all, through marmoreal distortions. In *Modern Chivalry*, the statue comes to life on the Pennsylvania frontier, only to discover that without a proper pedestal, he sinks into the fresh mud of an unpaved, burgeoning America. *Modern Chivalry* remains the only sustained record of the encounter between the Federalist, republican

This article has benefited from the thoughtful critique of many readers. Robert Ferguson first brought *Modern Chivalry* to my attention and read many versions. Jeff Steinbrink would not be dissuaded from the validity of the project. Franco Moretti, Judith Mueller, Amelia Rauser, Whitney Trump, Tessa Barber, David Shields, and Emily Battistini also provided essential commentary.

<sup>1</sup> References to *Modern Chivalry* cite Claude Newlin's 1962 edition (New York, 1962). First the part (I or II) is given, followed by volume (1, 2, 3, 4), book (1–7), chapter (1–20), and, after a semicolon, the page number (1–808).

America that led the nation in framing and founding and the unruly, inclusive, democratic vision that eventually prevailed.

In order to illuminate the ways in which *Modern Chivalry* depicts this vanished, crucial moment, this article begins with a discussion of Brackenridge's biography and politics. Living along the border between civilization and wilderness in the 1790s, Brackenridge glimpsed the populist future of America before his coastal peers. Formal analysis of the book reveals an author reaching for expressive effects associated with the later history of the novel, and *Modern Chivalry* is an early attempt to represent the heterogeneous polyphony that America already was in 1790. Though the contentiousness of early America has been well established, few other early American authors struggled so long and inventively to represent this discord.<sup>2</sup> The article concludes with an examination of Brackenridge's personal despair and its reflection in *Modern Chivalry*.

*The Political Prescience of a Pittsburgher: Signs of Federalist Decline*

Despite being an immigrant himself, Brackenridge never learned to like rough-hewn strivers like his Irish servant character, Teague O'Regan. Brackenridge wanted to live in an idealized republican realm of clear social hierarchies, superior education for the elite, and quietly submissive wives. Brackenridge's East Coast peers could cling to this myth a bit longer, but by 1795, he knew America would never resemble his vision. The difference was, at least in part, Brackenridge's unique biography. An appreciation of his strange book thus begins with the historical and geographical contexts that nurtured it.

Brackenridge was not America's greatest late-eighteenth-century prose stylist. But more than any other writer, he considered the implications of the unruly frontier for the political theory discussed by bewigged urbanites. Brackenridge grew up in rural, central Pennsylvania (York County), spent his young adulthood in the relative sophistication of the

<sup>2</sup> An excellent recent account of political acrimony at the end of the eighteenth century is Robert A. Ferguson's "The Earliness of the Early Republic," in his *Reading the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 9–50. See also: Lewis P. Simpson, "Federalism and the Crisis of Literary Order," *American Literature* 32 (1960): 253–66; John R. Howe Jr., "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," *American Quarterly* 19 (1967): 147–65; and Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, NY, 1970). Edward Watts, *Writing and Postcolonialism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville, VA, 1998) and Grantland Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago, 1997) specifically explore this diversity in *Modern Chivalry*.

eastern seaboard, moved in 1781 to the distant frontier of Pittsburgh for twenty years, and eventually settled in midstate Carlisle, Pennsylvania. During his twelve years on the East Coast, Brackenridge embraced its multifaceted cultural milieu. Following his graduation from Princeton, he taught at an academy, wrote patriotic plays for his students, became an army chaplain during the Revolutionary War, wrote and published revolutionary sermons, edited a literary magazine, studied law under Federalist judge Samuel Chase, and was admitted to the Philadelphia bar in 1780. He became, in short, a lesser member of the eastern establishment.<sup>3</sup> An exploding colonial population and the rise of international markets for American products enabled a wealthy elite to emerge in seaboard cities, especially Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. By the late eighteenth century, these urban centers of the East Coast were linked by a thriving cultural nexus of college, church, and court.

Even so, Brackenridge left for the wilds of Pittsburgh. A western outpost like Pittsburgh boasted few cultural resources or accomplishments; when Brackenridge arrived in 1781, no newspaper or printing press existed. Brackenridge himself explained the move in pragmatic terms. Philadelphia, in 1781, had no shortage of competent lawyers. He observed, "When I left Philadelphia . . . I saw no chance of being anything in that city, where there were such great men before me, Chew, Dickinson, Wilson, &c. I pushed my way to these woods where I thought I might emerge one day, and get forward myself in a congress or some other public body."<sup>4</sup>

Intellectual courage and even stubbornness also inspired this drastic relocation. By 1780, Brackenridge was one of the lawyer-writers whose collective work and assumptions created what Robert Ferguson terms the "configuration of law and letters." For these lawyer-writers, the law inspired a religious and aesthetic level of faith; it provided "the prospect of form and definition within the densest American wilderness."<sup>5</sup> Brackenridge certainly put his faith to the test. The wilderness he found at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers could not have been less receptive to him or his ideas.

