

Modern Chivalry and the Origins of American Fiction*

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I. Theory

The ontologist always faces the age-old debate of the chicken or the egg. Which *did* come first? Applied to humans and their work, the question becomes even more difficult. Does the culture, the forms of society, determine what the members of that society do? Or is culture an expression of what they do? More specifically, did the new American Republic create such writers as William Hill Brown, Susanna Rowson, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, and Charles Brockden Brown or should we say that they, in their way, were “creating” the identity of the new Republic? The noted speculative anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, addresses himself directly to the larger question (in its non-literary form) and proposes a solution:

Culture, this acted document, . . . is public. . . . Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity. The interminable, because untermi- nable, debate within anthropology as to whether culture is “subjective” or “objective,” together with the mutual exchange of intellectual insults . . . which accompanies it, is wholly misconceived. Once human behavior is seen as . . . symbolic action—action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct loses sense. . . . It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.¹

Culture, then, is not a self-contained reality, self-perpetuating and self-directed. Nor is it merely the record of behavior, a kind of crude history of human actions. It is not, as the so-called “componential analysts” would insist, that which is embedded deep within the individual members of society. And neither is it, as the structuralist maintains, an abiding constant underlying different superficial surface forms, a con-

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necting bond between, say, a Hopi *kachina* dance, on the one hand, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, on the other.

Culture instead, according to Geertz, is "public because meaning is."² More to the point, culture serves as a "control mechanism" represented by a set of symbols which educates individuals to a particular pattern of life. Symbols, in particular, provide a "template" for action, for behavior, a template that persists even after the perceiver dies and so provides continuity between persons, across generations. A human being may come into the world with a certain set of capacities but, unlike lesser animals which are governed by inherited instincts, humans need guidelines that will direct those capacities. The means of direction are symbolic (cultural artifacts are often essential symbols) as well as direct (education, in both its formal and informal manifestations). The *accumulation* of directions (the goal) is what we call culture, or "a culture," or, more specifically, "society."

I would further suggest that so-called "popular" or "mass" culture is one of the most obvious, most pervasive, and most systematic sources of the symbols that provide the template for human action in a large, complex society such as the modern Western world. From children's books and rhyming games, to fairy tales, to comic books and formula fiction (directed at children as well as adults), we learn not only what our society expects, but how firm those expectations are. From movies and television too we learn how to dream and what to dream. For the present purposes, however, I will restrict myself to fiction. Indeed, formula fiction, whether serialized in magazines and newspapers or published in books, has long been popular in America and serves as the kind of template Geertz describes.³ It guides. But it also *tests*. And formula fiction tests, I would suggest, very much as a small child regularly tests its parents. Discreet disobedience can determine (a) that the rules are really rules; (b) which rules are important and which are minor; (c) how far the rules can safely be broken. Also like the child, popular fiction rarely asks more fundamental questions: (a) how sound *are* these rules themselves; (b) how valid are their underlying principles? In fact, one crucial difference between "commercial" and "elitist" fiction in America is that the former asks the first series of questions, whereas the latter tends to ask the second. To continue the parent-child analogy, we might say that if popular fiction tests social rules as a small child does, elitist fiction questions as an American teen-ager might. One is not necessarily more valid than the other, and both, at root, have the same function: that is, to gauge the flexibility of social dicta. But the adolescent's questioning tends to have more serious consequences and entails the possibility that the whole system will be undermined and countermanded. Both popular fiction and young children question in a safer fashion. Thus in any of the immensely popular Nancy Drew books, a young girl learns that it is acceptable for her to occasionally disobey authority figures (when disobedience ultimately serves the very values those authority figures seek to uphold); it is sometimes permissible to act independently (the boyfriend will still take her to the prom and, despite her sleuthing, she *wants* to go to the prom); when it seems necessary to do so, she can briefly abandon gender-expectations (since, at other times, she will affirm her femininity in

spades). In contrast, a novel like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) drew the mass disapproval of Victorian America precisely because its heroine, Edna Pontellier, disobeys authority, acts independently, casts aside gender-expectations—and means it.

