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# Fatal Passion: The Early American Conspiracy Plot and Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*

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FATAL PASSION: THE EARLY AMERICAN CONSPIRACY PLOT AND CHARLES  
BROCKDEN BROWN'S *WIELAND*

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FATAL PASSION: THE EARLY AMERICAN CONSPIRACY PLOT AND CHARLES  
BROCKDEN BROWN'S *WIELAND*

By

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THESIS

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## Introduction

America's most enrapturing story is the story of itself. From the earliest days of the settlement of the nation, the inhabitants of America have created narratives to understand and justify their place in the world. An especially seductive narrative in the understanding of the nation has been one that understands the formation and growth of the country as inextricably linked with the actions of secret societies and movements. In this understanding of America, the young nation was constantly beset by those who wished to do away with the freedom the forefathers established. This version of history reads very much like a narrative, with America as the hero and the agents of secret societies as villains. Although Americans do not have a monopoly on conspiracy theory, it has long provided American historians and scholars with a narrative of the country, and thus is linked to American thinking.

The period just after the establishment of the American Constitution is an especially important period in the formation of the national story for modern historians and conspiracist thinkers alike. A conspiracist thinker is one who insists on viewing the events of the world as a narrative, with a motive force, despite any evidence to the contrary. Therefore, their understanding of the world and history is very close to a fictional narrative, such as those found in novels. During this time period, many politicians, scholars, and clergymen wrote about the threats to the young nation from secret societies which wished to see the grand experiment fail. At the same time, the American government passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which would punish foreigners and any who spoke out about the government. This period was fertile for controversy, and the American man-of-letters Charles Brockden Brown ingeniously

immortalized the era in of his writings and novels. Recognizing that the conspiracy narrative cleverly mirrored the sentiments of the nation, Brown penned a novel that deals explicitly with the young nation and conspiracy tales, *Wieland, or the Transformation: An American Tale*. Through the characters of Clara and Carwin, Brown explores the nation's fatal attraction to conspiracy narratives and the fragile knowledge that comes from such a reflexive mode of thinking.

In *Wieland*, Brown introduces the audience to a Clara and Theodore Wieland, the affluent children of a radical protestant missionary. On their remote and idyllic farm Mettingen they have created the very model of a rational academic community with Theodore Wieland's wife, Catharine, and her brother, Henry Pleyel. At Mettingen, the Wielands and Pleyel devote themselves to the study of the classics and discussion of political theory. However, their community is disturbed by the appearance of Carwin, a mysterious man whom Pleyel recognizes from Europe, and who brings a voice of dissent to the group.

Soon after Carwin's appearance, members of the Mettingen circle begin to hear strange, supernatural voices. These voices warn them against certain actions, and are often the voices of people far distant. The debate over the origin of the voices leads to a schism in the group, as each member attempts to understand the source in his or her own way. Ultimately, Theodore Wieland is so moved by the phenomenon that he murders his entire family because he believes that God has ordered him to do so. Before the final confrontation between Clara and Theodore, Carwin reveals to Clara that he is a "biloquist," and has the capability of performing amazing feats of mimicry and ventriloquism. Although Carwin claims that he did not influence Theodore Wieland to

commit familicide, Clara remains convinced that he is a villain and intentionally caused Wieland to commit the murder, thus breaking up the rational society at Mettingen in the most violent manner possible.

In the short, unfinished companion piece *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, Brown reveals that not only did Carwin convert to Catholicism, he also joined a secret Utopian society led by the enigmatic Ludloe. Ludloe desires to reform all governments in the world under his aegis and according to his political ideals. In *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, Brown explicitly draws on the conspiracy theories so common in his day to question the acquisition and use of knowledge and understanding of events, especially in the dialogues between Ludloe and Carwin about the latter's acceptance into Ludloe's Utopian society. Throughout his career, Brown remained fascinated with how observers understand events and their consequences.

Brown wrote his first novel with the intent to educate the American people. In the introduction to the novel Brown claims that "his purpose is neither selfish nor temporary, but aims at the illustration of some important branches of the moral constitution of man" (4). Foremost among the issues that Brown explores is that of knowledge and understanding: how does an observer make sense of events? Must those events necessarily fit into a cohesive plot? Although Brown answers these questions in a novel, he suggests that understanding history as a plot is erroneous, and he toys with the novel as a narrative understanding of history. He effectively uses the form of the novel to question the understanding of history. He lampoons those who suggest that secret societies or plots are the motive force in history. Brown clearly has misapprehensions about the understanding of evidence, and these misapprehension form the backbone of

his novel. Likewise, to understand the development of conspiracist narratives in American thought and fiction, it is important to create a backbone, in other words, to develop a history of the conspiracist narrative in America as it stood in Brown's day.

The understanding of the American republic and its politics came primarily from the events of the American Revolutionary War. Politicians such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, contemporaries of Brown, used the Revolutionary War both to understand America's place in the world and as a source of theories of freedom which informed their politics. Their writings helped to create a narrative of the American republic as an entity unique in the history of the world which must necessarily stand alone from the ancient societies of Europe. This narrative has continued to inform politicians and writers in one form or another to the present day.

The English politician Edmund Burke was one of the first to claim, in the late eighteenth century, that the circumstances of American Independence were far different than those of any nation that would subsequently seek independence. His reasoning for this assertion comes from his reading of the uniqueness of American history. Burke argues that the American story, with its roots in British governments and the civil war of the seventeenth century, encourages the acceptance of the American Revolution (*Reflections* 137). After all, the events were foreshadowed by the struggles of the British a century earlier. Thus, in a narrative sense, the American Revolution is a logical progression from the earlier experiences of the British. However, as a contemporary viewer of the events of the Revolution, Burke did not have the opportunity to adequately observe the myriad events that led to the Revolution. Whereas the revolutions of a century earlier had been a legitimate expression of English political power, conservatives



like Burke suggested, the overthrow of the French government was entirely unexpected and in its fanaticism had the taint of secret societies (Mulford 172). For the revolutionaries, the narrative of revolution emphasizes the natural rights of men and claims that monarchs have held them back through villainy. Conservatives like Burke argued that such revolutions, entirely unprecedented in the world, created a threat to continued security.

Gordon Wood, Richard Hofstadter, and Luke Gibbons provide a more modern reading of American history in the Revolutionary era. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the British began to ignore many of their holdings around the world, including the American colonies, preferring to focus on their own domestic problems. As Wood notes, however, “suddenly in the 1760s Great Britain thrust its imperial power into this changing world with a thoroughness that had not been felt in a century and precipitated a crisis within the loosely organized empire” (3). Colonists long accustomed to governing themselves were jarred by the sudden interest that the British government, under the control of the newly crowned George III, began to show in the American colonies, especially in the form of new taxes and tariffs. To colonists long accustomed to governing themselves, this interference was both malicious and planned. King George III soon became an antagonist, bent on destroying the freedom of the colonists. Unwilling to concede their accustomed liberties, the American colonists turned to rebellion. However, “as the colonists groped to make sense of the peculiarities of their society, this rebellion became a justification and idealization of American life as it had gradually and unintentionally developed over the previous century and a half” (Wood 3). The Revolution thus became the culmination of a narrative of liberty that had subconsciously

been forming among the colonists. It became a narrative to justify the radical changes that the colonists were inflicting upon their world, and a narrative to justify breaking away from an overbearing parent, which is a classic narrative trope.

Even at the outset of the Revolution, American colonists understood themselves as characters in a momentous plot. For clergy, many of them adhering to denominations other than the traditional Anglican church, the American Revolution was a catalyst for sweeping spiritual reform. The event, as one clergyman promised, would create out of a “perishing world [...] a new World, a young world, a World of countless millions, all in the fair Bloom of Piety” (Wood 4). In a spiritual sense, many Americans narrated the Revolution as an opportunity to create a new religious world. Brown utilizes this theme in the history of the Wieland family, which immediately encourages the reader to remember the religious aspect of the Revolution.

In a more political sense, the meddling of the British Empire proved to colonists that Britain was the villain in their narrative of freedom. As British officials bungled their way through the rebellion and subsequent crises,

Step-by-step the colonists became convinced that the obnoxious efforts of crown officials to reform the empire were not simply the result of insensitivity to unique American conditions or mistakes of a well-meant policy. *Instead, Americans saw these as the intended consequences of a grand tyrannical design.* (Wood 61, emphasis mine)

For American colonists, the rebellion took the shape of a narrative. The rebellion was instigated not by errors in government, but rather by a government that intended harm to them. American thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson saw the acts of the British crown as a

plan of reducing the American people to slavery (Wood 61). Thus, Britain's blunders against the colonists were the result of a harmful plot, one which ultimately reinforced the colonists' belief of the morality of their nascent country.

The narratives of the infant country very quickly began to include reaffirmations of the need to distance itself from the cultures and peoples of the Old World. As Gibbons notes, "If the American project was to establish itself as an advance on this flawed version of civility, it was vital that as much fresh air as possible—three thousand miles of it, preferably—be placed between the New and the Old World" (27). Instead of mourning the distance that separated the colonies from the advancements of the Enlightenment, early Americans celebrated their distance from corruption. Their plight would become that of a pure, religious underdog against a massive, powerful oppressor (Gibbons 28). Americans understood themselves as a new hope in a corrupt world, and began to recognize their place in the world as one of proselytizing, promoting the idea that democracy could provide an escape from European and aristocratic corruption. The elder Wieland viewed the American countryside as just such a location of purity, and moved his family there in order to accomplish the conversion of the Native Americans in the area. Mettingen, the elder Wieland hoped, would be a place far removed from the corruption of European religion.

This narrative continued when the colonies won their independence and began to create a new government. Many of the narratives about the nation were inflamed by the debate surrounding the ratification of the new Constitution. Although America had won its independence from Britain, it "was still a weak nation, one beset by foreign and domestic debts, surrounded by enemies, harassed on its borders by hostile Indians and in

foreign ports and foreign waters by unfriendly navies. Nor was there to be unity at home” (Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron 82). The landscape was full of antagonists more than willing to destroy the citizens and their new government. Revolutionary dreams of a nation united against aristocratic and monarchical corruption everywhere were beginning to crumble, and the realities of forging a new nation were becoming clear to Americans everywhere. Indeed, the outbreak of revolution in France in 1789 altered the American narrative of freedom afterwards.

In only a decade and a half, the face of western government was changed irrevocably with the outbreak of revolutions in America and France. Perhaps the most important event in political history, the French Revolution, broke out only a few weeks after Washington took office in 1789 (Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron 87). Initially, Americans were supportive of the French Revolution, remembering their own struggles against hereditary corruption. As Burke argued, the French Revolution was ultimately incomparable with the American Revolution because the history of the French government did not encourage, or foreshadow, the revolutionary events. The difficulties caused by the French Revolution would eventually lead to war throughout continental Europe, and the “Jacobin ‘Reign of Terror’ that followed confirmed their deepest misgivings about excessive democracy” (Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron 87). The fears of Jacobin rule would fuel political debates over just how far democracy should reach, and caused conspiracist thinkers to create plots of political villainy.

Americans initially perceived the French as natural allies in the quest for republicanism throughout the world, but this optimism would turn to misgivings when the French government became more deeply embroiled in chaos. Indeed, by the election

of 1796, George Washington warned America that it was in the best interests of the nation to remain uninvolved in European affairs so as to remain uncorrupted by sectarian quarrels (Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron 89). The American narrative had at this point changed considerably. Instead of being a nation enthusiastic about spreading the wonders of democracy to others, America had become obsessed with keeping its virtues pure from foreign influences. As Americans began to be wary of their neighbors, the fear of the machinations of secret societies grew, and secret societies like the Illuminati were increasingly blamed for wickedness and corruption. Because many of these secret societies were imported from foreign countries, the fear of secret societies was inextricably linked with foreign contagion. Thus, Brown's audience would not have been surprised that the "foreign" Carwin was the author of such wicked schemes. Americans from all walks of life, from ordinary laborers to college presidents, feared the incursions of these wicked conspirators into their idyllic republican lives

The academic dialogue surrounding conspiracist thinking has often condemned it as "simplistic" thinking, beginning with Hofstadter's seminal lecture "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," first presented as a lecture in 1964. Hofstadter traces a strand of thinking that attempts to narrativize the production of a nation, what he calls a "paranoid style" in American politics, which he believes is manifested by people to whom "the feeling of persecution is central, and is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy" (4). Indeed, American colonists felt nothing if not persecuted by the crown, and the trials and experiences of the American Revolution can be understood in terms of a plot, in which the antagonists, the British, are constantly haranguing the lives and opinions of the protagonists, the colonists. Hofstadter argues that this paranoid style has

been present in American politics for centuries, and he traces its development from the revolution, through the Masonic and Catholic scares of the nineteenth century, and to the 1960s. Hofstadter argues that those who evidence the paranoid style believe in “a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (29). A critical argument in Hofstadter’s thesis is that “the distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events” (29). Thus, conspiracist thinkers insist on assigning a plot to historical events where other observers cannot be sure that there is one.

Hofstadter identifies several elements in the paranoid style that point to its narrative origins and which describe the thought process of conspiracist thinkers. The most important is that the believer accepts that conspiracies are the motivating factor in history. However, Hofstadter also argues that:

1. The proponent of the conspiracy theory must see himself as the hero. He is a “member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as-yet unaroused public” (30-1).
2. Those who participate in the conspiracy are the enemy, people who are unconcerned with morals and virtues. As Hofstadter notes, “The enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman” (31).
3. As avant-garde researchers, those who study conspiracies must not be seduced by them. There is an undercurrent in the paranoid style that expresses a fear of contamination from the enemy (32).