<sup>3</sup> The best biographical treatment of Brackenridge remains Claude Newlin's *The Life and Writings of Hugh Henry Brackenridge* (Princeton, NJ, 1932). See chaps. 1–7 for details of Brackenridge's early years.

<sup>4</sup> Newlin, *Life and Writings*, 57.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Ferguson, *Law and Letters in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 32.

Brackenridge dramatized the political milieu of the frontier through his protagonists' political careers. Captain Farrago resembles Brackenridge: an educated, middle-aged man with a penchant for pretension. Federalists like George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Fisher Ames believed that the liberty of the masses consisted of their right to choose which educated white men would represent and govern them. Thus, by these principles of classical republican theory, the uneducated frontierspeople should look to Farrago as a leader and elect him to Congress. Instead, in a direct echo of Brackenridge's own political career, *Modern Chivalry* begins with the people choosing "Traddle," an illiterate weaver, for public office. Farrago delivers a long lecture against this decision, but convinces no one. Instead, he is told, "It is a very strange thing that after having conquered Burgoyne and Cornwallis, and got a government of our own, that we cannot put in whomever we please."<sup>6</sup> Farrago is never elected to any post, but Teague O'Regan, an illiterate Irish immigrant, is invited to join the American Philosophical Society, solicited by the Presbytery to become a minister, and appointed to the office of excise collector by the president of the United States. O'Regan appears to have limitless opportunities, while Farrago's only role is to fuss and pontificate. Brackenridge sees clearly that the gentleman of letters will be no match for an authentic man of the people.

Yet, why was Brackenridge the only member of this lawyer-writer group to understand the "densest American wilderness" so literally? Brackenridge arrived at his ideological commitments differently than most members of the eastern elite of the 1770s. He went to Princeton with James Madison, but he never would have been mistaken for Virginia gentry. His roots were humble, and he had the scrappy aggression of an immigrant's son and a self-made man. Brackenridge's political allegiances were based less on familial, class, or geographical loyalties than on his principled commitment to classical republican values. To these principles were added the insights of his frontier experiences.

Unlike his Pittsburgh neighbors, Brackenridge favored centralized control of the new nation under the Constitution. His reasons were the same as those of Hamilton, Madison, and Jay in the *Federalist Papers*: desire for a strong defense, standardization of law, and cultural unity.<sup>7</sup> But

<sup>6</sup> Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, I.1.1.3; 16.

<sup>7</sup> John Jay, "Federalist No. 4"; Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 16"; John Jay, "Federalist No. 2," in *The Federalist Papers*, by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison (1788; New York, 1987).

Brackenridge's classicism extended to a Whiggish mistrust of economic ambition: virtuous wealth was in land, not international commerce. So, unlike the New England Federalists, Brackenridge resisted the Walpolean aspects of Hamiltonian centralization, namely the establishment of a national bank and the assumption of state debts. Brackenridge's aversion to this economic model derived from both the purity of his classicism and his regional sympathies.<sup>8</sup> He was blessed (or perhaps cursed) by his ability to read Plutarch as easily as the newspaper and to discover the political virtues of his yeoman neighbors.

In seeing the plight of the western farmer from a Philadelphia lawyer's perspective, Brackenridge comprised a political class of one. Living in Pittsburgh, he glimpsed the political future of the United States before the more celebrated Americans of his day did. Though the political interests of frontiersman were still marginal in 1790, the rough-and-tumble westerners, not classically trained lawyers, were the future of American politics.<sup>9</sup> Educated Americans saw their country within a context of classical models based on two centuries of European political philosophy. For better or worse, whiskey distillers in western Pennsylvania lacked this frame of reference. They were not trying to set an example for the world; their interests were unashamedly quotidian.

Brackenridge never gained the eastern audience he sought for so many years, and he was also repeatedly rejected by his rustic neighbors. He earned nothing but enmity for his insights.<sup>10</sup> His remarkable engagement with ambiguity and contradiction in the first few volumes of *Modern*

<sup>8</sup> See Michael T. Gilmore, "Eighteenth-Century Oppositional Ideology and Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*," *Early American Literature* 13 (1978): 181–92.

<sup>9</sup> The easterners of 1790 could afford their cavalier disdain for another generation—in presidential politics, Washington would serve another term, and 1796 was the first of eight elections won by a representative of either the Boston Federalists or the Virginia gentry Republicans. Brackenridge saw what was coming because he lived in the West, and change would come from that region. American voters in 1828 swept both the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Democrats from the American stage just as surely as they shouted Andrew Jackson onto it.