In both forms of fiction—as in each manner of testing—part of the fun is in the uncertainty. Fiction, in either its popular or serious forms, always offers temporary escape from the quotidian. But again the limits of the uncertainty are different in the popular and in the elitist work. And again an analogy might be useful. We might think of popular fiction as a roller coaster: the attraction lies in the appearance of danger, but we never seriously question that we will arrive at the end of our ride in one piece. The track is there and it seems to be carefully built to the proper standards of safety. Elitist fiction (and this analogy goes hand-in-hand with the previous one of elitist fiction as adolescent testing) might be seen as a game of “chicken,” a crude variation on Russian roulette sometimes indulged in by American teen-agers. In its simplest form, two cars speed directly towards one another and the loser is the first one who shows himself to be “chicken” (who becomes afraid and turns aside). Obviously the escapism of playing “chicken” is quite different from that of riding the roller coaster. The latter assumes return; the former holds out the definite possibility of not just escapism, but final and absolute escape. Nancy Drew, for all her unlikely, un-girlish adventures, solves crimes and thus aids society. Edna Pontellier's suicide only affirms her total rejection of social values.

Having laid this theoretical background, I would now like to turn my attention to early American fiction. To return to questions of ontology, why was it that American fiction, as a genre, was born and quickly passed into a kind of awkward literary adolescence at precisely the same time that America herself, as a republic, was making a similar journey? We can see how the New Republic early fumbled with the problem of its own identity but finally, after the War of 1812 (a *classic* adolescent rebellion), moved into an increasingly assured adulthood. Similarly, in the first formative years of American culture, fiction had not quite decided what directions it might take. Whereas nineteenth-century fiction is notably marked by a schism between popular and elitist fictional forms, the earliest American fiction could not define itself according to this as yet unestablished dichotomy. So it is not surprising that this first fiction is often disconnected and diffuse. The first novelists were not quite sure what audience they addressed or why. Their fumbings make this fiction hard-going for the New Critic (is this a symbol or a misstep?) or the Neo-Aristotelian (exactly what are the author's intentions here?), but a veritable playground for the cultural historian. The stumblings of the genre towards adulthood perfectly mirror the stumblings of the nation towards an independent identity. This parallel between the developing culture and the cultural artifact gives us a symbolic map of the forces that shaped America—and the forces that shaped the great fiction of America's nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fiction that, one could easily argue, marks America's most important contribution to world letters.

II. History

As many commentators have noted, the last decades of the eighteenth-century saw enormous changes in the American way of life.⁴ Most obviously, the Puritan past *was* past; religious strictures were losing their hold on the national conscience. The Great Revival expired not to be revived again. Class structure, too, was changing. The burgeoning American middle class increasingly gained political power and looked guiltily, like a prodigal son, towards England for advice on how to behave with more sophistication, more "class." Within that middle class, and in the lower classes too, the old agrarian "home" economy was more and more superseded by a proto-industrial, proto-urban economy in which wages were earned principally outside the home and mostly by men. This shift in family function, along with the egalitarian philosophy that justified the Declaration of Independence, raised, for the first time in America, the problem of women's role.⁵ In one state, New Jersey, women were even enfranchised for approximately a decade, and everywhere what was then called "the woman question" was discussed. There were debates on the status of women; the need for female education; the nature of marriage; the rights women should have, privately and publicly. Finally, as if there were not already enough issues to trouble America's uncertain identity, the new nation early experienced sectarianism. The question of slavery began to divide South from North, while new settlements in the West felt little in common with the old colonies east of the Susquehanna that now claimed control of the western territories very much as England had claimed control of the Atlantic seaboard. No wonder the "United" States faced an identity crisis. The Republic was in its adolescence, a teen-age democracy replete with physical growing pains and social gaucheries.