4. There is a special significance given to “insider information,” that is, testimonials from those who joined secret societies and then left to confess their sins to the world (34).

All of these elements serve, in the paranoid narrative, to explain exactly how secret societies and their adherents can control history. Brown clearly recognized many of these key points, although he did not have the benefit of knowing it as the “paranoid style.” The elements which Hofstadter identifies as a particularly conspiracist mode of thinking are key plot points in *Wieland*.

In *Wieland*, Brown utilizes the fears of conspiracy that were common in the political and historical thinking of his day, and incorporates them into a tale which he considers to be specifically American, as indicated by its subtitle. Carwin, the protégé of the scheming Ludloe and member of his Utopian group, represents the intrusion of foreign ideas, and is identified as the villain by Clara, though Carwin continues to proclaim his innocence throughout the novel and its unfinished sequel. Carwin is Brown’s fictional representation of the very real conspiracy theories of his day, most of which, like Clara, blamed the intrusion of scheming foreigners for the demise of pure, idyllic republicanism.

Brown’s claim that *Wieland* is somehow a uniquely American tale forces the audience to consider how the Mettingen circle and the events they encounter offer a peculiarly American experience. Drawing on contemporary events, Brown creates a novel that attempts to identify an American narrative. In Brown’s mind, using a conspiracist mode of thinking as a framework for his novel was an effective way of approaching the problem of early American morals. Hofstadter identifies a narrative

moment in conspiracist thinking when he argues that “what distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts (though it is occasionally true that in his extravagant passion for the facts he occasionally manufactures them), but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some crucial point in the recital of events” (37). Thus, the paranoid style can begin with verifiable truth, but it always makes a leap into fiction, much as a novelist can begin with historical events and create a fictional piece. Hofstadter outlines this process, and Brown is clearly aware of it. Brown's *Wieland* perfectly exemplifies this in fiction. Using the fears of secret societies, conspiracies, and foreigners, Brown created a novel that uses all of these to explore America's understanding of history.

Scholars such as Ed White reject the idea that the paranoid style is groundless. Rather, they believe that the catalyst for these events, the grain of truth from which the tales spring, is as important as the ultimate paranoid style. White's central argument is that there is a grain of truth in early American conspiracist thinking. Instead of outlining paranoid fears in such a way as to make them seem groundless, White argues that there may be some benefit in studying them with the understanding that conspiracy theories are not always groundless and that conspiracist thinkers are not always “paranoid.” If a conspiracist mode of thinking was prevalent in the past, it is important to understand this mode of thought, even if present historians reject it as a coherent manner of understanding history. Scholars may not be able to find examples of diabolical plots such as those that were attributed to the Illuminati, but the inspiration for these elaborate notions of conspiracies are evidenced by events such as the skullduggery surrounding the ratification of the Constitution. Likewise, many great novels have started with a grain of



truth, then embellished it with fiction. It is clear that Brown is not only using the conspiracy theories prevalent in his own day to compose a novel, but he also critiques the conflation of history and fiction.

A matter of great importance in Brown's lifetime was the philosophical nature of the republic. Drawing from classical sources, politicians such as Thomas Jefferson believed that a republican lifestyle should stress community and candidness. As the republic grew, so, too, did anxieties about the machinations of secret societies. Although public opinion encouraged participation in charitable societies as representing a pure identity of America, these same societies were often under scrutiny as possible sources of dissension. As David Brion Davis explains, Americans felt that their government "was the one with the most to fear from secret societies, since popular sovereignty by its very nature required perfect freedom of public inquiry and judgment" (211). Thus, any legitimate society should be willing to operate in a public sphere, where it was open to public critique and censure. Davis argues that most Americans considered themselves open to new ideas, but when they were excluded, "they imagined a 'mystic power' conspiring to enslave them" (211). In the American imagination, those organizations that were unwilling to function publicly must be dedicated to creating dissension and undermining the efforts of democracy, and, ultimately, purity. However, it is important to note that the group at Mettingen, the very picture of eighteenth century rationalism, conducts their meetings in an open air temple. Thus, they are symbolically opening themselves to the public—there will be no secrecy among them. The notion of a society barred from public republicanism caused Americans to fear that their livelihoods were under attack from the sinister machinations of secret societies.

What was perhaps so frightening to early Americans was that members of secret societies need not exhibit certain outward characteristics. These attributes made true loyalty extremely hard to prove, Davis argues, and this heightened the importance of the special oaths that initiates were expected to swear to their elders and their order (213). Carwin, the character whom Clara identifies as the villain, is an American citizen who has converted to Catholicism. Thus, although he appears to be just like the American characters at Mettingen, he is actually an outsider. Though the Mettingen circle should fear him, they do not immediately realize that. Literature of the time shows important trends in American thought: “the themes of nativist literature suggest that its authors simplified problems of personal insecurity and adjustment to bewildering social change by trying to unite Americans of diverse political, religious, and economic interests against a common enemy” (Davis 214). Brown's novels reflect this in his interest in contagion and disease, often using contamination by foreign and outside forces as a key plot point. American philosophers transform political insecurity into an attempt to reunite Americans into one cause, a cause that condemns the supposed injustices caused by people whose intentions were simply to destroy every vestige of America’s political and ideological freedom.

Ultimately, political and ideological unity served to further promote the idea of national piety. Davis notes that among nativists, “the exposure of subversion was a means of promoting unity, but it also served to clarify national values and provide the individual ego with a sense of high moral sanction and imputed righteousness” (215). By positioning themselves against an onslaught of sinister secret societies, American alarmists reinforced their idea of a unified, sanctified nation. Creating a narrative of a

unified nation was one part of the struggle for the nativists. Another was refuting the claims of the secret societies, especially the Freemasons. Traditionally, Masons supported the belief that they were a Christian sect with fine origins, which would seem to be naturally opposed to the evil perceived in non-Christian sects, but their emphasis on secrecy was certainly opposed to the ideals of the republic. Such secrecy led to accusations that the Masons were shaped by anti-Christian forces and monarchical powers intent on destroying republican values (Davis 215). Thus, the Mason's own narrative of a strong past was turned, by nativist thinkers, into further proof of a conspiracy against the virtuous American republic.

If America was the hero of the early paranoid style, then the Illuminati, Masons, Mormons, and Catholics in turn were the villains. Because republican America was supposed to be vested in garments of purity and virtue, the villains must be portrayed as licentious, cruel, and avaricious. Politically, secret societies were threatening because they aroused fears of forces acting against the young republic, attempting to stifle the nascent virtue of Americans. In terms of narrative, writings about conspiracies and secret societies were attractive because they created narratives that both reinforced American's perceptions about their nation and titillated the readers, demonstrating simultaneously positive and negative behavior and models. As Davis notes, in many pamphlets and books "nativists [...] projected their own fears and desires into a fantasy of licentious orgies and fearful punishments" (217). Finding no other outlet for narratives scandalous to an eighteenth and early nineteenth century audience, writers projected these desires onto the secret societies, creating villains who were both disreputable and oddly attractive. Catholic priests became Casanovas, able to seduce any woman and unwilling

to contain their desires, which were informed by ancient Catholic texts. Atheistic, unprincipled, and dangerously seductive, the members of secret societies began to seduce the American imagination.

Portrayals of the adherents of secret societies ranged from the gullible fool to the ambitious sociopath. Whatever the character of the villain, it was the patriot's duty to discredit the secret society, reasserting the fraudulent nature of the society. Even the enemy's licentiousness, which was strangely attractive to many of the writers, was condemned in the end because the sexual freedoms of the secret groups was usually associated with brutality and incest (Davis 220). Davis notes that the "imagined enemy might serve at first as an outlet for forbidden desires, but nativist authors escaped from guilt by finally making him an agent of unmitigated aggression" (221). In the end, the villains follow the comfortable course of traditional narrative, unrepentant in their cruel sins.

Charles Brockden Brown began penning his classics of American literature in this atmosphere of fear and distrust. He was immersed in a culture which both embraced and condemned the notions of secret societies, and which was attracted to the conspiracist notions of history while still rejecting the culture of conspiracy. In fact, one of Brown's close friends was Jedidiah Morse, a famous minister who became well-known for his jeremiads against conspiracy. Another of Brown's sources was undoubtedly the immensely popular *Proofs of Conspiracy* by John Robison, a Scottish professor, a document that outlines the evolution of an anti-Christian conspiracy of Illuminati. This massive document, a breathtaking mix between a travelogue and a confession, is an account of the efforts of a group of people whose lodges have become "schools of

irreligion and licentiousness” (8). Indeed, Robison identifies Freemasonry with French efforts to promote democratic belief and practice. Whereas modern audiences are accustomed to hearing these beliefs espoused by obsessed conspiracy theorists, to whom they often attribute elements of madness, Robison was a well-respected philosopher and scientist. Ultimately, Robison’s work closely resembles the realm of fiction when detailing the acts of the Illuminati, an act characteristic of most conspiracist retellings of history.

Charles Brockden Brown was fascinated by the Illuminati scare of the late eighteenth century, and the reaction of the government to perceived foreign threats, which he wrote about it frequently in his letters and his periodical, *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review*. Throughout 1798, fear of alien influences on the nascent, virtuous republic grew until the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in July of 1798. The acts were intended to protect America against foreign threats: “the Alien Acts gave the president power at his pleasure to expel or jail undesirable foreigners,” and “the key clause of the Sedition Act provided severe fines and jail penalties for *anyone* speaking, writing, or publishing ‘with intent to defame [...] or bring into disrepute’ the president or other members of the government” (Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron 90). These acts were an early eruption of the fear of foreign influences that writers continue to address. In this particular narrative, the foreigner, typically also a Mason, Illuminatus, or other undesirable, must be expelled before he can interrupt the course of American virtue. Although no arrests were made under the Alien Acts, hundreds of immigrants were scared from the country. Almost all of those prosecuted under the Sedition Acts were Democratic editors, mainly those who opposed the then-Federalist government

(Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron 90). It was in this atmosphere rife with the fear of sinister foreign ideas and influences that Brown wrote *Wieland*, a novel about the dangers of foreign influences and contagion.

Clearly elaborating on these events, Brown crafted narratives of foreign intrusion threatening the lives and minds of the Americans unfortunate enough to encounter them. Aware of the fears of the nation, Brown created Ludloe, a scheming conspiracist with Utopian ideals, who ultimately his protégé Carwin to wreak havoc on what Gibbons terms the “American pastoral idyll” (42). As Gibbons notes:

This posed a particular problem for the kind of rogue's gallery of hero-villains that was appropriate to an American environment: "What was to be done about the social status of such hero-villains? With what native classes or groups could they be identified? Traditionally aristocrats, monks, servants of the Inquisition, members of secret societies like the Illuminati [were central to gothic fiction], how could they be convincingly introduced on the American scene?" (28-9).

Although Carwin does not fit the traditional European “rogue’s gallery” in that he is not aristocratic and wealthy, he does fit the American conception of a villain. He is a beguiling, converted “foreigner” who has rejected the ideals of Puritan America and insists on infecting the pastoral landscape with foreign ideologies. His status as a supernatural “beguiling ventriloquist (‘biloquist’)” only adds to his threat, as he possesses power beyond that of a normal person (Gibbons 42). In these ways, Carwin anticipates the American narratives about secret societies and their sinister members.

Brown used contemporary events to craft a piece of fiction that mirrors the paranoid style. Taking his cue from the political climate, Brown crafted novels that

expressed the nativists' fears of foreign corruption, feeding on the narratives that permeated the nation in an attempt to create a novel which explored the morals of the young nation. The following chapters will trace specific themes that evidence the use of these narratives in Brockden Brown's novel *Wieland* and the fragmentary *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. The first chapter covers the rationalistic, eighteenth century understanding of history as a narrative and examines how Brown utilizes these themes to construct a novel of moral history. The second chapter turns to society, evaluating how Brown uses his novel to create an understanding of family and patriarchy that is irrevocably tied to conspiracist narratives. Finally, the last chapter discusses how Clara's attraction to Carwin mirrors the American attraction to conspiracist narratives.

## History in Conspiracist Thought

“Knowledge so far from corrupting man, has always improved him when it could not totally correct or reform him” (Condorcet 24).

Charles Brockden Brown is recognized as one of America’s first true men-of-letters. He was well educated, astute, and keenly interested in politics, as is evident in his novels and other writings. The settings of most of his novels are in early America, where he explores issues of politics in the early republic. Unlike later authors, like Hawthorne or Poe, he is most concerned with the American way of life, and rarely sets his writings outside of the country. Thus, he is intensely interested in how Americans perceived themselves, and, based on that perception, how they would govern their young nation. He often explored these topics in his periodical, *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review*, a forum in which he could engage in conversation with the American public. As part of his duties as an editor, Brown often responded directly to contemporary political issues. Much of his writing was a critique of knowledge and how the public understood the world, especially as these issues related to the possibility of living a moral life. He was skeptical of conspiracist narratives in particular, and of a “universalist” understanding of history in general.

Although the American conception of history often stresses narrative in the retelling, a tendency which Brown was cynical about, this trend is not an exclusively American one. During the Enlightenment, a mode of teleological thinking was applied to history which attempted to explain how history happened and apply an intelligible model



to its course. Teleological thinking about history had been prevalent for some time, but before the enlightenment it had focused on a Christian eschatological method of explaining the world (Howell and Prevenier 120-1). Thus, instead of taking a scientific view of the world and stressing observation, medieval European historians focused on recounting the works of God in the world, with the idea that this narrative would inform the audience. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, philosophers such as Kant and Hegel attempted to apply a more rational view of history, emphasizing that history was a process, like so many natural occurrences, and that observers could recognize processes and trends in history if they knew how to observe it. These ideas were born of an Enlightenment spirit of inquiry which informed the writings and studies of many of Brown's contemporaries. As an educated person, Brown would certainly have been familiar with the ideas of all of these philosophers, though he remained critical of the implications of understanding events in a universalist manner.