<sup>10</sup> Newlin (*Life and Writings*) provides many illustrative examples. In his term in the state assembly, Brackenridge was a tireless advocate for the West. William Findley, a weaver and the other representative from Westmoreland County, was ignorant of the issues and provided no legislative aid to his neighbors. Nevertheless, Findley was much more popular than Brackenridge because he was a "common man." No matter how much good Brackenridge did, he was suspect because of his learning: "I had thought to defend myself by writing, but only made the matter worse, for the people thought it impossible that a plain simple man could be wrong, and a profane lawyer right." (Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents at an Insurrection*, 3 vols. [Pittsburgh, 1795], 3:13). Findley was not even the worst of Brackenridge's trials. Before Brackenridge left Pittsburgh, his public efforts led to his being interrogated by Alexander Hamilton after the Whiskey Rebellion under suspicion of treason.

*Chivalry* was, then, a response to these political frustrations. Had he remained a Philadelphia lawyer, Brackenridge never would have doubted the Enlightenment intellectual tradition he so revered. *Modern Chivalry* brought Brackenridge scant comfort. The reader experiences his gradual realization that neither his book nor America itself could accommodate both the classical republican past (represented by Captain Farrago) and the burgeoning democratic upwelling of men like Teague O'Regan.

### *Form and Modern Chivalry*

In *Modern Chivalry*, Brackenridge records his ambivalent engagement with a rising, populist America. By attending to Brackenridge's formal decisions, the reader most vividly experiences this historically crucial encounter. Eventually, Brackenridge's form collapses under the weight of his own alienation, but early in the book he remains sanguine, despite his frustration. Before settling for splenetic harangues, this Federalist strove mightily to imagine an America that could reconcile both a Farrago and a Teague. He would have preferred to mimic his revered literary models, observing that "In the English language, that of Hume, Swift, and Fielding, is the only stile that I have coveted to possess."<sup>11</sup> Yet, he found inadequate the very literary conventions he so admired. Brackenridge's literary ingenuity may be inadvertent, but its emotional and historical immediacy lends it poignancy. In particular, he attempts to represent the clamor of the frontier through repetition and juxtaposition—mechanisms of a rudimentary literary polyphony. Brackenridge's strongest sections might be described as "interactive clusters." Instead of narrative arguments with clear introductions, theses, and conclusions, he arranges his scenes into a complex matrix of competing claims about government and society in early America.

Brackenridge gave Pittsburgh's burgeoning democracy dramatic form in the early sections of *Modern Chivalry*. He repeats many times an untrained man's striving for position and status. In volume 1, Teague O'Regan aspires to become an elected official, a member of a scientific society, a minister, a bogus Indian chief, a suitor of means, and a lawyer. He fails in each case. After the first one or two repetitions, there is no narrative reason to repeat the sequence. We understand that Teague will try

<sup>11</sup> Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, II.4.1.2; 643.

anything and that Farrago has definite ideas about what Teague is qualified to do (be his servant). But by repetition Brackenridge can consider the problem of immigrant "Teagues" in this variety of contexts.

The initial cycle of repetitions leads to another. Brackenridge finds the idea of Teague as suitor, government official, and lawyer especially intriguing; he wants a longer look at these situations. Brackenridge thus reconsiders Teague as suitor; he becomes an Irish Lothario in the "Teagueomania" chapters, books 3 and 4 of the third volume. Next, Brackenridge lingers on Teague as public official, specifically an excise officer (volume 4). Finally, instead of returning to the law, Teague takes up another position for the educated, that of a newspaper editor (first book of part 2).

The repetitions are not limited to imagining reckless ambition. Brackenridge also considers the repressive prejudices to be working, unfairly, against a striving immigrant like Teague. The final image of part 1 is one of Brackenridge's most poignant: Teague in a cage, feathers hanging from splotches of tar, his every action being misinterpreted by the "experts" of the American Philosophical Society as proof of his animal nature. As Teague's humanity is about to be tried, one of the "philosophers," Counsellor Catch, introduces the seemingly conclusive evidence that "the thing had a human voice and speech, that of a west country Irishman; no instance of which was to be found in any natural historian." But speaking with an accent is no guarantee of humanity in Brackenridge's America. "It was no uncommon thing . . . for beasts to speak some language; such as Latin, Greek; for which he might refer the gentleman to the *Æsopi Fabulæ*." The jury is convinced, and the American Philosophical Society keeps its Irish-accented beast for "a year or two" before selling him to a French philosophical society.<sup>12</sup>

Brackenridge often uses repetition of actions, but in one memorable scene he layers characters' perceptions instead. This prescient analysis of multiplicity centers on the interpretations that different men make of a mysterious sign, the badge of the Order of Cincinnatus. The order's badge was gold colored and in the shape of an eagle.<sup>13</sup> Brackenridge sets his scene at an inn with Farrago, Teague, "an ecclesiastic," and the wearer of

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, I.4.1.16; 324.