As an example of the latter, we might now consider America's early ambivalent attitude towards "culture." Puritans had been suspicious of many of the arts and social graces; had maintained that these "frivolities" turned humans away from the much more important matter of attending to the question of their eternal salvation. That attitude persisted after Independence but with a different justification. Pragmatic Yankees condemned that which was not materially serviceable, that which turned people away from the business of getting ahead in the world. Paradoxically enough, worldly success had been for the Puritans a sign of God's grace, but now men like Franklin dismissed Puritanism precisely because it was not immediately "useful." So culture continued to be suspect unless it served obvious utilitarian ends—was overtly didactic and fostered accepted moral, social, spiritual, or nationalistic goals. Poetry continued to fit the bill, but the novel—*fiction*—proved difficult to justify. The very word "fiction" conjured up the notion of inveracity (a clear violation of the Ninth Commandment). And Henry Fielding's definition of the novel—"a comic epic in prose"—did not placate American critics who were none too certain about the merits of either comedy or epics. For such reasons the novel drew the public censure of a number of prominent Americans who, one would imagine, should have been too busy to worry about such things. Noah Webster took time out from writing dictionaries, Timothy Dwight from running Yale, and Thomas Jefferson from presiding over a nation to pen

attacks against the novel. A host of lesser critics also entered into the fray and condemned the suspect form.⁶

In spite of such censure (or possibly because of it), fiction thrived in the New Republic. But that fiction did have to make certain accommodations to its critics. For example, nearly every novel written in America before 1815 either pleads the factuality of its plot, the utility of its story (which extolls American and/or Christian behavior), or the morality of its conclusion. Sometimes, of course, the novels themselves do not bear out the justifying claims that they advance in their Prefaces. Yet those Prefaces still effectively illustrate the way in which these early novelists attempted to juggle both the overt demands placed upon them and the commercial objectives they attempted to achieve. In short, it was early difficult to be both popular and good. At the same time, the first novel readers in America also had an obvious taste for true fictions, a taste which has persisted throughout the nineteenth century and even into the present (witness the current vogue of the "documentary novel" as exemplified by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* or Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*). The first novel written in America, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) is just such a non-fiction novel. It is a *roman à clef* only slightly disguised. Because Brown so obviously exploited a story of seduction and incest that provided the then current gossip of Boston high society, his novel was eventually withdrawn from circulation. The full facts of its suppressing are still not known, but all evidence suggests that the real subjects of the supposed fiction successfully convinced Brown (or perhaps Brown's publisher) that it would be best not to distribute the book.⁷ Hardly an auspicious beginning for the American novel.

Even a novel like *The Power of Sympathy*, however, can serve to document the symbols designed to educate the first American novel readers who also happened to be the first citizens of the new United States. For all the scurrilousness of its plot and the gossip-mongering of its contents, *The Power of Sympathy* claims to serve two valuable ends. The book will promote the ideal of female education; it will warn of the "specious causes and the fatal Consequences, of SEDUCTION."⁸ Neither claim should be surprising. Because of the critical climate of the time, such promises were almost a precondition for publishing. And neither are these promises *pro forma*. Harriet should have been smarter. Several subplots, all ending in ignominious death, do illustrate the final fate of the fallen. Female education in the early American Republic was deplorable. A young woman (if her family was affluent) might be taught to read but often she could not write, and she definitely was not taught to think independently, to consider herself responsible for her own state in life. A man would take care of that problem, which meant that a woman had to be—and continue to be—worthy of her "protector."⁹ In this sense, seduction novels were almost mercantile fables, for they demonstrated the high price paid by those who allowed themselves to become, according to the double standards of the time, damaged goods. There was, furthermore, a social dimension to this same domestic lesson. Post-Revolutionary New England cities and towns, we are now discovering, suffered from a dearth of men.¹⁰ The male population had been depleted first by war, then by westward expansionism.