A major proponent of a teleological view of history was the Marquis Condorcet, a famous mathematician who reasoned that history had a rational and observable course, as long as the observers were not too eager to see cause where there was none. In his "Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind," Condorcet attempts to trace the rise of European civilization in what he terms a "universalist" method. He notes that "what happens at any particular moment is the result of what has happened at all the previous moments, and itself has an influence on what will happen in the future" (4). Thus, to a student of history, the events of the world are as intelligible as any fictional plot. Condorcet rejects the idea that the observable past can be unknowable. The purpose of his work is not only to map the changes through which societies go to reach

their current state, in pseudo anthropological fashion, but also to champion a science of foreknowledge and prediction of human affairs (8). Indeed, Condorcet is attempting in this work to find causality for history, as he envisions history as the struggle between tyrannical forces and the purity of philosophy. In doing so, he has created an understanding of human history in which greed and power always stymie the efforts of rational philosophy, but he remains convinced that the beauty and purity of philosophy will eventually triumph over such evils and man will soon reach a stage of Utopian enlightenment. Thus, Condorcet has created a grand narrative of history, one which is as comprehensible as any novel.

Modern historians consider such a rational picture of history to be misleading, as it overemphasizes the importance of certain events and attempts to paint a picture of progress where one cannot be certain that there is any progress. Instead, they emphasize that although history is a process, it does not necessarily have a predetermined goal. Indeed, the very word “progress” implies that there is a specific ordering of events which will lead inevitably to one conclusion, such as the society of Europe in the eighteenth century. Condorcet envisioned the irreversible progress of humanity as moving from simple tribal societies, mired in superstition and ignorance, through nine stages of development in “gradual progress to absolute perfection” (24). In his treatise, Condorcet identifies several nations, such as Greece and Rome, and even individual people, such as Pericles, as specific “heroes” of history because of their actions and virtues. Without the actions of these heroes, the progress of humanity would have taken a much longer time before it should recognize the perfection of Philosophy. Thus, Condorcet’s sketch resembles the plot of a novel in that it envisions relationships and causality where there

need not be any, and in that is champions an ultimately understandable ending.

A key concept in Condorcet's version of history is that all events happen for a reason, in that they must eventually lead to a Utopian society ruled by Philosophism. While he was writing his scientific sketch, Condorcet was in hiding from the more radical forces of the French Revolution, and was attempting to make sense of the violence that had erupted (Palmeri 75). Many conspiracist writers attempted to find reason in the same event. However, whereas Condorcet saw vast, historical forces controlling the outcomes of these events, conspiracist thinkers saw the meddling of secret societies and sinister individuals. Even Condorcet does not rule out the possibility of the influence of secret societies. When discussing the middle ages, he asks whether "at this period when philosophical proselytism was so formidable, there were not secret societies formed to keep alive a small number of simple truths and to diffuse them clandestinely amongst a few initiates as sure antidotes against the prevalent superstitions" (91). Condorcet theorizes on the existence of philosophical societies to protect truth. The idea that secret societies were a motive force in history is so prevalent that Condorcet, a rationalist mathematician, uses their presence as a plot-point in his narrative of history. However, having acknowledged the possibility of such secret societies, there are only small leaps of logic to be made, in the conspiracist mind, to the presence of such societies as a mitigating factor in the totality of human history.

Conspiracist thinkers such as John Robison also thought of history in a narrative form, but instead saw secret societies, most notably the Jacobins and Illuminati, as the prime movers of the tides of change, whereas Condorcet clearly sees them as an important, but ultimately small, piece of history. The Abbe Barruel was a French

aristocrat who, after being disenfranchised in France, wrote a multivolume work tracing a massive anti-Christian conspiracy in Europe from which Robison drew much of his inspiration. In his massive treatise *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, the Abbe Barruel undertakes the incredible task of documenting the progress of the Jacobins, Illuminati, and a vast anti-Christian conspiracy in undermining European society. Indeed, his labor is so massive that he was compelled to divide his work into four volumes, each of which focused on a different aspect of the conspiracy. The first volume documented the conspiracy against religion, the second against the monarchy, the third against society, and the fourth attempts to trace the history of the Illuminati in its entirety. Because of the magnitude of his work, Barruel's writings were very influential on contemporary and later conspiracist thinkers. Wherever society suffered, Barruel saw the work of the Jacobins and Illuminati. Although Condorcet saw history as the triumph of philosophy over other powers, Barruel saw philosophy as the catalyst that led men away from the Christian religion and persuaded whole nations from God (349). Using the same techniques as Condorcet, Barruel has come to a decisively different conclusion about the "progress" of history in the Western world. Although they both suspect that history can be explained rationally, they have identified vastly different agents of change in historical processes. Moreover, where Condorcet suggested that history was progressing toward a more perfect future, Barruel warned that unless citizens realized the danger that the Jacobins and Illuminati represented, every government in the world would be demolished by their malicious plots.

In the actions surrounding the French Revolution, Barruel saw the vast mechanisms of a long-standing anti-Christian conspiracy. Barruel scoffs at the notion of

history as the “concourse of unforeseen events inseparable from their times” as a fallacious notion. To him, history must have a purpose and a plot (6). Barruel identifies the group that holds these notions as having no cure to offer society when tragedy breaks out, as tragedy must necessarily be unforeseen to them. This, Barruel argues, is “a language better calculated to lull all nations into that fatal fecundity which portends destruction” (7). Clearly, understanding history as a story with motives is a necessity, as it allows the prevention of future catastrophes. In this respect, the conspiracist understanding of history works like a moral inoculation, and thus its importance as a logical foundation of conspiracy narratives. In *Wieland*, Clara exhibits a similar mode of thinking in here of the fastidious recitation of Wieland family history. She suggests that the cause of the Wielands’ problems is located in their family history, and that understanding the problems of this history is key to practicing caution in the future.

In America, the French Revolution and the rise of democratic virtues were originally hailed as an overwhelming success. However, the horrors that came eventually swayed many from their initial beliefs. Whereas most observers were disgusted by the events and the sudden collapse of a government, Barruel claims that in regards to the French Revolution, “everything was foreseen and resolved, was premeditated and combined,” the result of “deep-thought villainy” (8). Thus, for thinkers like Barruel, it is imperative to understand the history of the revolution. If every action was predicted once, it might be predicted in the future. This is a striking contrast from Burke, who argues that the events of the French Revolution were never predicted by French history. Clearly appealing to the skeptics, Barruel writes that “Though the events of each day may not appear to be combined, there nevertheless existed a secret agent and a secret cause,

giving rise to each event and turning each circumstance to a long-desired end” (8). Like a great novelist, Barruel counsels that each event, no matter how small, eventually plays into the larger scene of politics.

Indeed, just as Condorcet chose certain people in Greek history as “heroes” of the age, Barruel unrelentingly identifies conspirators as the villains of his age. He fingers Voltaire, D’Alembert, Frederic II of Prussia, Diderot, and even Condorcet as soulless perpetrators of the great plot that would one day overthrow the French government and culture (358). The force that Barruel identifies as the impetus for the wickedness of the Jacobins and other secret sects is philosophism, which is “the error of every man who denies the possibility of any mystery beyond the limits of his reason, of everyone who, discarding the revelation in defense of the pretended Rights of reason, Liberty, Equality, seeks to subvert the whole fabric of the Christian Religion” (12). Thus, Barruel’s enemies, and the scourge that swept France, were the enemies of most normative values. Indeed, Barruel suggests that “Such was the conspiracy; it was to overrun every altar where Christ was adored” (34). Barruel’s secret societies and illuminated men have not only been given the assumed power of overthrowing the government of France, they have also been given the power of a novelist, the ability to plot every move and have it come to a desired and usable end. Thus, history is no longer merely a process. It is a scripted action that must inevitably lead toward a future where one of the factions must triumph soundly over the other. Clara falls victim to the same manner of thinking when she insists on identifying Carwin as the author of her misfortunes.

Whereas Condorcet’s treatise provided a rational explanation of the progress of civilization, Barruel’s *Memoirs* contain references to painstakingly researched letters and

other articles of value (370). Indeed, Barruel suggests that it is the historian's duty to "tear off that mask of hypocrisy, which has misled such a number of adepts, who, miserably seeking to soar above the vulgar, have only sunk into impiety, gazing after their pretended Philosophy" (371-2). He also concludes that every lesson that philosophy purports to teach is actually a sin (372). Thus, Barruel encourages his audience to understand history as Condorcet did, but instead of encouraging an understanding of history that promoted the idea of progress toward a final utopia of Philosophism, Barruel stressed the importance of guarding against anti-Christian conspiracies. Although Condorcet would certainly recognize this action as irrational, and Brown clearly did, to Barruel, his reading of history is as logical and rational as any that Condorcet made. Brown clearly draws on Barruel's type of fanaticism in the character of Theodore Wieland. His actions are shocking to the audience, but to Wieland, they are completely rational given his own understanding of the world.

Barruel's main concern in his work is the chaos which had recently overtaken France. However, there were a great many conspiracist thinkers in America as well. Following Barruel's line of reasoning in identifying an ancient anti-Christian conspiracy, many pamphlets and treatises were published on the matter. In "View of the New England Illuminati," John C. Ogden traces a similar narrative to Barruel's for the proliferation of secret societies on Americans soil. He contends that the Illuminati in America have been following a long-agreed upon plan to overthrow society, and have long taken refuge in the ranks of certain religions, which in turn use colleges as their fortresses (8). In his day's factionalism, Ogden sees the work of the Illuminati in their crusade to bring about the Millennium, as he calls it (6). Of course, Ogden envisions the

stakes of this battle in much the same way as Barruel. Moreover, he warns against falling into the Illuminati's plans, lest "our families, religion and country be destroyed by the Illuminati" (15). The ultimate purpose for American society, in his contention, is to become great men, a project that cannot be completed as long as the Illuminati stymie society's efforts (16). In a stunning move, Ogden accused anti-Illuminati preachers such as Jedidiah Morse and Theodore and Timothy Dwight of being bedfellows of the Illuminati (12). Ogden's writings give a glimpse of the factionalism that pervaded American politics, a factionalism that the Mettingen circle purports to avoid due to the isolated nature of the Mettingen estate.

In the early American republic, this narrative was often framed in terms of moral values. Like other conspiracist narratives, the action was usually framed in terms of specific individuals. Thus, as Bradshaw notes, "all social phenomena result from benevolent or malicious designs by specific individuals" (369). Again, like the action of a novel, early American beliefs invested individuals with the power to change the course of history and moral understanding, a power that conspiracist narratives insist the Illuminati use for malicious ends.

Conspiracist narratives follow many of the same generic plot points: they assign an ancient history to the secret societies; they claim that these societies played an important guiding function in history; they allege that certain famous persons were involved in the plots; and they envision a purpose for history that should ultimately glorify their nation. As Hofstadter notes, the conspiracist thinker does not see conspiracies here and there, which may have a grain of truth in it, but instead sees conspiracies as a "motive force" in history (29). "History is a conspiracy," he writes, "set



in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power” (29). In these terms, the struggles that conspiracist thinkers portray resemble more the plot of *Paradise Lost* than a rational understanding of history.

Charles Brockden Brown commented on contemporary developments in conspiracist thinking in his publication, *The Monthly Magazine and American Review*. In 1799, he reviewed a speech documenting the supposed history and progress of the Illuminati in American affairs. Although he questions the mode of thinking that would encourage one to believe in a vast historical conspiracy, he concedes that such beliefs are a good indicator for the state of moral and political opinions in a country (288). The importance of these sources to Brown is in their ability to inform the audience of the moral constructions and opinions of their authors. Thus, although he understands and glosses Barruel’s construction of contemporary European history, Brown is more concerned with what these ideas indicate about the authors’ understanding of morals. Brown reasons that it is entirely possible that the Illuminati and other secret societies may be groups with radical but laudable motives, that “though their activity be pernicious, their motives are pure” (289). Conversely, Brown notes that authors like Barruel insist on seeing sinister designs where it is not clear that any exist and argue that every consequence of their actions were intended and foreseen (289). Brown objects not only to a notion of history which emphasizes causality and narrative, but also to the assumption of certain morals within this construction. He remains skeptical that people ought to be persecuted because they endeavored to change society, even if the change was drastic, noting that “though that activity be pernicious, their intents are pure” (289). Brown notes that what is remarkable about Barruel’s reading of events is that he attempts to assign

specific meaning to events that have occurred for millennia, namely wars and bloodshed. Although he recognizes the overall merit of the work, Brown encourages his audience to consider the likelihood of events rather than be persuaded by the narrative of others.

Brown's view of history is best displayed in the short pieces "Walstein's School of History: From the German of Krants of Gotha" parts I and II. In these short pieces, meant to be taken satirically, he argues that history is shaped by the actions of important individuals, whose influence informs the morals and policies of their people. However, he also denies that history has a set course, arguing that "actions and motives cannot be truly described" (336). Thus, Brown seems to take a middle ground between a modern understanding of history and the Universal understanding of history proposed by Condorcet and his adherents. Moreover, instead of understanding history as a progress toward certain assumed events, Brown argued that important historical individuals--such as Cicero--ought to be seen in terms of the virtuous services they provided. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of writing a history should be to inform the audience of moral living (337). In order to accomplish the task of educating the audience in moral pursuits, the historian must attempt to write vividly and entertainingly. Brown suggests that of the two ways to affect the common good, in writing books or in legal machinations, that writing is the better method (338). These short pieces display the tension that Brown observed between history and history as philosophers described it. Although Brown disagrees with universal historians on the understanding of historical events, he advocates the use of history, often greatly exaggerated history, as a means to inform moral compass of the public. Fiction then becomes an effective tool to inform audiences and strengthen their moral education.