<sup>13</sup> Anxieties about the order were typical in early America. Was a new aristocracy being built on the fame of the very revolution that freed us from a king? The badge that members wore was especially galling; it smacked too much of an instantly recognizable hierarchy.

the badge ("the Cincinnat"). The Cincinnat enters, and Teague, hungry for fowl, imagines that the eagle badge is a dinner order for goose. Farrago is "greatly irritated" by Teague's shenanigans, but the Cincinnat appreciates this misunderstanding. "He was not dissatisfied at the mistake, in as much as it had brought a couple of good ducks to the table."

After the arrival of the ducks, the badge inspires three contradictory readings. For the Cincinnat, the badge signifies an allegiance to nation, and his nationalistic devotion acts as a substitute for religion. "[H]e worshipped any god, true or false very little," yet the eagle badge "designates the cause for which her [American] soldiery had fought; in the same manner as the eagle was the standard of the Roman legion." The ecclesiastic opposes a civic religion replacing a theological one, and "[he] grew the more enraged, and insisted that it was an idol." For him, the badge is a violation of a venerable juridical code, the Decalogue. Finally, Farrago makes his reading. He dismisses the religious objections, but reverses the Cincinnat's own reading. Instead of devotion to nation, he sees devotion to faction: "My principal objection . . . lies against all partial institutions, whatsoever; they cut men from the common mass, and alienate their affections from the whole, centering their attachments to a particular point and interest."<sup>14</sup>

In the episode, four men disagree on the meaning of a symbol. Brackenridge challenges the possibility of meaningful communication, of reliable signs, and of comprehension by listeners. In this moment, he is skeptical about insisting on particular meanings for American history. It is surely no accident that the only worthwhile product of the badge in this scene is the cooked duck it helped summon—and only after a misreading of the badge's intended purpose and image. A democracy cannot function without a common language of adjudication and negotiation. Thus, Brackenridge imagines American diversity as leading irrevocably to a latter-day Tower of Babel. While Herman Melville would later celebrate this heterogeneity in the "Doubloon" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Brackenridge is deeply pessimistic about the diversity that he, nonetheless, records in a creative fashion.

Brackenridge's inventive juxtapositions are more powerful for their metonymic significance. Obviously, there are Farrago and Teague; "Farrago is the decent, gentlemanly, republican past; Teague is the ill-

<sup>14</sup> Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, I.1.7.1; 69–75.



mannered, popular, democratic future.”<sup>15</sup> Neither character dies and neither emerges triumphant at the conclusion of *Modern Chivalry*. Even at this simplistic level of analysis, Brackenridge seems unable to dismiss what Teague represents and declare Farrago's America the victor. But Brackenridge's most effective use of juxtaposition may be his meditation on opportunity on the ostensibly democratic frontier.

Two immigrants claim to be ministers: one man has a ministerial certification, and the other claims to have been robbed of it. Captain Farrago asks each would-be minister to preach, declaring “let the best sermon take the purse.” Farrago need not make a choice, as in frontier America “certification” can be real or imagined. Though the imposter initially despairs of preaching, Farrago himself coaches the man. He says, “there [are] few bodies, ecclesiastical or civil, in which there [are] more than one or two men of sense.” Farrago's cynicism builds the imposter's confidence; he spews a Sunday school summary of the Bible, and “the lay people present were most pleased with the . . . discourse.” Farrago can “see no harm in letting them both preach. There is work enough for them in this new country.” Authenticity is sacrificed to ingenuity, even if it is the result of conniving. This may be a cynical presentation of opportunity, but both men will preach.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the case of ministers, America holds no prospects for a ruined woman. Immediately following the ministers' episode, Farrago suspects that Teague is at a brothel. But, instead Farrago discovers a beautiful young woman on the verge of tears, the victim of a heartless rake. The fallen women would have been familiar to readers of sentimental fiction, but, modern or not, Farrago's chivalry fails him. Cervantes's Don Quixote would have galloped off to vanquish the miscreant, but Brackenridge's chevalier lectures the woman and inquires of charitable Quakers on her behalf. This modern Dulcinea will have none of it. Rather than be subjected to more Enlightenment theory about “goodness,” “judgment,” and “merit,” the young woman hangs herself.<sup>17</sup> By pairing these two episodes, Brackenridge insists that the reader consider them as a thematic unit: opportunity may exist in America for some people some of the time (shown formally by the repetition of the ministers' claims), but

<sup>15</sup> Joseph J. Ellis, *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York, 1979), 100.

<sup>16</sup> Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, I.2.3.1–2; 99–104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, I.2.4.2; 107–13.

this Enlightenment is severely curtailed for others. Through repetition and juxtaposition, Brackenridge explores such early American constitutive contradictions.