There simply were not enough "husbands" to go around, a problem in a society that scorned the unmarried woman. The contemporary novels, in one respect, were manuals on how to survive in a situation where the odds definitely favored the "seducer" and not the uneducated, vulnerable, and sometimes desperate young woman.

I would argue that we cannot judge these early books by our present sophisticated standards of literature. To do so requires that we dismiss them as "trashy" novels. Yet they were much more than late eighteenth-century Harlequin romances, tales of only fantasy and escape. The books, like the fledgling feminist movement of the time, did raise real questions about marital relations and the usual values by which women were supposed to live. Demographic considerations precluded marriage for many women of the time, and the portraits of so many unappealing men that fill the seduction novels in part consoled women for that fact. And certainly extramarital sex was not worth the risk involved. Thus the basic sentimental recipe: illicit relationship, pregnancy, abandonment, alienation from community and family, poverty, and usually death in childbirth. Of course sentimental novelists were not all of a piece. Conservative writers like S.S.B.K. Wood and Helena Wells stressed traditional standards and advocated the old ideal of frail femininity. To be purely and properly maidenly would presumably evoke the protective instincts of some good man. But other writers such as Judith Sargent Murray (herself a notable feminist) and Tabitha Tenney questioned those views and showed how heroines could be capable on their own behalf. One of these early novelists, Hannah Webster Foster, was still more radical. Her *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797), certainly one of the best of these fictions, suggests that Eliza Wharton's proper suitor Reverend Boyer, as much as her intended seducer, Major Sanford, is a vain, shallow, and selfish man. There is not much to recommend the one over the other. But a fall still proves fatal. The essential lesson of the sentimental is finally advocated in this novel too, even though (to return to my earlier metaphor) *The Coquette* as a roller coaster ride comes dangerously close to jumping the track.¹¹

The sentimental novel, particularly in its seduction form, was one of the first types of fiction to become established in America. It was soon followed by the Gothic novel which also early became immensely popular. Interestingly enough, the Gothic is a "test case" novel too. The form traditionally centers on a female protagonist who is subjected to a series of trials and tribulations. But those trials were no longer primarily sexual, for the Gothic heroine is typically tested by an encounter with the seeming or the actual supernatural. In novels by Charles Brockden Brown or Isaac Mitchell, for example, the protagonist's strength of character is at issue. Her rationality and her capability are measured in situations that definitely are not quotidian. The Gothic, in this respect, enlarged the sphere of reference of American fiction. As I have argued elsewhere: "Action expanded from the narrow circle of the drawing room, to the great house, to the bare expanse of wilderness, and, most important, to regions of the mind not invoked in the usual sentimental test. Furthermore, Gothic novels allowed the female characters much greater latitude in the larger fictional landscape they also helped to create. The typical sentimental heroine could do little

more than refrain from 'falling,' whereas the heroine of the early American Gothic would generally act independently and even be capably assertive in her own defense and on her own behalf."¹² The Gothic is thus more a psychological test than a moral one. It centers on the qualities of the protagonist and not the manners of the society. Indeed, the decrepit Old World castles that commonly provided the setting for the early Gothic would seem to have little place in the New World.

Nonetheless, these Gothic novels do set forth a social message. The seducer, in sentimental fiction, was often British or, at least, an American who aped British manners and tastes. In the Gothic too the villain frequently comes from the same background. Sometimes he is European, as is Carwin in the best of these novels, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798). Sometimes he merely tries to be European. Thus the evil Bloomfield in Isaac Mitchell's *The Asylum* (1811) is an American landowner who aspires to be an English aristocrat. With these villains—sentimental or Gothic—the underlying iconography is quite clear. Whether they are European or would-be-Europeans, they represent the aristocratic values of the Old World that have supposedly been repudiated by the Revolution but that still threatens to undermine the new country. An obvious national allegory emerges. The heroine (again, sentimental or Gothic) can stand for America—young, innocent, threatened. This allegory, however, more naturally inhered in the Gothic, for the Gothic heroine, as earlier observed, was more capable than the sentimental heroine and typically survived her trials. A surprising number of these novels are even set at the time of the Revolution, which renders the social meaning all the more clear. The denouement of the plot corresponds with the end of the war, the establishment of the new nation. America and the heroine both triumph. Yet this social dimension was still limited. The Gothic novel could extoll an American victory in a war that had already been won. The New World-Old World, good versus bad polarity of this fiction, however, meant that it could not easily serve to address the national questions that arose after independence from Europe had been assured.