Because Brown recognizes the importance that historiography had on his audience and their understanding of the world, *Wieland* itself begins with a long treatise on the history of the Wieland family and their arrival in America. In the first pages, Clara advises the reader that she hopes her tale will “inculcate the duty of avoiding deceit” (5). Clara’s words echo Barruel’s beliefs about the nature of historical writing. Here again is the notion so popular in conspiracist narratives that knowledge must buttress morality, but in a much less surprising place, a novel intended as a moral comment for society. Clara, like Condorcet, proposes that all the events that she has experienced must “progress” to some future events. In this case, her narrative will serve to enlighten the reader so that these events cannot happen again. This statement also reflects Brown’s contention that writing should perform a moral function. Clara goes on to trace her family’s history, from her paternal grandfather to the present day. In this family history she finds many moments that she perceives to inform her “destiny.” In fiction, as in conspiracist novels, it is common to emphasize history as an indicator of current or future events. Unfortunately for her, Brown suggests throughout the novel that Clara’s reading of events, although apparently rational and scientific, are incorrect and do not inform her understanding of the world.

The unexplained death very early in the novel of Clara’s father informs many of the events that happen later in the novel. One night, while performing his ritual prayer session, the elder Wieland is engulfed in flames, the victim of apparently spontaneous combustion. Clara speculates that her father’s death may have been due to any number of events, including an act of God for an act of disobedience (21). Most of the Wieland family act on the presumption that the spontaneous combustion was indeed an act of God,

though in an interesting maneuver Brown, via a footnote, suggests that a scientific explanation is perfectly reasonable (21). One understanding of the novel is that the elder Wieland's death comes from his inability to perform some task, and that Theodore Wieland is finishing the deed, in the murder of his family, that his father never could (40). Thus, the murders are a delayed effect of the elder Wieland's fanatical religion. In any event, the Theodore Wieland clearly understands his murders as an effect of the mysterious voices he has lately heard (256). In his understanding, familicide is a perfectly reasonable response to this vocal stimulus.

Clearly, though, the murder of one's family is not a typical result of hearing strange voices. Charles C. Bradshaw suggests that, ultimately, the line of cause and effect drawn by Clara and other members of the Wieland family ought to be critiqued. Brown is clearly suggesting that a universal understanding of history "is inadequate to the task of explaining complex phenomena and inspiring positive political change" (371). The multiple epilogues to the story clearly show Clara grappling with the effects of the murders in her life. The story ends, strangely, with Clara reciting the tragic story of Maxwell and Stuart. Her ultimate purpose is to suggest that it is the education and misunderstanding of the victims that exposes them to wickedness (277). All of the characters in this story, as well as her own, are impeccably educated (274). Through a cause-and-effect narrative Clara attempts to explain how these events occurred, but ultimately the audience must recognize certain gaps in the narrative. For example, although Clara concludes that Stuart's murderer must have been Maxwell, there is not other textual evidence than her assumption. Certainly Clara does not see the insufficiencies in her narrative, though she leaves the audience with many questions.

As Bradshaw notes, the narrative of the novel, which begins with the tight deductive rationalism of the Wieland family history, is subsequently strained as Clara struggles to apply a cause and effect structure to the events (373). Where her brother relies on religion to explain events, Clara relies on reason alone, although the deteriorating coherence of events causes her to “long to refute what she herself witnesses” (Shelden 22). Brown is clearly suggesting that an understanding of history that emphasizes cause and effect must ultimately tear itself apart at the seams because it cannot possibly explain the random nature of human existence. Even Clara’s understanding of Carwin’s role in the events is misguided. She insists on framing him as the “grand deceiver” of the misfortunes that befall the Wieland family. In her understanding of events, as in those of conspiracist thinkers, Carwin is the knowing and malicious agent of all the wrongs that have been committed against her family. Near the end of the novel, Clara confronts Carwin in her home. Again and again she accuses Carwin of being the manipulator of the events, to which Carwin replies that he has caused mischief, but “my actions have possibly effected more than I designed” (223). Here is a clash between Clara, who insists on seeing agency and plot in the events at Mettingen, and Carwin, who insists that he is not a devil and did not design any of the murders. This clash mirrors the tensions between conspiracist thinkers and those who refuse to see motive in historical events.

A universalist view of history is closely linked with rationalism in that it argues that history is knowable and close observation can create a structure out of seemingly random events. However, this reading motive into events is what creates the downfall of the rational society at Mettingen. When the intensely rational society, who come close to

worshipping Cicero, hear Carwin's biloquism, they are each called upon to explain the events. Upon first hearing the voices at Mettingen, each of the company forms his or her own opinion of their source. Pleyel, the most rational of the group, concluded that Wieland might be wrong, but that conjecture was inadvisable in any case. On the other hand, Catharine and Clara immediately think of supernatural sources (39). Theodore will not initially admit his own line of reasoning, but does argue that, in discovering the source of the voices, "to suppose a deception will not do" (41). Wieland's reasoning is that no supernatural occurrence could possibly be a lie; although he may have reason to believe that statement, he committed an error in reaching that conclusion in the first place. When Carwin joins the group at Mettingen, Wieland "maintained the probability of celestial interference, when [Carwin] was disposed to deny it, and found, as he imagined, footsteps of a human agent" (85). Again, Pleyel's reaction is a bit more rational. He insists that he must experience the phenomenon to decide on his own, and that thus far the events have only served to create doubts in his mind (86). Each of the characters follow their own lines of reasoning--even the women are observed to be of good sense, though they immediately suspect supernatural agency--and each character is ultimately astonished at the tragic murders at Mettingen.

The reactions of the group at Mettingen show a decidedly conspiracist bent. Only Pleyel and Carwin are willing to discount the voices as supernatural and explore natural possibilities, and nobody is readily willing to accept Carwin's suggestion. Theodore Wieland's rationalization of the voices will lead to murder. He reasons that he saw no physical source for the voice so it must be divine. Divine voices will not lie, and thus when such a voice commands him to kill, he must follow the order. Even Pleyel's

reasoning becomes questionable when he confronts Clara and explains to her that he can no longer be acquainted with her. He explains that one night as he was walking home in the dark, he heard Clara and Carwin together, and he concluded that Clara must have succumbed to Carwin's seduction. Although he only heard her voice and Carwin's, and though it was admittedly too dark to see, he is convinced by his sense and the very familiar timbre of Clara's voice that it must be her (154). He does not seek any further evidence, even though he considers himself a rational man of science. His line of reasoning is ultimately as weak as that of the rest of the characters. Although Brown introduces the characters as a group of utopian, rational adults, their reactions to the unknown voices proves that their rationality is primarily for appearances.

Although in their rationality Clara and Pleyel exhibit a conspiracist tendency to narrativize events, Wieland exhibits a different conspiracist tendency in his understanding of the murders. Whereas Clara and Pleyel's knowledge stresses "reliability, usefulness, and practicality," Wieland's knowledge "is esoteric and spiritual, disclosed only to the few chosen ones" (Paryz 38). Both the desire to narrativize and the importance of secret knowledge are central to conspiracist thinking, and Brown finds issue with both. Clara and Pleyel claim to understand events but continuously exhibit that they do not, while Pleyel emphasizes the superiority of his secret knowledge. Bryan Waterman argues that secret knowledge, as Carwin realized, establishes and "author-audience transaction that establishes an imagined intimacy between the two" (25). Wieland does not believe that his audience will completely understand his actions, as they were not chosen for secret knowledge like he was, but he knows that they can comprehend his narrative of a divine command. In doing so, Wieland attempts to play on

an Abrahamic myth to explain his actions, a myth that his audience would have known well. Although Wieland's attempts backfire, Brown would like his audience to keep in mind that a suggested intimacy does not always suggest trustworthiness.

After Clara's uncle has explained to her the murders at Mettingen, he likewise offers a solution. He relates the story of Clara's great-uncle, who leapt off a cliff with the belief that he was following the orders of a phantom voice (203). Clara's uncle, a medical practitioner himself, concludes with the note that this event is a common one in the army, well-researched and understood, and is likely the same affliction that struck Theodore Wieland (204). However, even with this evidence, Clara is reluctant to accept her uncle's reading of events. She continues to believe that she was the victim of some great plot (205). Brown's characters are clearly evidencing a conspiracist mindset. They are doggedly searching for a relationship between the voices they hear and their own beliefs, even when these relationships are not obviously apparent. Like a conspiracy theorist, they each painstakingly examine the facts in the occurrences at Mettingen and conclude with a narrative that closely resembles fiction, whether it is Wieland's belief that the lord is testing his righteousness or Clara's belief that Carwin is maliciously plotting her downfall. However, as Bradshaw notes, "ambiguous events and coincidences [...] all throw into chaos the ordered, causal world postulated by the enlightened Wielands" (376). Brown is making a pointed statement that the understanding of the world having a cause-and-effect relationship is a fallacy, one which can only lead to tragedy.

The *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* does not actually begin with any attempts to explain the Wieland murders. Instead, it offers a biography of the troubled biloquist, Carwin. Tacitly it offers an explanation of the powers that might have led to the events at



Mettingen, and explicitly includes a nod to conspiracist thinking, in the society which Ludloe heads. Amanda Emerson suggests that Brown's stories "document the difficulties Americans met as they attempted to draw out unifying stories from the dearth of observed events and the excesses of imaginative possibility" (128). Repeatedly, Hofstadter identifies the trait of exaggerating history with the formulation of conspiracy theories; Brown picks up on this trend as a core of conspiracist understandings of the world.

Throughout the fragmentary novel, Carwin bemoans the fact that he can never seem to do entirely the right thing. He is always swayed off course at some point and falls into deception. He points to one episode in particular, when he is caught in his father's room late at night. Having debated using the voice of his dead mother to trick his father, he decides not to on account of superstition (indeed, his whole family was famously superstitious, and had even heard ghostly voices) (292-3). However, while he debates a tree outside is struck by lightning and he rushes to wake his father, and then must explain what he was doing in his room (293). Although loathe to do so, Carwin tells his father a lie. He reflects that "nothing can be more injurious than a lie, but its evil tendency chiefly respects our future conduct" (293). Here Carwin implicates both his superstition and this one lie in an eventual cycle that will consume the better part of his career. He identifies this tendency in a cause-and-effect relationship to all events of his life. Like a conspiracist thinker, Carwin attempts to understand each event in his life as a link in a chain that ends with his inability to practice virtue.

Early attempts at a unified historiography of the western world emphasized rational recreations of the course of human life, focusing on the progress of human life to a perfected future. From the tangled events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

philosophers like Condorcet attempted to make sense of the arc of history. Consequently, they formulated a system of universalist history, in which events were as tightly plotted as those in any novel. This view of history closely resembles a fictional plot in that it stresses a rational development of events into a knowable and understandable future. The same events that Condorcet witnessed, however, were also utilized by other writers, such as Barruel, Ogden, and the Dwights, as evidence that there were secret societies and plots against the very foundations of society.

As Brown recognized, a central error in this understanding of history is the idea that the forces of history are recognizable and knowable, and that observers can make rational judgments based on their observations of history. Brown was skeptical of the notion that, based on observation alone, a witness could comprehend exactly the nature of events. Thus he lampoons conspiracist methods of thinking in his articles, and he continues to address these issues in his novels, where the audience is presented with the convoluted reasoning of the Mettingen circle.

## Patriarchy and the American Tale

Since Brown's purpose is to provide moral instruction to the audience, he criticizes far more than the philosophical ideas of his day. Brown was familiar with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, and even wrote a dialogue addressing the rights of women. One of the issues that Brown addresses is patriarchy. He criticizes the family structures as conducive to acts such as Wieland's familicide, and examines long-held beliefs about gender .

There are two intimately related moral issues that run through Brown's work. One of these is Brown's desire to encourage the audience to analyze how they acquire knowledge and how they will use this knowledge to further their understanding. His interest in knowledge is typified by his skepticism of the power of secret societies and his cynicism about the public's reaction to them. Brown continuously questions the foundational assumptions of society, such as the idea that history is a plot with a definite ending. Closely related to these concerns is Brown's interest in civilian rights, especially the rights of women. Brown is very concerned with how society constructs the roles of women and how they are institutionalized. He often discusses women's issues in his periodicals, and published a classical dialogue entitled *Alcuin*. Brown is especially compelled by the way that society constructs the idea of a woman's inborn virtue.

In *Wieland*, the tensions between the "enlightened" eighteenth century ideals and the reality of women's education and expected roles manifest in the character of Clara. Although she is a very well-educated young woman, brought up in the best methods of the day, she continuously misunderstands the happenings at Mettingen. Clara's character is Brown's direct response to the ideals of women as proposed by society. Brown

certainly had many sources in mind while constructing Clara, but one very important source for the character is undoubtedly the writings of conspiracist thinkers themselves. During the summer of 1798, while Brown was composing his work, Brown's social group was deeply involved in reading writings of conspiracist thinkers, most notably John Robison (Waterman 19). Drawing on Barruel's work, Robison has constructed a narrative claiming to identify the power that the Illuminati hold over important political powers, most of which was obtained through sheer avarice. Notably, Robison argues that the present corruption is due to the fact that European leaders have succumbed to their greed, and have fallen away from the principles of Christianity. Robison emphasizes that women are the more virtuous of the sexes, and are thus anathema to the interests of Illuminati and anti-Christian groups. Robison does not see women's virtue as a reason for granting more rights, but instead emphasizes their overall virtue and incorruptibility. After all, allowing women into the public discourse might have the opposite effect, and in the end cause their corruption.