Brackenridge's formal structures are not only a means of more sophisticated thematic development. They are also a literal embodiment of the very political processes at issue. In order to consider democratic multiplicity, Brackenridge attempts to represent it as closely as possible. In the early volumes of *Modern Chivalry*, the book *becomes* a discursive democracy. Many eighteenth-century novels and picaresques involved a variety of characters, but Brackenridge was unique in his consideration of so many perspectives and in his deployment of formal devices to articulate them. Indeed, Brackenridge demonstrates the courage to imagine realities he finds discomfiting. Though he never had affection for Teague and his ilk, he refused to hate or dismiss them either. By juxtaposing the inevitable process of Teague-risings with reflections on the limits of the Enlightenment, Brackenridge not only appears to realize that America will soon become unrecognizable to him, but also faces this prospect with resignation (though not equanimity).

He discovers no *jouissance* through *Modern Chivalry*; writing was a civic duty he undertook (or at least imagined for himself), and he is quite explicit about how painful a process this was. But the author cannot ignore the robustness of Teague's claims to play a role in the democratic government that Brackenridge supports with his writing. Teague is an unfortunate concomitant of the government in which he has such theoretical investment; alas, there is no state where every man is a Latin scholar and all women can best be seen "at the spinning wheel."<sup>18</sup> Brackenridge knows he must reconcile the theoretical attractions of republican theory with the presence of Teagues and Traddles.

These formal techniques both recall and reimagine Brackenridge's earlier work as editor of the *United States Magazine*. Brackenridge and publisher Francis Bailey produced twelve monthly issues in 1779. The *United States Magazine* (USM) was the only magazine published in British America between the Declaration of Independence and the official end of the Revolutionary War in 1783. This era was part of what Frank Luther Mott called the "lean years" for magazines, yet he praised Brackenridge for "probably the most brilliant performance of the whole

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., II.4.2.15; 797.

period.”<sup>19</sup> A bound copy of the complete *USM* would bear a striking resemblance to *Modern Chivalry* itself.<sup>20</sup> Brackenridge wrote for serial publications throughout his life, and *Modern Chivalry* can be understood as a private, occasional serial. *Modern Chivalry*, however, is unlike *USM* and other serials in the ways that Brackenridge creates cumulative intellectual narratives among its episodes, at least in the early volumes. Comparing the *United States Magazine* to *Modern Chivalry* both demonstrates Brackenridge's creativity in the latter work and suggests a crucial link between periodicals and the early American novel.

### *Political Decline and Personal Despair*

Brackenridge wrote with deep anxiety for his nation. He signals this thematically and formally, for Brackenridge both depicts and enacts his failure as an author. Authorial success for him would have been paid in political coin: enrichment of the political discourse of his fellow Americans. The sheer heft of *Modern Chivalry* demonstrates its author's determination.

Yet, Brackenridge's writing rarely had the ameliorative effects he sought, and he became increasingly aware of this. Though the historical reality of Brackenridge's production was unfortunate for him, the reader may come to appreciate his difficulties. His writing is most vivid and moving when he imagines his irrelevance. In these moments, *Modern Chivalry* abruptly shifts from the stolid annals of eighteenth-century political philosophy and enters a nightmarish realm where the boundaries of identity and time dissolve in scenes of memorable emotional torment.

Near the beginning of part 2, Farrago visits a mental institute (“hospital”) where he sees his former and present selves happily gesticulating in

<sup>19</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1938), 1:11, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Each is a lengthy (250,000 words for *USM*; 325,000 for *Modern Chivalry*) compendium of reflections on the politics and public affairs of early America. For instance, a chapter-by-chapter description of the first fifty pages of *Modern Chivalry* shows a similar diversity of interest. *USM* and *Modern Chivalry* are alike both in length and range of interests. They are thus significantly *dissimilar* from the novel that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe. None of Brackenridge's characters in either work experiences growth, no narrative trajectory lasts more than a few chapters or articles, many chapters are purely expository, interpersonal relationships are rarely addressed, and descriptive details are virtually absent—neither text provides descriptive details of landscape or characters' appearance. Above all, the books do not tell a story. In both *USM* and *Modern Chivalry*, the unit of meaning is the political abstraction, and both texts work through a series of episodes with meager narrative links among them.

their cells. "A man who imagined himself a moral philosopher, delivering lectures," "an insane person, who styled himself the Lay Preacher," and a mad poet who "was overjoyed to see the Captain, who was the hero of his Poem." Brackenridge thus imagines the various roles he has played—lay preacher to Revolutionary War troops, moral philosopher in writings like *Six Political Discourses* (1778), and finally, a "mad poet." (The prototype for *Modern Chivalry* was a verse Hudibrastic featuring Farrago and O'Regan.) For Brackenridge, then, the mental institute is a hall of mirrors. Having such a vision is not the same as interrogating one's ideas; this is the desperation of a man who fears he has lost his audience forever.<sup>21</sup>

What, for Brackenridge, are the consequences of such a loss? He grieves for more than his own failure: the future of writing in the American Republic is at stake. The lengthy introduction to volume 3 comprises his longest and most revealing meditation on this subject. As it begins, "Author" seeks the imaginary poet "M'Comas" and learns that M'Comas has not only died but still owes his landlady. She makes no allowance for genius, dead or alive. "Lousy writers . . . keep writing night and day, and biting their nails, and mumbling to themselves, like witches or warlocks."<sup>22</sup> Brackenridge's double pays M'Comas's back rent for the privilege of rummaging through his papers. He uncovers "Cincinnatus: A Poem."