A third type of fiction that soon became popular in early America, the picaresque, was, however, flexible enough to accommodate many of the problems of the time. Less structured and more discursive than most forms of fiction, the picaresque has always readily facilitated a critical appraisal of the society in which it is set. Political questions, especially, had little place in the narrow sentimental world of threatened domesticity. And neither could some apprehensive maiden convincingly ponder problems of state while preternatural danger loomed in the shadows of the Gothic doorway. An Americanized version of the picaresque could do what these other forms could not accomplish; it allowed important social issues of the historical moment to be fictionally assessed. As Frederick Montoser has noted, the picaresque form, which originated in the chaotic and conflict-ridden world of sixteenth-century Spain, has continued to flourish in ages of social anxiety.¹³ As I have already pointed out, America, soon after the Revolution, suffered from a good deal of anxiety. So the picaresque novel, too, was soon at home in the New World.

The picaresque in America was sentimentalized, Americanized, tamed. But it still

retained the essential qualities that had first been evinced in sixteenth-century Spain, then in seventeenth-century France and Germany, and slightly later in eighteenth-century England. It will be recalled that the picaro in the early European novels is typically poor, frequently a servant, often a foundling, always a sharper. He swindles and connives, however, in order to survive in a society that is itself corrupt and corrupting. The reader is encouraged to sympathize with the prankster protagonist against the more systematic evils of the society. We admire the amoral ingenuity that allows this character to counter his privileged antagonists and the immoral legalities whereby they hope to keep him in his place. In short, the picaresque is populist by design and was admirably suited to a new nation which at least preached democratic principles. Yet while the picaresque favors the underdog, it also demonstrates that the uneducated can be gulled (a message of the sentimental novel) and that the unwary can be abused (a basic point in Gothic fiction). On this level, the theme of the picaresque can be inverted, as Hugh Henry Brackenridge clearly demonstrates, to become a warning against the vulnerability of a government run democratically by a sometimes gullible populace. So here too the picaresque allows for a more complex double vision of society than did either the sentimental or the Gothic.

There is still another way in which the picaresque permits a wider vision. Whether we are reading Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism*, Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, or the first half (the picaresque portion) of Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*, the representative picaro stands for not the norm, or the abnormal, but rather the possibilities that always exist in life—although sometimes it takes a con man to perceive those possibilities. The reader, encouraged by the form of the novel to identify with the protagonist and to participate in his or (occasionally) her misadventures, is, in effect, required to view the society through the critical eyes of the picaro. It is not then surprising that the picaresque was particularly appealing during the time of America's adolescence. It is the most "rebellious" of the early fictional forms. A pleading for better female education, for prudence in the face of possible seduction, for caution and rationality when encountering the supernatural and the irrational, is replaced by a desire for "adventures." Sometimes those adventures are serious business. Not always, however. By and large, it was the picaresque form that opened the novel for comedy, fun, escapism—and also provocative social questioning. With the early picaresque, American fiction had not yet reached its confident maturity. But it was beginning to come of age, as the following brief assessment of Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* should amply demonstrate.