Although the eighteenth century was a time of burgeoning political and social awareness, the roles of women were still largely defined by long tradition. *Wieland* was written in a time in which patriarchy played an influential part in the nascent American republic. While the founding *fathers* debated and legislated who should have what rights, numerous tracts and discourses praised the power of the virtuous woman to influence public policy from the household. When faced with controversial social changes, people often rationalized their fears in terms of conspiracy narratives. For example, the growing civil discontent in France and the ensuing revolution initially fueled a narrative that reinforced America's confidence in its own political changes. Revolution and deposing

government would prove to be a major philosophical issue throughout the eighteenth century, as many countries struggled with the consequences of overthrowing traditional monarchs whose ties to their people were often thought to be as strong as a father to his children.

Throughout the tumultuous period following the Revolutionary War and the fear surrounding the French Revolution, the threat of sinister conspiracies also weighed heavily on the minds of the populace. Barruel encouraged people to see only the works of a vast anti-Christian conspiracy in the French Revolution, which is akin to identifying a chief antagonist in a work of fiction. These conspiracy theories alleged many different masterminds in different eras, but they often took the form of a sinister father preying on his estranged children. Whereas monarchical and authoritarian government power was imagined as an overbearing father, its opposition was the virtue and grace of republican motherhood. As a consequence, although women were typically barred from participating in public life, they were encouraged to exhibit their virtue, which was thought to positively influence their sons and fathers, who could subsequently participate in the national conversation. In conspiracist narratives, this inborn virtue is often the one saving grace for the besieged European society.

Although much modern feminism has its roots in the eighteenth century writings of critics like Mary Wollstonecraft, gender and social roles were still rigidly hierarchical. It was generally agreed upon that men must act in the public sphere, laboring and conducting business, while women stayed at home to concern themselves with domestic affairs (Schloesser 2). In his dialogue *Alcuin*, Brown discusses the contemporary beliefs about women's roles in society. *Alcuin* is a dialogue modeled after the classical form, in

which a schoolmaster and a widow discuss the rights and opportunities of women. Initially the schoolmaster follows traditional theory and argues that women do not have the fortitude to occupy spaces in the public sphere. However, after long discussion with the widow, he has a vision in which he travels to a woman's paradise, which advocates a Utopian society that emphasizes equality above all else. Although the schoolmaster asserts that the sexes are to be considered equal, he believes that women must ultimately triumph in virtue (50). Moreover, Brown locates men as the seat of vice and folly, proclaiming that "habit has given permanence to errors, which ignorance had previously rendered universal" (50). Having once learned to dwell in folly, men will continually flounder in error. Where Brown differs from his predecessors is in asserting that women not only have the capacity for education, but that it is vital to their continued virtue to pursue education. Thus, Clara cannot expect to exercise an inborn virtue without having had the opportunity to practice it continually.

In *Wieland*, Carwin exemplifies the idea of the chasm between education and virtue. Although he ought to know when and how to use his talent, he can never seem to learn which uses are appropriate. In *Alcuin*, Brown addresses similar concern about women when the schoolmaster debates the wisdom of sending women to school. Although he admits that their intellect should be capable of higher education, he argues that their inborn virtue might be tainted by the experience of public schooling (57). Certainly Carwin never learned virtue, despite his long years of study. The idea of women's virtue being natural and inborn permeates writing of the eighteenth century.

Brown attempted to reason through the rights of women and the needs of society in a classical dialogue, long recognized as an effective philosophical tool. On the other

hand, John Robison attempts to analyze the roles of women through a conspiracist narrative. In Robison's belief, like so many others, feminine virtue is inborn, and inextricably linked to the benefits of Christianity. Like Barruel, Robison fears the influences of secret societies, which were often supposed to be in a struggle against all Christian belief, and he creates a narrative to explain the corruption rampant throughout European government. In Robison's narrative, the Illuminati have long been instigating corruption in European courts and governments with the intent of eventually ruling everything. The one hope against this corruption is the interference of Christian soldiers, who must stamp out the corruption with Christian doctrine. Thus, for Robison, the power of women: as they were supposed to be the more virtuous and naturally religious of the sexes, they must be powerful in any contests against secret societies. In *Wieland*, Clara uses this same logical construction to explain how she can triumph over Carwin's deceit, even though she has no supernatural powers to call to her aid.

Throughout his work Robison not only outlines the ways in which an anti-Christian conspiracy is taking root throughout the world, but also how women can act to halt it. It is Robison's opinion that "woman is indebted to Christianity alone for the high rank she holds in society" (152), and that in all circumstances, women's hearts are naturally inclined to accept and keep the Christian faith whole (153). Because of these beliefs, Robison targets women as the last bastion against the growing power of the Illuminati and other conspiracies against the very foundations of Christianity, which he presumes to be targeting women specifically to undermine their virtue. However, as he notes, "if the women would retain the rank they now hold, they will be careful to preserve in full force on their minds this religion so congenial to their dispositions" (156). Thus,

Robison adds another layer to the ongoing narrative of a battle between Christian good and Illuminati evil. The ultimate victor may well be women, whose virtue and faith will help them triumph over the same men who barred women from socializing in their lodges.

As a citizen of the new American republic, Charles Brockden Brown was always very concerned with how the new country constructed and understood morals. As such, he was also very aware of the literary and political fads, and was very interested in the conspiracist narratives of his time. Most conspiracist narratives, such as those espoused by Barruel and Robison, attempted to show how Western society could lead virtuous lives without the danger of secret societies. Although Brown was very concerned with the moral state of the nation, he was skeptical of the goals of writers like Barruel and Robison. Therefore, it was Brown's intention to pen a novel based on virtue and methods of avoiding deceit, utilizing a character who on the surface appeared to be the very model of Christian virtue. Clara is Brown's attempt to examine how the idea of inborn feminine virtue and the overwhelming patriarchy of the age create epistemological tensions.

Using the rhetoric of the time, Brown consistently aligns Clara with virtue, both in her words and in the opinions of the other characters. It is Clara's virtue that Carwin attempts to attack, and it is her virtue that, she believes, has carried her through the events of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Clara hopes that her work should serve as a warning to others. In her exposition, she never identifies a lack of virtue as part of her difficulties. Instead, she concludes that her troubles stemmed from an "imperfect discipline" (5). Clara never has reason to question her virtue, only her education. However, Brown troubles the issue of inborn virtue when he has Pleyel confront Clara



about her imagined infidelities. The audience is aware both of the fact that Clara has never knowingly acted lasciviously, and also of the fact that Pleyel is supposed to be the most rational of the group. “Your education,” Pleyel claims, “could not be without influence. A vigorous understanding cannot be utterly devoid of virtue; but you could not counterfeit the powers of invention and reasoning” (133). Brown toys with the idea of inborn virtue in the character of Clara who, until the appearance of Carwin, always manifested the appearance of womanly virtue, and who also possessed a thorough education. How could a woman who possesses both a strong sense of virtue and a sound education be deceived so thoroughly? Clara believes that her fault lies in her discipline, though it was the paragon of republican upbringing. However, a more important factor in Clara’s mistakes is her Saxon, radical Christian heritage.

Although Brown intends the audience to be skeptical of Clara’s ability to reason and observe, the truly irrational character is Theodore Wieland. His actions are the result of a broader Christian crisis which he believes he inherits from his father. In any event, the deviance from virtue rests with the men of the Wieland clan. At the end of the novel, Clara wishes that her brother “had framed juster notions of moral duty, and the divine attributes” (278). Although she faults her own discipline, Clara identifies the foundations of Wieland’s beliefs as contributing to his fanatic acts. Clara finds her brother lacking moral virtue. All of his classical education could not instill a sense of moral justice into him--likewise, she regrets that she herself was not gifted with “ordinary equanimity, or foresight” (278). Robison would certainly agree with Clara that Theodore Wieland would be at a disadvantage in understanding virtue because, as a man, he would always be more receptive to sin. Nevertheless, Robison would also argue that Theodore’s religious fervor

would aid his attainment of virtue. However, although Robison clearly links Christianity with virtue and, ultimately, the downfall of secret societies, Brown suggests that religion and virtue are not necessarily natural bedfellows, and religion unchecked by virtue can be tragic.

Throughout *Wieland*, Brown has his characters face the powerful tendencies of patriarchy, the typical social construction for most of human history. Since Brown himself identified women with virtue, the lack of women in the Wieland family is very suggestive. As Jane Tompkins notes, the first part of the novel is concerned with tracing the failed family tree of the Wieland clan. Brown is assiduous in tracing the failings of the three generations of Wielands central to the story. In each case, the younger generation is orphaned at a very young age, without the guidance of either a father or a mother figure, certainly long before the children received any form of moral education from the parents.

In Burke's writing, he encourages the audience to think of the French royal family specifically as a family. This encourages the audience to conceive of a government as a family, a theme common in many political theories. In a conspiracist narrative, secret societies threaten the virtuous political family. Brown certainly noticed these trends in government, and incorporated them into his novel. In Tompkins' eyes, Brown's *recitation* of family serves to address the question about whether the American Republic was a viable political entity. Anita Vickers agrees, noting that "it is a scathing critical examination of political and patriarchal authority (or misuse of that authority) in the new republic" (1). If monarchs or other executive powers are the parents in a political family, what does it suggest when children are orphaned at an early age? The Wieland children

lack both a patriarchal father to instill order, and, perhaps more importantly, a republican mother to model virtue.

Authority and virtue were linked in early American thought. Politicians and citizens alike worried about the formation of the new republic, and the idea of virtue was always at the forefront. The embodiment of virtue was usually vested in women and their ability to be republican mothers, scions of morality who were capable of guiding their families on the path to enduring virtue. The lack of a republican mother in *Wieland* is an issue. Until Brown introduces Clara as a character in her narrative, rather than the narrator, there are no substantial female characters, let alone republican mothers. The family at Mettingen is clearly lacking the “natural” source of virtue. This extended discourse on fathers and father figures also serves to reinforce a narrative about the problematic role of fathers, specifically in political and social thought. Ultimately, the role of fatherhood and patriarchy is so overbearing that the only recourse for Brown’s characters is to disassociate themselves from the problems of the nuclear, patriarchal family.

The narrative surrounding the royal family in the French Revolution is very important in understanding the role of family and patriarchy in political thought. There is a recurring emphasis on fathers as the sinister controllers of wicked families. In the imagination of the French public, King Louis the XVI was the head of a plot to keep from the populace the freedom they desired. Instead of leading his people as a kindly father and teaching them to be upright citizens, the king was perceived to be withholding information and freedom from his people. Indeed, historians such as John Hardman verify that the king was involved in activities that seem conspiratorial in nature. King

Louis controlled the presses, bought politicians, and summoned armies secretly to Versailles (64). To the French populace, these activities formed a narrative of conspiracy against liberty. However, Hardman likewise notes that “under different assumptions such evidence could be taken as proof that Louis was acting as an eighteenth-century constitutional monarch--La Porte, the Intendant of the Civil List playing John Robinson to Louis’ George III!” (64). Although history was not kind to Louis XVI, George III was generally considered to be an acceptable monarch. However, in the eyes of the American colonists, George III was undeniably a conspirator, and one who was bent on destroying every last freedom of the American people. He became the model of a wayward father, the king-father of a country who refused to let his children explore freedom and virtue. On the one hand, the Mettingen circle may have an advantage in understanding freedom and virtue as there is no overbearing father to control their thoughts and actions. Indeed, Theodore Wieland’s primary source of trouble is attempting to finish the actions that his father began. On the other hand, the children suffer from a lack of knowledge and structure that a patriarch presumably could have provided.

Aside from the brothers and sisters of the revolution, the traditional structure of political thought held that the government was like a family, with the king at its head. Burke suggests that citizens determined to revolt ought to treat the shortcomings of the state as they would the shortcomings of their father. On the contrary, they are willing instead to kill their fathers and “hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds, and wild incantations, they may regenerate the paternal constitution, and renovate their father’s life” (*Reflections* 94). Instead of appreciating the importance and weight of the traditions and laws that the

governmental family has created, the children are apt to act first and reflect later, a course of action which is mimicked in the trajectory of conspiracist thinking. Although conspiracist thinkers may recognize a real issue, instead of choosing to address it in a typical manner, they attempt to create narratives which afterwards cloud the motives of the participants in a haze of conjecture and fancy.

From the outset of the Revolutionary War, the colonists saw that they were fighting from true virtue, virtue that could not be offered by the increasingly corrupt and ostentatious courts of Europe. As Wood notes, separation from England would do more than alter a government, it would create a new, utopian, morality based system of government and society (*American* 47). For most Americans, the split from Europe offered the possibility of starting anew, without any of the evils that they saw entrenched in European society.

If the Wieland family represents the young nation, then the Mettingen circle represents the young nation's ideals. The narrative of the nation closely follows Brown's idyllic beginning to *Wieland*, that of educated, enlightened young people discussing politics and religion. Holding their meetings in the temple that once housed the elder Wieland's religious retreat, the young philosophers seem to have renewed all that was confining about the old world and created the perfect rational society. However, their society does not long withstand the onslaught of the voices, as their upbringing does not meet the task of explaining the voices. In his typical fashion, Brown troubles the idyllic republic images of the Mettingen circle. Although they clearly begin as ideal republican citizens, their downfall could certainly have been avoided were they a bit more world-wise. When Carwin suggests that he has a solution for the voices, which is a phenomenon

he came across in Europe, the Mettingen circle does not want to hear his explanation, preferring to reason it out on their own. Once again, the young rationalists refuse to listen to a source with actual authority on the matter. Brown urges the audience to accept the most judicious explanation and not rely on what society deems the most fashionable. The Mettingen circle is the victim of a fashion for rationality.