Given the satiric portrait of M'Comas, the reader expects the poem to be a parody of the drivel that a romantic poetaster like M'Comas might write. Yet, the poem continues over twenty-two pages—more than a thousand lines of rhymed couplets. "Cincinnatus" is no joke.<sup>23</sup> Brackenridge is never again so frank and personal with *Modern Chivalry's* readers. Perhaps he intends the comic frame and numbing repetition of his couplets to distract readers from the emotional nakedness in this section.

The poem details the travails of a member of the Order of Cincinnatus (the well-known society of Revolutionary War officers). The Cincinnat knows he ought to prefer his civilized "modern times" to the barbaric days

<sup>21</sup> Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, II.1.1.12; 384–87. Two recurrent blind characters, a lawyer and a fiddler, are similarly the products of Farrago's feverish self-apprehension: Brackenridge is the lawyer who "fiddles" a tune of *Modern Chivalry*—blindly, he fears. The lawyer occasionally argues a case by which he "made a penny," and the two wait for hand-outs as the fiddler plays (II.1.1.7; 361).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., I.3.Intro.; 172.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., I.3.Intro.; 173–94. Brackenridge thought well enough of the poem to reprint it in his 1806 *Gazette Publications*.

of “cudgelling an adversary.” Though he is ambivalent about the progress of modernity, an elder knight steps forth and commissions the Cincinnat to pursue *modern* chivalry. Instead of “dragons of the air / Or fiery vultures,” the modern “valorous knight” combats “false notions of the right” with weapons of “free born thought and speech.” The comparison between chivalry and republicanism is not surprising in this book. Chivalry is ostensibly a code of honor to guide the elites who were entrusted with the care of the unfortunate or weak—not unlike the classical republicanism that Brackenridge supported. Less expected is the comparison of modern chivalry / *Modern Chivalry* to *Don Quixote*. Trying to bring about mass education may be just as misguided as Quixote’s attacks on windmills.

Surely many Federalist writers shared Brackenridge’s frustration. But Brackenridge expresses more than petty annoyance here—perhaps gentlemen of letters like him are literary fools. There is nothing of the buffoon in arch-Federalists like Massachusetts senator Fisher Ames; that Brackenridge could compare his work to Quixote’s suggests a unique—and perhaps remarkable—self-awareness. Quixote was not stupid or malicious; rather, he was a man whose reading prevented him from distinguishing fantasy from reality. He was, as Brackenridge’s Cincinnat says, “somewhat unstable in his brain.” Brackenridge unambiguously suggests that the same might be true for an American trying to write the nation to enlightenment.<sup>24</sup>

The sentimental suicide discussed before is relevant in this context. Suicides are conventional in sentimental tales, but rarely do they follow a stranger’s earnest lecture on “merit.” Brackenridge has refashioned the sentimental tale to express his deepest anxiety as a writer, for the relationship between Farrago and the young woman stands as exaggerated metonym for the one between Brackenridge and his audience. In *Modern Chivalry*, Brackenridge writes hundreds of pages entreating his readers to consider the fine points of representation, hierarchy, and democracy. These readers may not be quite as desperate as his fallen woman, but like her they are apparently in need of being rescued from their misapprehensions. How extraordinary for an author to imagine readers preferring death to his words!

<sup>24</sup> In the end, Brackenridge turns to fantasy. In volume 2 of part 2, Farrago, Teague, and a handful of minor characters leave their settlement and set out for the wilderness. Brackenridge then reimagines the development of a republic—the establishment of courts, press, and government. Only in this newly settled, imaginary republic can Farrago (or Brackenridge) be a republican leader.

The structure of *Modern Chivalry* confirms the despair suggested by these scenes. The gradual disappearance of discrete and contrasting text sections in the book provides empirical evidence of Brackenridge's initial struggle and eventual resignation. The early volumes (1792–93) courageously work at the limits of eighteenth-century narrative to imagine ambiguity and contradiction, but by the last few volumes (1805, 1815), Brackenridge has given up on courage and innovation. *Modern Chivalry* suffers entropy: initial complexity and polyphony are succeeded by a tedious monologism.