III. *Modern Chivalry*

Should we see Captain John Farrago and Teague O'Regan as two different picaresque heroes in search of a national identity or two concepts of a national identity in quest of a credible and creditable American symbolic hero? To state the problem either way is not to overstate the case. Indeed, *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), the turn-of-the-century novel in which these two characters appear, attempted to address precisely those questions of identity which most disturbed a Republic that had only

recently declared its independence. Through satire, crude burlesque, and even occasional slapstick comedy, Hugh Henry Brackenridge sought to strengthen the fledgling nation by warning it of where its weaknesses might lie. His novel was widely read. Its broad humor almost guaranteed popularity in a time when novel-reading itself was a national obsession comparable to contemporary television viewing. And once Brackenridge had the attention of his American audience, he used his comically engrossing plot to convey a moral both didactic and patriotic—a message which operated on a much larger social level (not inappropriate in a book of some eight hundred pages) than did the meanings advanced in the sentimental or the Gothic.

Brackenridge's two protagonist-antagonists must really be considered jointly, for Captain Farrago and his servant, O'Regan, are conjoined together in perpetual partial conflict. Thus they comprise, themselves, an uneasy republic. It is a very small republic, with a population of just two, but the issues here are the same as those that preoccupied America at the time. What are the responsibilities of the rulers; the rights of the ruled; and what sort of commonwealth should they jointly strive to achieve? We should also notice that, taken together, these two characters represent the two strands of the picaresque tradition which I have already discussed—its populist proclivities, as well as its warnings that the populace too can be duped. Attempting to lean in both directions, the novel, at times, seems simply self-divided. But a careful assessment of Brackenridge's incongruities suggests that the reader, *like the good citizen*, is supposed to resolve what first seem to be undermining inconsistencies and intolerable contradictions. The aim, in short, is the achieving of a higher harmony.

As an example of the process I am describing, let us turn now to a passage late in the book. Captain Farrago would rid himself of his servant. It is a promise or a threat that he regularly makes and just as regularly fails to execute. But there is more to this scene than the obvious conservative ethos that the Captain advocates—an ethos admirable in some respects but not quite attuned to this character's "present" world. Before we dismiss the Captain as a Ronald Reagan before his time, we should notice the terms with which he expresses his half-considered judgment:

You may have my bog-trotter. . . . I am pretty well tired of bothering myself with him. . . . I have had as much trouble on my hands with him as Don Quixotte [sic] had with Sancho Panza; and I cannot but acknowledge as some say, that I have resembled Don Quixotte myself, at least in having such a bog-trotter after me. . . . But I hope I shall not be considered as resembling that Spaniard in taking a windmill for a giant; a common stone for a magnet that can attract, or transmute metals. *It is you that are the Don Quixottes in this respect*, madcaps, and some of you from the madcap settlement . . . tossing up your caps at every turn, for a new constitution; not considering that when a thing gets in the way of changing, it will never stop until it gets to the end of liberty, and reaches despotism, which is the bourne from whence

no traveller returns. (*italics added*)¹⁴

As Joseph H. Harkey has pointed out, the numerous similarities between *Modern Chivalry* and Cervantes' novel are mostly superficial.¹⁵ So it is not particularly incongruous that the later protagonist regards his literary ancestor as a deceived fool. Captain Farrago is not, in the English sense, a Quixotic character and does not approve of the Spanish Don's delusory quest for perfection. Moreover, he suspects that many of his countrymen are also engaged in a foolish searching for a hopeless ideal. The countenance of the Captain is woeful precisely because he has met so many of these latter day Quixotes—not because he himself is seeking to fulfill an impossible dream. Because of these other more questionable Quixotes, the Captain's whim of dismissing O'Regan soon passes into a Jeremiad addressed to Americans who would change the Constitution on a whim. He warns: "I would not be surprized, if some of you should have your necks in the guillotine, before a fortnight. . . . This happened in the French revolution, and it will happen with you if you give way to your reveries" (p. 784). His reference to the French Revolution, an example of revolution run wild that readily served to silence all early American advocates of further political reform, is obviously a final argument against the kind of "foolishness" that Farrago has repeatedly condemned. Opposing reform, the Captain regularly proffers a different solution to the political questions of the day. His advice is always simple: accept, be moderate, trust those who rule to rule wisely, and avoid the chaos of revolution gone mad or the harsh order that a Napoleon would impose.