On the other hand, it is also possible to read Brown's Mettingen circle as the reduction of political affairs to a family level. In this sense, Brown is instead taking the personal tragedy of a family and using it to narrativize the development of a nation. Vickers suggests that the setting of the novel also mirrors the plight of the young American republic; "like Theodore and Clara Wieland," she writes, "the new United States has lost a parent, a parent who was characterized as having a harmful influence" (11). Brown again utilizes a familiar narrative of the revolutionaries, that of likening political authority to oppressive patriarchal authority. Moreover, Vickers suggests that after the loss of the patriarchal authority, in both cases the orphaned children live a precarious existence in isolation from their former contacts (11). Brown could clearly see the parallels between the intimate matters of a nuclear family and the larger issues of the political theatre, a parallel that he grapples with in a narrative, much the same way as conspiracist thinkers grapple with their fears and concerns in their own narratives.

The narrative of the Wieland family itself suggests a recurring problem. Each generation is drawn farther from normative society into its own vacuum of patriarchal authority and religious fervor. In the introduction to the novel, Clara recounts the troubled history of the Wielands. Her grandfather is estranged from his family for disobeying the wishes of his family and marrying outside of the aristocracy when he is

wed to the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Their son, the eponymous Wieland's father, orphaned at an early age, likewise forsakes the traditions of his family when he leaves Europe to follow his own strict and fanatical variety of Christianity. Their mother soon follows their father to the grave, leaving a vacuum where a traditional family would have none. Clara and Theodore are left to the care of a maiden aunt, whose presence is only remarkable in its mediocrity. The most Clara can say about her is that "she seldom deviated into either extreme of rigor or lenity" (22). Although she is every bit as kind as a mother, there is no mention that she is a source of virtue, whereas Catharine is often described in terms that highlight her republican virtue (191). Without a father to control the family and a mother to instill republican virtue, the Wieland children must necessarily suffer a lack of typical domestic education. The lack of an authoritative father figure and Wieland's own religious fervor lead him to commit an Abrahamic act of patriarchy. If he had had a stronger model, or if he had not relied unquestioningly on traditional definitions of authority and obedience, he might not have been moved to familicide. Although they were exceedingly well-educated in most academic subjects, the Wielands lack a strong source of domestic education.

Because Brown intended the Mettingen circle to be very well-educated, he devotes a good deal of time to discussing their education. After going to live with their aunt, the Wielands received instruction in "most useful branches of knowledge," and were never sent to boarding schools (22). In most topics, it seems that the Wieland children were encouraged to discover knowledge on their own, away from most formal scholarly atmospheres. One particular issue of note is that their education was not formal, and did not follow one specific creed (24). Instead of receiving a formal religious

education, the young Wielands considered religion “the product of lively feelings, excited by reflection on our own happiness, and by the grandeur of external nature” (24). Like their father, the young Wielands pursue religion outside the traditional bounds of the church. Although Clara assures the audience that the Wielands’ education was thorough, she cannot formulate a coherent reason for the matter of their father’s death. In family legend the elder Wieland’s death was caused by the father’s refusal to obey divine commands (Ruttenburg 213). This understanding of the elder Wieland’s death informs Theodore Wieland’s later actions.

Wieland family legend holds that the elder Wieland was extremely agitated before his death because “a command had been laid upon him, which he did not wish to perform,” and family legend holds that the burden to complete it has been passed to another (14). Brown never fully explains what this command was, but Theodore believes that he knows. Drawing on the Bible, Theodore believes that he has been asked, as Abraham was, to sacrifice that which is dearest to him. Because he was willing to perform God’s will without question, Abraham became the patriarch of the Israelites. Theodore clearly believes that his actions align him with Abraham, and that the orders come from the same source. After the verdict, Theodore maintains that “my deed was enjoined by heaven; the obedience was the test of perfect virtue, and the extinction of selfishness and error” (200). Theodore Wieland acts not only on the basis of his strict Calvinist philosophy, but also in accordance with the family legend. When his father failed in his patriarchal duty, Theodore would have to take up the burden. Brown intended the audience to question Theodore’s convictions and the convoluted patriarchal reasoning that brought him to it. Wieland sees the murder of his family as affirming his



faith. However, he also sees it as affirming his virtue.

Brown drew inspiration for his first novel from many sources. One was clearly the conspiracist writing of his time. However, he drew the details for *Wieland*'s murders from real cases in his lifetime. Brown utilizes the cases of Beadle and Yates to force his audience to consider how flawed reasoning can affect judgment. In the 1780s, Beadle and Yates were two failing businessmen who took the lives of their families. Yates was captured and brought to trial, whereas Beadle committed suicide. In both cases, the murderers used the biblical myth of Abraham to explain their actions. Both of these men professed the idea that God was in some way responsible for their actions: Yates believed that God had given him the command to kill his family, whereas Beadle believed that God supported his decision to commit familicide because God did not tell him not to murder his family. Both men used the biblical myth that most supports patriarchy to confirm their murderous impulses. Daniel Williams suggests that Brown used these real-life events as a basis for his tale. Having read about them in local papers, Brown found them to correlate with his ideas about power, legitimacy, and authority in the new republic (644). Although both of these men saw their acts as supportable by mores and religious philosophies, society at large recoiled from the reasoning that these men exercised in their crimes, namely that it was their duty as patriarchs to protect their families in this manner.

Whether one reads *Wieland* as an exploration of political ideology or as an analysis of religious and moral education, Brown is clearly questioning the place and use of patriarchy. After *Wieland* the elder's premature death, the family must learn to cope with a vacuum of power; in this case, patriarchy has clearly been suspended in the

Wieland family. Jennifer Harris argues that “If Wieland the father is the ‘Revolution,’ motivated by seeming divine intervention or right, Wieland the son (or the ‘new nation’) may need to be reined in, as his judgment has been impaired by the father’s example and the justifications invoked to support it” (201). In this sense, the enormous scope of the Revolution can here be embodied in persons understandable to the reader. The momentous events of history can be narrativized into a novel that clearly spells out the delineation between revolutionary passion and the dangerous reality of creating new systems of government. Harris suggests that Brown has created a compelling narrative to explain the divide between republican ideology and American reality: “This is not simply a matter of patriarch or patriarchy gone awry,” she writes, “but rather the failure of an immature and unsupervised patriarchy--what Brown fears for the nation if a more concentrated federal effort is not made” (201). Therefore, Clara’s moralizing tale may be read as warning the audience of the expenses of boundless freedom as well as the dangers of wandering ventriloquists. This act of reading the personal tragedy into a controlling narrative of government and history can be seen as the turn of thought that conspiracist thinkers embrace.

Meanwhile, Carwin struggles with his own issues surrounding patriarchy and fathers. Throughout the fragmentary *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, Carwin persists in trading one father figure for another. From his own overbearing and violent father to Ludloe, the insidious father of the Utopian society and the fathers of the Catholic church, Carwin seems unable to settle on any particular model of patriarchy. After leaving his father’s farm and losing the haven of his aunt’s wealth, Carwin meets the mysterious Ludloe, who entices him to Europe and acts as a surrogate father for the enterprising

young bilquist. Though fragmentary, this account troubles the reassuring vision that Clara provides of the safety of ancient Europe. Carwin can certainly attest to the fact that European patriarchy and tradition may not hold the answers for those who are discomfited by the proceedings in America. Those who propose a return to traditional values may well find themselves in the grasp of an even more sinister power. Conspiracist thinkers often argue that society needs a return to traditional values, before the meddling influence of modern ideas, but *Carwin* suggests that this ideology may lead one into the arms of literal secret societies, such as Ludloe's Utopian community.

Citizens of the new American republic agreed that virtue was the binding force of a republic. Whereas republican leaders were held accountable to the Commonwealth by their neighbors, hereditary monarchies and aristocracies maintained order, or so the founding fathers believed, by fear. However, the rulers of a republican society must be known as only men, not as fearsome bringers of wrath (Wood 66). Therefore, the American political family should have a reasonable, approachable parent to lead it, not someone steeped in mysticism and ancient traditions. Theodore Wieland suggests the overbearing authority and power of the *ancien regime*. He is overbearing, morose, and unapproachable, and conducts his affairs in his family like an absolute monarch (28). He is not the paragon of virtue that the young republic desired, namely a man approachable by and amiable to his fellow man. Revolutionary narratives suggested that it was desirable to do away with these frightening figures of the old world because it is only free from the corruption of these men that republican virtue can flourish. Conspiracist thinkers tend to prefer the old order, lamenting the demise of European monarchy. However, they show a remarkable antipathy towards ancient orders, too. After all, they seem to be most

wary of those institutions that have ancient roots, such as the freemasons and the knights Templar. Ultimately, conspiracist thinkers are also wary of groups that do not conduct themselves in the public eye.

*The Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* delves into issues of monarchy and gender far more than *Wieland*, which focuses on the issues of republic. In the figure of Ludloe, Carwin discovers a man amiable and approachable, but mired in the ideals of wealth and power of the old world. Although Ludloe proclaims himself to be a friend of liberty, it is soon clear that he wishes to exert over his followers a power in all ways equal to that which patriarchal monarchs wield (308). From the moment that he offers to help Carwin, he wields indisputable power over the young man, although he purports to support the biloquist out of kindness and sympathy, like a father might. However, life under Ludloe is filled with strange demands, such as his ordering Carwin to travel to Spain, learn the language, and study Catholicism (311). Ultimately, although Ludloe is a man of great learning, Carwin discovers him to be one of little virtue.

Try as he might, Carwin is not able to find a role model for virtue in his young life. Ludloe is ultimately a dangerous megalomaniac, and all the women in *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* are portrayed as superstitious and foolish, with no hint of inborn virtue. Although Clara wavers in her beliefs about the voices, most of the women in Carwin's memoirs accept the mysterious voices immediately as supernatural productions (302). It is no wonder that Carwin cannot turn from destitution when he has no examples of virtue to model. Carwin is the perfect archetype for the conspiracist model of secret society recruits. Although learned, he has never been trained in the art of virtue, and has no examples of inborn virtue to follow. The dangers of the secret society and threat to

governments are only too true, as Ludloe harbors plans against the world's governmental powers. Like so many characters in conspiracist narratives, Carwin is almost literally seduced by Ludloe's offers of an easy life and freedom to pursue his studies, though this all ultimately feeds in to Ludloe's master plan.

At last, after Ludloe's machinations and the tragedy at Mettingen, Carwin is persuaded to abandon his errant ways and confess to the people he tormented. In his confession in *Wieland*, Carwin claimed that he never intended to do harm, but was instead unable to control his mischievous urges to do ill (226). On the other hand, characters such as Clara see Carwin as the malicious initiator of Wieland's murders (217). In either case, the characters agree on one point: that Carwin certainly lacks the ability to practice virtue. However, after the tragic events at Mettingen, he is inspired to renounce his ways and attempt to study virtue, moved at least in part by Clara's example, and his own repulsion at the events at Mettingen (245). Indeed, by all accounts Carwin has determined to live out his days in Pennsylvania, absorbed in the "harmless pursuits of agriculture" (273), for all intents and purposes the model of republican agrarian virtue. It is important to note that his change of opinion came about through contact with an upstanding, virtuous woman, as opposed to the foolish women whom he had associated with earlier. Clara's influence is even enough to undo some of the ill that Ludloe had wrought. Ultimately, in Carwin's case, the feminine, republican model of virtue triumphs over the sinister modes of European patriarchy, a theme which would be utilized by conspiracist thinkers from Robison forward.

However, whereas traditional societal values might dictate that a return to strict patriarchy is the solution to these problems, Brown clearly places patriarchy as the

creator of these issues. Although the difficulty at Mettingen may well be linked to the Wielands' lack of a father and other patriarchal figures, it is also clear that the Calvinist teachings played a major role in the tragedy that befell the family. After all, who is more imbued with patriarchal authority than one of the Old Testament patriarchs whom Theodore Wieland so obviously imitates? Moreover, Brown makes it obvious that the schemes of Ludloe, a sinister father figure, are no more reasonable than Wieland's religious doctrine, despite how learned he is. As Waterman notes, "*Wieland* argues against the utility—and for the dangers—of faith in divine intervention and offers pointed parodies of Calvinist Christianity and Quakerism alike" (27). By presenting a novel with which readers could easily relate because of its political and social exigency, Brown wished to inspire them to more completely analyze their understanding of world events. Theodore Wieland turns to God to understand the intrusion of disembodied voices much the same way that Robison turns to Christianity to understand the intrusion of disenfranchised mobs. Brown suggests that a patriarchal theme evidenced in both the religious and conspiracist understandings are logical errors. In fact, reliance on blind tradition and fanatical political rhetoric may well lead to murder.

In his use of Clara as the narrator, Brown opens up the question of women's voices. Though women were held to be paragons of virtue, they were not allowed a voice in the public sphere, a tradition that Brown continuously questions in his writings. Clara presents her story, in much the same way Brown believed that all fictional stories should be presented, to inspire the audience to virtue. Clara believes, and Brown hopes the audience will believe, that women are the sources of virtue in republican life. In giving Clara a remarkable education Brown is clearly arguing that women can and should be

widely read. In allowing Clara faults of reasoning and observation, Brown is criticizing the assumption, originally so dear to Clara, that virtue is in any way inborn and can be used without practice. The narrative of inborn virtue links the ideal woman with conspiracy theories that attempt to explain history and contemporary events in a fallacious manner, and Brown encourages his audience to ignore seductive, but flawed, arguments.