The first volume (1792) is both the shortest and the most carefully subdivided of the seven. In volume 1, Brackenridge wrote seven books, ranging from six to seventeen pages, and these books are in turn divided into chapters, none longer than five pages. But by the last volume, Brackenridge made far fewer distinctions among his sections. Though the new material in the 1815 edition (what Newlin publishes as volume 7) is twice as long as the first, this seventh volume contains only two (instead of seven) books, one of eighty-four and the other of eighty-nine pages. These books are then divided into twenty and eighteen chapters, many longer than the longest chapter from volume one. Most significant is the shift in the way Brackenridge used these chapter divisions. In the earlier volumes, he used them to create discrete units he could manipulate to contrast with or support another section. By the second half of *Modern Chivalry*, these subdivisions seem to indicate nothing more than the author's loss of interest. These book and chapter breaks suggest an apt metaphor—the book has flattened over the years. In 1792 the book rose and fell with frequent, precise, and hierarchical breaks. By the end, the reader finds only long, undifferentiated plateaus. Few books provide such an elegant demonstration of their own narratological decline.

Brackenridge's eventual frustration is hardly surprising. He had set an impossible task for himself, and he cannot comprehend the answers to his own questions. Brackenridge began *Modern Chivalry* because of a nagging sense that his perception of American political life was flawed; he turned to an unconventional discursive format because the older forms were no longer providing satisfactory answers to his concerns. But Brackenridge's intuition and literary creativity forced him to glimpse a political future similar to the very bumptious multiplicity that he warned against. The early sections of *Modern Chivalry* imply that America can exist only as a place of democratic enthusiasm and unresolved ideological

polyphony. Such an America is not at all what Brackenridge intended to discover. This vision terrifies and confuses him, and all he sees is anarchy. Not surprisingly, he retreats from these insights. Imagine Brackenridge creating a virtual and very diverse Congress in the early sections of *Modern Chivalry*. He dismisses it after 1797 with the publication of volume 4.

Yet, its sprawling difficulty has made *Modern Chivalry* attractive to contemporary critics who value ambiguity and paradox in texts. Brackenridge can now be appreciated as a protodeconstructionist, a prescient literary *saboteur*. Literary critic Christopher Looby asserts that the protagonist represents “an outmoded pretense of rationality and reactionary attachment to a deferential social protocol” and that Brackenridge’s “deepest investment is in the subversive, transgressive, energizing agency of the rogue, the knave, and the fool.” Edward Watts reads *Modern Chivalry* as an act of postcolonial resistance to the literary forms of a hegemonic imperial culture, while Grantland Rice celebrates Brackenridge for indicting “the truth claims of all texts by revealing their fictionality and homogenizing conventionality.”<sup>25</sup> These valuable claims make visible much that is fascinating about *Modern Chivalry*. I want to complicate Brackenridge even further by claiming that he is, finally, a deeply conservative writer, a far cry from the gleeful subversion of a Stephen Burroughs. Though Brackenridge shows a keen awareness of the ferocious ideological struggles of 1790s America, he takes no pleasure in it; his appreciation of contradiction was reluctant, partial, and brief.

And yet, in spite of Brackenridge’s distress, his biography is ultimately a story of perseverance, even hope. Even though Brackenridge is remembered, if at all, for *Modern Chivalry*, there was much more to the man.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago, 1996), 243; Watts, *Writing and Postcolonialism*, 38; Rice, *Transformation of Authorship in America*, 135. For classic discussions of *Modern Chivalry*, see: Michael Gilmore’s deft delineation of Brackenridge’s political allegiances in “Eighteenth-Century Oppositional Ideology”; Joseph Ellis’s demonstration of Brackenridge’s appreciation for “alienation, contradiction, and disorder” in *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York, 1979), 73–110; Louis P. Simpson’s analysis of “literary vocation” in *Modern Chivalry* in *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1980), 31–37; Robert A. Ferguson’s exploration of legal frames of reference in *Law and Letters in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 119–28; Emory Elliot’s demonstration of a “balance of competing perspectives” in the novel in *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725–1810* (New York, 1982), 182–217; and Cathy Davidson’s illumination of Brackenridge’s use of the picaresque form in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986), 151–78.

Though some twenty-six years passed between “The Modern Chevalier” and the final volume of *Modern Chivalry*, Brackenridge was not writing it continuously. He wrote most of the book in bursts, in response to the traumatic events of his professional life. Meanwhile, he never stopped writing newspaper articles and remained a powerful figure in Pennsylvania politics (though never what he had imagined for himself). *Modern Chivalry* must be seen as merely one of many expressive options for Brackenridge. He turned to *Modern Chivalry* to work beyond the limits imposed by a newspaper editor and the decorum expected of traditional eighteenth-century forms; it was his refuge from crisis. I calculate, for instance, that he wrote at least a quarter of it (over two hundred pages) in less than a year (1804–5) in response to a Pennsylvania judicial crisis. Clearly then, if read in isolation, the book gives an exaggerated view of Brackenridge’s distress.<sup>26</sup>