Again and again Captain Farrago denounces what he perceives he has encountered—backwoods ignorance, pretentious American intellectualism, the hypocrisy of religion, the pitfalls of sentimentality. The foil and perpetual recipient of his orations is his servant, Teague O'Regan. O'Regan is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the American Dream and of the democratic ideal that anybody—even an illiterate immigrant—can succeed in the New World. He is unscrupulous but ambitious, uneducated but convinced that his lack of education does not handicap him in the pursuit of success. More to the point, those whom Farrago and O'Regan meet during the course of their wanderings almost always share the servant's point of view and are ready to help him rise in the world. O'Regan is nearly elected to the legislature, almost inaugurated into the American Philosophical Society, just about ordained a Presbyterian minister, and even comes close to being named chief of the Kickapoo Indians. He is prevented from achieving these and other distinctions only by the intervention of Farrago who, proponent of order and rationality, regards the sundry honors showered on his servant as so many gross miscarriages of justice that a man of honor must set right. Regularly the master masters the ambition of the man.

It is at this point that Brackenridge's plot thickens and his theme expands. O'Regan fails too frequently to be the traditional picaro who calls into question the structure of his society. Mostly the society, through the agency of Captain Farrago, prevails. Is the Captain then the hero, a protagonist whose actions authenticate the elitist standards to which his class adheres? The book has often been read in this

fashion, but I will here argue that such a reading simplifies all that is subtle in *Modern Chivalry*. Briefly, although Captain Farrago is often partly right, he is also generally priggish, often mistaken, and invariably dull. At fifty-three, a bachelor with little experience in life, he has set out to discover the world. But his "education" merely confirms his former prejudices. In fact, for eight hundred pages he views his fellow citizens with a mechanical misanthropy and never considers the possibility that an illiterate man might be wise or a poor person prudent. His attitude towards others is unremittingly patronizing. Lawmakers in Philadelphia, he would insist, have only the best interests of the populace at heart, even though that populace consists mostly of "uppity" provincials who do not even merit their betters' concern. His views are too simplistic, too "reactionary" to be satisfactory.

Furthermore, as Robert Hemenway points out, Farrago's practice continually compromises his theory.¹⁶ If reason and justice require that O'Regan be forestalled, they certainly never achieve that objective. Again and again we see Farrago expounding to citizens and servants who remain unswayed by his rational pronouncements. To achieve his ends the Captain must play the confidence man himself in order to prevent his conniving servant from conning the public. Farrago then addresses the crowd on its own terms—using *ad hominem* arguments; hysterical rhetoric; appeals to fear, vanity, and small-mindedness. Or he takes O'Regan aside to explain the real issues, as when Teague is about to be sent to Congress. This particular incident perfectly exemplifies the Captain's self-serving logic:

When a man becomes a member of a public body, he is like a racoon, or other beast that climbs up the fork of a tree; the boys pushing at him with pitch-forks, or throwing stones, or shooting at him with an arrow, the dogs barking in the mean time. . . . They will have you in the newspapers, and ridicule you as a perfect beast. There is what they call the caricature; that is, representing you with a dog's head, or a cat's claw. . . . I would not for a thousand guineas, though I have not the half of it to spare, that the breed of O'Regans should come to this; bringing on them a worse stain than stealing sheep; to which they are addicted. You have nothing but your character, Teague, in a new country to depend upon. Let it never be said, that you quitted an honest livelihood, the taking care of my horse, to follow the new fangled whims of the time, and to be a statesman. (p. 17)

Teague is convinced. Farrago succeeds in his purpose. Ironically, he succeeds as the traditional picaro would succeed—by his wits. Here, as elsewhere, a specious argument does the trick. Irrationality prevails—even in the name of reason. Moreover, that irrationality springs from the man who elsewhere rationally argues for the rule of rationality. And one of Brackenridge's main points here becomes even clearer. Humans are often foolish and inconsistent, always imperfect. By their very nature,

then, they cannot join together to form a perfect republic. The best that can be achieved is a system of balances whereby countering limitations can be held in check, a type of union that will make the whole greater than the sum of its imperfect parts. Indeed, in the novel, as a whole, both the Captain and the servant would be much less if deprived of each other.