## Narratives of Seduction

Conspiracist histories of the world held great sway over the minds of the populace in Brown's time, and Brown was skeptical of the reasoning that led to their formation. To Brown, the idea of a clearly plottable history with knowable scenes was seductive but flawed. To explore the dangers of turning to conspiracist thinking to explain events, Brown plots a troubled relationship between Clara and Carwin, the supposed author of all her evils.

Derived from the writings of Barruel, and more directly from the lectures of clergymen Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight, a conspiracist understanding of American history, with the virtuous Americans pitted against evil and perverted secret societies, was quite common in the late eighteenth century. Conspiracist writings, especially those of Dwight and Morse, are often filled with a mixture of repulsion and often eroticized attraction. Clara's fluctuating feelings toward Carwin mirror the attitudes of American citizens toward the Illuminati and other conspiracies of the eighteenth century. Although she is attracted by Carwin, she also fears his behavior, which often falls outside of the realms of what she understands as normal.

The conspiracy theory was clearly a staple of American life, and was a popular means to understand world events. As Hofstadter explains, "the paranoid tendency is aroused by a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political process of bargain and compromise" (39). As such, the logic of the conspiracy operates not in the world of political reality, but in the world of fiction and the novel. The turn away from reality toward conspiracy mirrors the turn to the novel. Like many novels, a conspiracist



thinker often begins with verifiable facts and then digresses into conjecture. As Hofstadter is quick to call attention to, “What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts (though it is occasionally true that in his extravagant passion for facts the paranoid occasionally manufactures them), but rather the curious leap in his imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events” (37, emphasis mine). This “curious leap” mimics not only Clara’s imaginings in her boudoir, but also the very conceptual act of writing a novel itself. It signals a turn from strict reality to the more pleasing forms offered by fiction and art.

The attraction of conspiracy theory has not only been constant, it has also been seductive. Although those who expounded from their pulpits on the evils of the Illuminati certainly believed their assertions, there is an erotic undertone to their warnings.

Hofstadter notes that “The enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, cruel, sensual, luxury loving” (31-32). Carwin is something of a superman. His vocal talents lie outside of the scope of most people, and the very image of their use, complete with sparking eyes, is supernatural (168). Carwin clearly evinces the powers with which conspiracist thinkers imbued their own enemies. He also admits to having an affair with Judith, and desiring the same with Clara (229). Thus he exhibits another sign of the conspiracist’s antagonist: a seductive, cruel, yet somehow attractive, superbeing. This erotic tension runs throughout conspiracist writings. Timothy Dwight verged on eroticism when he imagined the Illuminati in the nude: “Sin is the nakedness and shame of the scriptures, and righteousness the garment which covers it”. Dwight associates his righteousness with the garments which would protect against sin. However, whether consciously or not, Dwight also associated his

enemy with nudity and the sensuality of sin. Contemporary authors also noted the effects of conspiracy on the minds it influenced. Conversely, writers also recognized the perversity and disease that Masonry and the Illuminati preached. Dwight noted the extent of the corrupting influence of Masonry when he wrote, “In the secure and unrestrained debates of the lodge, every novel, licentious, and alarming opinion was resolutely advanced. Minds, already tinged with philosophism, were here speedily blackened with a deep and deadly die; and those, which came fresh and innocent to the scene of contamination, became early and *irremediably corrupted*.” This image of disease is scarcely attractive, highlighting the polarization in depictions of the Illuminati, the tension between attraction to their wickedness and disgust at their perversions.

To Clara, as the primary voice in Brown’s narrative, these aspects of the “paranoid style” are very literal. Carwin, the one time secret society member and Catholic convert, is a vexing source of attraction for her. Even as she prepares to write about him in her transcript, Clara suffers a physical reaction to the thought: “It is with a shuddering reluctance that I enter on the province of describing him,” she writes. “My blood is congealed: and my fingers are palsied when I call up his image” (56). Her recollection of Carwin reveals a more interesting reaction. When Clara initially spots him in her yard, she writes: “His cheeks were pallid and lank, his eyes sunken, his forehead overshadowed by coarse straggling hairs, teeth large and irregular, though sound and brilliantly white, and his chin discolored by a tetter. His skin was of coarse grain, and sallow hue. Every feature was wide of beauty, and the outline of his face reminded you of an inverted cone” (61). Clara herself recognizes that Carwin is not the embodiment of beauty, and is indeed the negative of it. However, the next moment she fancies that his

face “served to betoken a mind of the highest order,” and impetuously sits down to compose a portrait of it (61). Like Dwight, Clara seems caught between the realization that Carwin is an oafish individual and an attraction which she should avoid.

It is in this moment that Clara’s extraordinary attraction to Carwin becomes apparent. Though there is nothing that she recognizes as beauty, she remains enchanted by his visage. In this act, she embodies the American attitude towards conspiracy theories. Though she recognizes his defects, she also finds him seductive. More specifically, she finds his voice seductive. Before she associated his physical form with his voice, she was completely enthralled. Clara writes that “the tones were indeed such as I never heard before; but that they should, in an instant, as it were, dissolve me in tears, will not easily be believed by others, and can scarcely be comprehended by myself” (60). Accordingly, Clara parallels the role of the conspiracy theorist, seduced by the words of the subversive, but unable to clear them from his thoughts. Although Clara claims that she writes with a “palsied” hand, there is no indication that Carwin’s voice has ever become repulsive to her, though the memory of his deeds certainly has. Like Dwight and Robison, Clara has fallen under the power of a renegade European’s voice. However, Clara is unable to throw off the attraction she feels for him, even if she feels repugnance for his visage.

Philosophers have struggled with the notion of beauty for millennia, wondering at its power over the human psyche. While Plato wrestled with the notion of beauty as it related to ethics and living a moral life, Aristotle noted that “the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy” (131). Obviously, beauty is the prerequisite for many of the niceties of human life, and it is

doubtful that an unhappy man can ever lead a righteous life. It is perhaps Burke, a rough contemporary of the events in Brown's novel, however, who enumerates the most essential elements of beauty. Whereas many philosophers had explained beauty as a perfect proportion of parts of features, Burke explains:

Proportion relates almost wholly to convenience, as every idea of order seems to do; and it must therefore be considered as a creature of the understanding, rather than a primary cause acting on the senses and imagination. It is not by the force of long attention and inquiry that we find any object to be beautiful; beauty demands no assistance from our reasoning; even the will is unconcerned. (*An Enquiry* 164)

Beauty, he suggests, does not come from great reflection, but is a quality that enraptures the viewer without his or her knowledge. This is certainly true of Clara's feelings for Carwin, whom she had only momentarily viewed, and yet found compelling enough to imitate in art. Clara's sudden infatuation with Carwin certainly seems to fulfill Burke's notion, as he notes that "the appearance of beauty as effectually causes some degree of love in us, as the application of ice or fire produces the ideas of heat or cold" (*An Enquiry* 164). Burke suggests that Clara's reaction is the only one she could have had, as the viewer often has a primal reaction to the appearance of beauty.

Clara recognizes that there is little conventional beauty in Carwin, and Burke's notions of beauty support her conclusion that his "every feature was wide of beauty" (61). After considering the arguments that beauty consists of proportion and symmetry, Burke concludes that beauty is

First, to be comparatively small. Secondly, to be smooth. Thirdly, to have a variety in the direction of the parts; but, fourthly, to have those parts not angular,

but melted, as it were, into each other. Fifthly, to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength. Sixthly, to have its colors clear and bright, but not very strong and glaring. Seventhly, or if it should have any glaring color, to have it diversified with others (*An Enquiry* 222)

Carwin violates these precepts in nearly every way. None of his body parts seem to match, and with a head “like an inverted cone” (61), it is not likely that he his parts “melt” into each other. Whereas his skin is “sallow,” his hair is dark, violating the precept that colors should not be glaring (though there is little doubt that they are bright). What is it, then, that attracts Clara to the clownish Carwin?

Part of the attraction for Clara may well be Carwin’s status as a European, native or not. She struggles with his identity as an exotic foreigner and wonders why he converted to Catholicism. Conspiracist thinkers are often attracted to the most exotic and foreign elements of their enemies, emphasizing those above mundane evils. Moreover, the threat of a foreign influence that can pass as American is equally insidious, suggesting that this disguise can only aid their villainy (Levine 16). Clara struggles with these implications when she examines Carwin’s character and attempts to understand his narrative. “His character excited considerable curiosity in the observer,” Clara writes. “It was not easy to reconcile his conversion to the Romish faith, with those proofs of knowledge and capacity that were exhibited by him on different occasions. A suspicion was, sometimes, admitted, that his belief was counterfeited for some political purpose” (78). Carwin’s presence at Mettingen has troubled the otherwise idyllic and monotonous lives of the inhabitants. Now, Clara has a chance to interact with a male outside of her family circle. As Burke notes, “The next source of pleasure in this sense, as in every

other, is the continually presenting somewhat new; and we find that bodies which continually vary their surface, are much the most pleasant or beautiful to the feeling, as any one that pleases may experience” (231). Though Burke is speaking here specifically of the sense of touch, his conclusion is that new bodies are as pleasing to this sense as any other. Thus, Carwin is attractive because he brings new ideas into the group. Clara notes that, despite his appearances, “no man possessed a larger store of knowledge, or a greater degree of skill in communication of it to others; Hence he was regarded as an inestimable addition to our society” (87). Certainly, Burke suggests that this attraction is a natural outgrowth of Carwin’s status as the novelty of the Mettingen groups.

In his discussion of early American conspiracy theories, Davis notes that there are three features of “countersubversive” rhetoric: “First, the imagined conspiracies expressed dominant values through a process of inversion; [...] second, countersubversive discourse reaffirmed social cohesion; [...] third, conspiracy fantasies provided an outlet for the ‘projection of forbidden desires’ and ‘irrational impulses’” (qtd. From White, 1). Like Dante’s *Inferno*, rhetoric of the conspiracy theory inverts what society should hold as moral and upright, providing a simplistic view of how immorality should work. In manner as well as custom, Carwin is an inversion of the norm at Mettingen. Whereas Pleyel and, to a certain extent, Clara, seem to be energetic characters, Clara notes of her brother that “his deportment was grave, considerate, and thoughtful [...] Human life, in his opinion, was made up of changeable elements, and the principles of duty were not easily unfolded” (25). Opposed to the melancholy patriarchy at Mettingen, Carwin is a man with a mysterious past who, by his own admission, had no love for his own father, and even viewed the mysterious Ludloe, a surrogate father figure,

as suspect (*Memoirs* 282). Carwin's rejection of his family and past is an inversion of the values held most dearly at Mettingen, where Wieland controls his family without a doubt. Carwin's conversion to the Catholic faith, as well as marking him as other, also marks his rejection of those values that move Wieland the most, the Calvinistic principles which rule his life.

However, Carwin's Catholicism and foreign affectations also presents a more sinister possibility, especially in terms of early American history. Catholicism and the foreign element had long been the target of the "paranoid" in the American system, along with the Freemasons and the Bavarian Illuminati. As Hofstadter notes:

Anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan. Whereas the anti-Masons had imagined wild drinking bouts and had entertained themselves with fantasies about the actual enforcement of grisly Masonic oaths, the anti-Catholics developed an immense lore about libertine priests, the confessional as an opportunity for seduction, licentious convents and monasteries, and the like.

(21)

Even as Clara and her family enjoy Carwin's turn-of-phrase, they are also troubled by his Catholicism, and Clara's reaction to Carwin's appearance suggests more than simple intellectual interest. Clara embodies this mixture of attraction and aversion to the religious other typical of her American associates. Carwin's conversion has attracted all of her attention and she wonders "what could have obliterated the impressions of his youth, and made him abjure his religion and his country?" (79). Clara associates her own Calvinistic upbringing with propriety and normality, whereas Catholicism holds a hint of risk. She has romanticized Carwin as the "bad boy" of the group, and has objectified him

in her fantasies, creating an illicit portrait and a narrative which center on Carwin as the center of her clandestine fantasies. This contact with the foreign and slightly dangerous element, embodied in Carwin, has quite literally seduced Clara.

Anti-Catholicism had deep historical roots in American thinking, so it is not surprising that Clara, in support of her native Protestant values, wonders at how Carwin could possibly have converted. Traditionally, Catholics were viewed in much the same light as the Masons. as Davis notes, “Freemasons, it was said, could commit any crime and indulge in any passion when ‘upon the square,’ and Catholics and Mormons were even less inhibited by internal moral restraints. Nativists expressed horror over this freedom from conscience and conventional morality, but they could not conceal a throbbing note of envy” (217). To be sure, Clara cannot keep Carwin’s conversion, and his adopted foreignness, from her mind: she writes that “Hours were consumed in revolving these ideas. My meditations were intense” (79). Whereas Wieland and Pleyel are attracted to Carwin’s intellectual company, Clara is more interested in the private motivations that led Carwin to adopt the scandalous faith of the Spaniards. Although she conforms to a Protestant faith, Carwin’s conversion is strangely attractive to Clara, as opposed to the authoritarian Protestantism that her brother insists upon practicing. It is Wieland, a staunch practitioner of his branch of Calvinism, “man of gentle virtues and invincible benignity” (198) who is inspired to sacrifice his family, a scandal usually associated with Catholicism and other non-Protestant religions. However, Clara does not find the reality of the “Puritan Pornography” as seductive as the tales spread about the misdeeds of the Catholics and other groups accused of engaging in subversive activity. Indeed, the news of her brother’s deeds incites in Clara a deathly illness (200). The



reality of such narratives is a striking contrast to the seductive presentation of them.