Judged by *Modern Chivalry* alone, Brackenridge’s final decade must have been the nadir of his despair; he writes hundreds of scolding pages that become repetitive and even dull. Had he become the forlorn man he imagined in the asylum? Perhaps in his darker moments the older Brackenridge saw himself in these tragic terms, but it would have been impossible for this man to waste much time moping. From December 1799 until his death in 1816, Brackenridge was a justice on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. In his later years, he spent less time with *Modern Chivalry* and more with his six hundred-page legal treatise, the stolid *Law Miscellanies*.<sup>27</sup> *Modern Chivalry* shows us that the middle-aged Brackenridge was a mourning eighteenth-century Federalist, but *Law Miscellanies* demonstrates that Brackenridge was simultaneously typical of many nineteenth-century Americans in his obsession with work. Surely his interminable trips on the legal circuit had a different motivation than the ocean voyages of Manhattan merchants did. Yet,

<sup>26</sup> The 1792 and 1793 volumes follow Brackenridge’s rejection as a congressional representative in favor of William Findley, the 1797 volume responds to the Whiskey Insurrection, the early sections of the 1805 volumes consider the newspaper wars of 1800–1801 in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, and the rest of the 1805 section takes up the 1802–4 attack on the state judiciary. Only the final sections (1815) seem unconnected to a specific personal trauma, though the War of 1812 and Brackenridge’s growing sense of mortality motivate many of these chapters.

<sup>27</sup> Full citation: *Law Miscellanies: Containing an Introduction to the Study of the Law; Notes on Blackstone’s Commentaries, Shewing the Variations of the Law of Pennsylvania from the Law of England, and What Acts of Assembly Might Require to be Repealed or Modified; Observations on Smith’s Edition of the Laws of Pennsylvania; Strictures on Decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States, and on Certain Acts of Congress, with Some Law Cases, and a Variety of Other Matters, Chiefly Original* (Philadelphia, 1814).



without *Modern Chivalry* on a corner of his desk, the older Brackenridge could be considered a conventional, successful graduate of the Princeton class of '71. He was simply working too hard to be truly despondent, or, in the language of today's psychology, "depressed."

*Conclusion: Brackenridge's Literary Achievement*

Written by a man with deep knowledge of American politics, *Modern Chivalry* provides an extensive vision of the idiosyncratic literary creativity and political turmoil of the American Enlightenment. *Modern Chivalry*, however, has alienated most subsequent readers. Brackenridge borrows, repeats, and includes where later authors would claim originality, write lean narratives, develop characters, and focus on the individual. Reading *Modern Chivalry* immerses the reader in an alien and sometimes incomprehensible place—the eighteenth-century mind.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, Brackenridge has good company in the sprawling, encyclopedic scope of his imagination. Like Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*, Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, Gertrude Stein in *Making of Americans*, and Thomas Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Brackenridge tries to capture his vision of the impossibly diverse American people and experience. I consider such books a uniquely American version of the Menippean satire—the democratic compendium. All writers of such books find the expressive tools available to them inadequate, and they create innovative literary devices that enable a more capacious representation. But these innovations always doom such books to incomprehension by at least some of the reading public. Melville was long dead before his book achieved acclaim, and *Making of Americans* remains one of the great unread books of American literature.

Writers who attempt such an ambitious project are necessarily idealistic; they dare to imagine that they are capable of inventing a new language

<sup>28</sup> *Modern Chivalry* ought to be read as a modern Menippean satire. The Menippean satire can be grouped with the picaresque and the encyclopedic compendium as literary modes that eschew narrative as an organizational imperative. Writers in these genres allow knowledge and opinion to dictate their form of expression; the "story" can reside in whatever space is left between the digressions. All three forms were dominant (and interrelated) in the eighteenth century. But, in a significant parallel to the political shifts already discussed, by the mid-nineteenth century these forms were obsolete. A way of imagining the world had been discarded, and from now on readers would expect narrative to be the primary organizational strategy in literature. Thanks are due to David Shields for first pointing out this link to me. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ, 1957) for further description of the Menippean satire.

to encompass the teeming diversity around them within a coherent intellectual system. But such idealism is usually disappointed. Already at the limits of their formal and conceptual vocabularies, these authors are eventually overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of the vision that initially inspired them. Their frustration may take the form of eventual despair: Brackenridge's form collapsed, Melville gave up writing prose narrative for thirty years, and Stein never broke her self-imposed exile in France or attempted another project nearly so ambitious. The tortuous prose of *Billy Budd* reveals the majestic cynicism of Melville before his death, and the conventionality of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* shows an author no longer capable of such formal defiance. Linking Brackenridge to these later authors suggests that he may have been less isolated than he feared. *Modern Chivalry* demonstrates that Brackenridge grasped a profound and ubiquitous characteristic of the American imagination. He was part of a still-emerging community of Americans that felt both awe and terror before American immensities: geographical, demographic, political, and metaphysical. In this, Brackenridge commands our attention as an early avatar of an essential, though often hidden, America.

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