Pleyel, the most rational among the group, is also affected by “the paranoid style.” Having introduced Carwin to the group at Mettingen, Pleyel begins to believe that Clara has fallen in love with Carwin (80). In doing so, he has granted Carwin a power imagined by many conspiracy theorists to be possessed by their enemies. As Davis notes, “such a projection of forbidden desires can be seen in the exaggeration of the stereotyped enemy’s powers, which made him at times appear as a virtual superman. Catholic and Mormon leaders, never hindered by conscience or traditional morality, were curiously superior to ordinary Americans in cunning, in exercising power over others, and especially in captivating gullible women” (217). Seducing women was a trait often assigned by conspiracy theorists to the groups they feared. In this way the men of the Puritanical America not only inverted their own society, but also projected their own desires and fears onto the other. Thus, the sallow skinned, coarse haired clown is transformed from the vaguely repugnant to the dangerously attractive by merit of his own menacing presence. This hint of danger, Davis suggests, is indicative of early American conspiracies. American conspiracy theorists fell between the two poles of attraction and repulsion when reflecting on their wicked, and usually foreign, enemies.

In the tradition of the American conspiracy theorist, Clara has conflated her own desires with the appearance of Carwin. In her boudoir, as she worries about Pleyel’s fate, Clara is suddenly aware of a presence in her closet. Even as she knows that she should retreat from the threat, she finds herself compelled to know what is in the closet. Upon discovering Carwin, Clara reflects that “I used to suppose that certain evils could never befall a being in possession of a sound mind; that true virtue supplies us with energy

which vice can never resist.” (104). Immediately, she wonders “How was it that a sentiment like despair had now invaded me, and that I trusted to the protection of chance, or to the pity of my persecutor?” (104). These words sound less like the words of a brave woman who has just confronted her fears than those of a simpering heroine in a harlequin romance novel. Although Carwin’s appearance in Clara’s boudoir is certainly a suggestive action, and although he admits to planning to ravish her (103), Clara is hardly innocent passionate thoughts of her own. She has retired to her boudoir in an agitated state to contemplate the hypothetical death of Pleyel, which perturbs her routine. Clara is painfully aware of her state of mind, noting that “Thus was I disturbed by phantoms of my own creation. It was not always thus. I can ascertain the date when my mind became the victim of this imbecility; perhaps it was coeval with the inroad of a fatal passion; a passion that will never rank me in the number of its eulogists” (95). Brown leaves the audience confused as to whether this “passion” refers to the disturbing agitation she has felt over the presumed death of Pleyel, or the “cherished” memory of her father which follows immediately after.

Hofstadter suggests that the projection of forbidden desires onto a subversive figure is endemic of the American paranoid style: “The sexual freedom often attributed to him, his lack of moral inhibitions, his possession of especially effective techniques for fulfilling his desires, give exponents of the paranoid style an opportunity to project and freely express unacceptable aspects of their own minds” (34). Carwin initially admits to desiring to rape Clara, but later changes his story. However, it is clear that Clara has already envisioned the possibility that whatever “ruffian” lurks in her closet may harm her thus (100). Her willingness to open the closet even when this threat is known to her

suggests that Clara is not entirely as virtuous as the audience may have been led to believe. Moreover, Clara's fantasy and fear that her brother may be lurking in the closet immediately follows these concerns, suggesting that Clara's desires may not be as forthright as she presents them.

Ironically, conspiracy theorists usually level the accusation of incest at the subversives. Davis notes that "Though the enemy's sexual freedom might at first seem enticing, it was always made repugnant in the end by associations with perversion or brutal cruelty. The persistent emphasis on this theme [incest] might indicate deep-rooted feelings of fear and guilt, but it also helped demonstrate, on a more objective level, the loathsome consequences of unrestrained lust" (220). Clara's impression of Carwin's sexual freedom is initially correct when Carwin admits to having an affair with Judith, Clara's servant (229). However, the episode in the boudoir reveals a deeper source for Clara's imaginings, one that Hofstadter and Davis suggest are indicative of America's secret guilt. In order to ignore the guilt that Clara feels in imagining her brother or dead father as sources of passion, she casts Carwin as the villain of her narrative, in much the same way that the conspiracy theorist casts the Illuminati or Freemason as his or her enemy. As such, Carwin is both a source of attraction, in that Clara has projected her desires onto him, and a source of repulsion, as he now embodies all that she has been taught is taboo.

Consequently, Clara casts Carwin as the villain in her tale. After Pleyel rejects her, Clara writes that "I reflected on the powers of my enemy. I could easily divine the substance of the conversation that was overheard. Carwin had constructed his plot in a manner suited to the characters of those whom he had selected for his victims" (152-153).

As the enemy, Carwin also serves an important function in Clara's tale. Davis suggests that "The sins of individuals, or of the nation as a whole, could be pushed off upon the shoulders of the enemy and there punished in righteous anger" (219). By locating in Carwin the source of her first abnormal thoughts and desires, Clara can react to Carwin as her enemy and treat him with the disdain that she should have for her own bizarre thoughts. Carwin recognizes Clara's authorial power: "'I am become a fiend,'" he cries, "the sight of whom destroys. Yet tell me my offence! You have linked curses with my name; you ascribe to me a malice monstrous and infernal" (223). Yet it scarcely matters whether Carwin is or is not innocent. As long as he remains an object in Clara's narrative, he can only be as she portrays him. Thus, it is his fate to remain as the villain, sometimes eroticized, sometimes villainized, in Clara's novel. As such, she can punish him for the tragedy which befell her family.

However, even as a scheming fiend, Carwin's role is attractive. Clara's life has been marred by the spontaneous combustion of her father (18) and her brother's murder of his family, which Clara attributes to Carwin, whom she assumes is the "author of her misery" (183). This assumption serves to order her world, making Carwin and his schemes the axis around which her troubles are oriented. Even as she recognizes him as a villain, the order he brings to her life is reassuring. Hofstadter notes that "the paranoid mentality is more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities" (36). In following with this view, Clara does not have to fear the motives which drove her brother to madness. Though they may be rooted in her dear father's religious instruction, she can now locate them instead in Carwin's machinations. On a larger scale, conspiracy theorists in early nineteenth century America also found

comfort in the idea of a personal enemy. “The paranoid’s interpretation of history,” Hofstadter writes, “is in this sense distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequence of someone’s will” (32). It is much more comforting for Clara to embody the strife she faces in the form of Carwin. He is both knowable and already known to her, and he is someone about which she can easily fantasize. As Clara would like to ignore the impulse which exploded her father or caused her grandfather’s suicide (203), many Americans would rather ignore the explosive impulses which cause strife, such as Nat Turner’s rebellion, in favor of trying to imagine a personal enemy. This makes change traceable and knowable, and assures the person of his of her place in the world.

“With only a loose and ephemeral attachment to places and institutions,” Davis writes, “many Americans felt a compelling need to articulate their loyalties, to prove their faith, and to demonstrate their allegiances to certain ideals and institutions. By doing so they acquired a sense of self-identity and personal direction in an otherwise rootless and shifting environment” (209). In this way, imagining evil entities such as Carwin served to reinforce the ideals of a nation which had few historically rooted ideals. Likewise, Carwin’s appearance seems to instigate in Clara the desire to establish a family with Pleyel, mention of which is conspicuously lacking before Carwin’s appearance on the scene. Moreover, Davis notes that “There were no limits to the ambitious designs of leaders equipped with such organizations. According to nativist prophets, they chose to subvert American society because control of America meant control of the world’s destiny” (208). The very idea of conspirators dedicated to destroying the American way of life reaffirmed the nobility of the American country and cause.

Though Clara seems to accept summarily her American and Protestant righteousness, she does indulge in a fantasy common to many American conspiracy theorists. Hofstadter argues that “there is a deeper eschatological significance attached to the person of the renegade: in the spiritual wrestling match between good and evil which is the paranoid’s archetypal model of the world struggle, the renegade is living proof that all the conversions are not made by the wrong side. He brings with him the promise of redemption and victory” (35). This is another arena in which Clara can project her fantasies. By imagining herself as a moral winner in Carwin’s evil, she can truly become the heroine of her story. In her appended letter, Clara writes that Carwin “saw, when too late, the danger of imposture. So much affected was he by the catastrophe to which he was a witness, that he laid aside all regard for his safety [...] He is now probably engaged in the harmless pursuits of agriculture, and may come to think, without insupportable remorse, on the evils to which his fatal talents have given birth” (272-273). Because of speaking to Clara and her upright relatives, Carwin has chosen a path that is not only safe for himself, but also beneficial for his compatriots. Moreover, he has repented of his wickedness. Thus, Clara’s virtue, imagined or otherwise, has triumphed over Carwin’s fiendishness. Consequently, Clara’s attraction to Carwin is also based on the fact that she has become a conquering warrior to his misguided mischief. Ironically, now that Carwin has disappeared from the story, both in voice and in person, to be a sedate rustic, Clara no longer seems to have an interest in him, romantic or otherwise. Having lost the attraction of danger and forbidden desires, reduced to a state where he no longer opposes American ideology, Carwin no longer holds any attraction for Clara.

Carwin presents a troubling figure, both for the audience and Clara. His

appearance in the rigid world espoused by Wieland causes tensions which test the strength of the characters' relationships. He is an unknown element, a convert to a despised faith, and a man of little physical beauty. However, his presence serves a valuable function to the characters at Mettingen, especially Clara. Her confusing emotions for him mirror the sentiments that early Americans held toward their self-proclaimed enemies, the wicked adherents of Freemasonry and Illuminatism. She is attracted to him because he represents her desires that she cannot act upon, and yet she is repulsed by the discord he represents. Ironically, the chaos that Carwin represents is his principal attraction. In locating Carwin as the source of her suffering, Clara has structured her chaotic world, filled with supernatural deaths and divine murders, lending a stability to her otherwise mysterious world. Carwin provides that stability, and her ultimate triumph over him, the triumph over her authorial voice over his projected voice, allows her to embody her beliefs as righteously triumphing over the defeated Carwin.

## Conclusion

From Charles Brockden Brown's writings in the years 1798 and 1799, it is clear that he was both aware of the Illuminati scare and skeptical of the power of the secret society. His articles in *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review* demonstrate his uneasiness with the concept that secret societies like the Illuminati can be the primary force in history. These views are perhaps explained best in the article in which he reviews a Fast Day speech and claims of important characters in history that "though their activity be pernicious, their motives are pure" (289). Brown denies the claim, so popular with many contemporaries and public figures, that there is a secret society specifically and villainously intent on destroying American freedoms and liberties.

The mention of Carwin's background in *Wieland* and the extended examination of Ludloe's society in *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* are evidence that Brown intended to examine secret societies in his fiction. His portrayals of secret societies, however, do not reinforce the claims being made by his contemporaries in 1798 and 1799. Instead, Brown wishes to examine etiologically how people understand foreign threats, and how the understanding of foreign threats affect their lives. Since the fear of foreign influences and more specifically the Illuminati scare drove legislation to pass laws such as the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, Brown's examination comes at a propitious moment. In choosing to frame his ideas in the form of a novel, Brown mirrors the impetus of conspiracist thinkers themselves. Taking actual events, Brown embellishes them with fictional elements to create a moral tale. On the other hand, Brown argues in his writings that conspiracist thinkers seduce their audiences with fictional stories passed off as historical fact. Brown is very skeptical of the notion that history can truthfully be presented in a



romantic plot.

Because Brown is an attentive social critic, he chooses to examine the etiological problems in conspiracist thinking in a number of different ways. First of all, he examines the Wielands' belief that they are rationalist thinkers and are thus qualified and able to make sense of their observations. From his treatment of the Mettingen circle, it is clear that Brown was very skeptical about the actual practice of rationalistic thinking. Brown is also skeptical about the inheritances children receive from their ancestors. The Wielands' troubles stem from the idea of patriarchal power, and the perceived vacuum that the loss of patriarchal power implies. Finally, the episode in Clara's boudoir offers a specific textual moment that offers a practical view of the Illuminati scare on an interpersonal level.

Conspiracist thinking has been a useful focus for many of the themes that Brown explores in his writing. Brown was very concerned about the moral fortitude and understanding of the early republic, and his writings offer a criticism of knowledge which implicates many of the traditions inherited from European philosophy, such as empirical rationalism and patriarchy. Brown offers *Wieland* as an American tale to encourage his audience to practice critical thinking skills that do not emphasize rational and knowable plots, as there is an overwhelming tendency to misunderstand such supposed plots. Clara's persecution of Carwin provides a prime example because she insists that there must be a villain in her story, and Carwin must be the source of her troubles.

The intersection of American history, philosophy, and politics contained in *Wieland* and *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* make it a fertile source for scholarly study on the development of a national narrative. In suggesting that *Wieland* is a specifically

American tale, Brown forces the audience to consider that the deranged narratives of madmen offer a uniquely American experience. The Mettingen circle copes with upheavals at every turn, and yet the novel ends with an almost deceptively happy ending. Considering the contemporary events, Brown desires to instill in his audience a sense of skepticism in creating a fictional tale out of actual events.

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## Curriculum Vitae

Rebecca Bossie was born in Houston, Texas to Clifford and Jerri Bossie. In 2002, she graduated third in her class from Parkland High School, and entered the University of Texas at El Paso that fall. As an undergraduate, she pursued a double major in Anthropology and English and American Literature. As an anthropology student Rebecca conducted field research and was part of a UTEP team that conducted an archaeological survey at the Three Rivers archaeological site. In 2006, Rebecca elected to return to UTEP to get a degree in literature. In 2007, Rebecca and some of her colleagues founded a graduate reading group called the Border Wits. Rebecca will be attending Purdue University to earn her Ph.D. in literature starting in 2009.