Numerous other incidents confirm this argument that neither man represents the whole picture; that both are heroes, both anti-heroes. Brackenridge uses an established fictional form to a different purpose. He seems to suggest that there will always be shallow hucksters like Teague O'Regan, always hypocritical moralists like Captain Farrago. Neither alone supplies the nation with an adequate identity nor can they be dismissed, like the fallen women of sentimental fiction, as examples of what *not* to be. Taken together—as is necessary in a democracy—they can comprise something like a nation and provide a pattern basic for the larger nation.

The twenty-five year period over which *Modern Chivalry* was written and published was an important one for an upstart nation which itself tilted in two directions simultaneously. But the author seems to be ultimately optimistic that the tension will provide equilibrium, not instability. Finally, Brackenridge's two partial picaros, through their actions and attitudes, balance the conflicting claims of an earlier Hamiltonian Federalism and an emerging Jacksonian democracy. The balance worked, as the survival of America attests. It worked because, at this difficult time, Americans succeeded in learning to be "Americans." In that task they were assisted in no small measure by a popular literature that was rapidly adapted to encoding the emerging values of a new society. In this sense, the earlier popular literature is, in its way, more representative of America than is even the classic literature of the mid-nineteenth century, the American Renaissance, that still predominantly claims our critical attention.

NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 10. My colleague, Russel B. Nye, first suggested to me that Geertz's theory of culture might be applied to the formula theory of popular culture.
2. Geertz, p. 12.
3. For a full discussion of the formula theory of popular fiction, see John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), ch. 4.
4. The historians of the New Republic have long documented the various social ills that troubled Americans in the late eighteenth century. A standard, but still reliable, discussion is Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (1930; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1942).
5. Cf. Marguerite Fisher, "Eighteenth-Century Theorists of Women's Liberation," and Ralph Ketcham, "The Puritan Ethic in the Revolutionary Era: Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson," in *Remember the Ladies: New Perspectives on Women in American History*, ed. Carol V. R. George (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 39-47 and pp. 49-65, respectively. See also Mary Sumner Benson, *Women in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1935).
6. For detailed assessments of the American critical attitude towards fiction see G. Harrison

- Orians' "Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines, 1789-1810," *PMLA* 52 (1927), 195-214; Ormond E. Palmer, "Some Attitudes Toward Fiction in America to 1870, and a Bit Beyond," Diss. Univ. of Chicago, 1952, ch. 3; and William Charvat, *The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1936), especially chs. 2 and 7.
7. William S. Kable includes an excellent discussion of the publishing history of this novel in his edition of *The Power of Sympathy* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1969), pp. xv-xxvi.
 8. *The Power to Sympathy*, p. 3.
 9. On the other hand, marriage was no legal shelter for the woman of the late eighteenth-century, as novels like Susanna Rowson's *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795) and S. S. B. K. Wood's *Dorval, or the Speculator* (1801) amply attest. For full discussions of women's legal rights both before and after matrimony, see Richard B. Morris, "Women's Rights in Early American Law," in *Studies in the History of American Law*, ed. Richard B. Morris (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1930), pp. 126-200; and, more recently, Mary Beard, *Woman as Force in History* (New York: Collier, 1962), ch. 6.
 10. Quantificational historians have recently begun to revise the old view that men outnumbered women in the late eighteenth century. An excellent example of the new research being done in this area is Alexander Keyssar's "Widowhood in Eighteenth-century Massachusetts: A Problem in the History of the Family," *Perspectives in American History*, 8 (1974), 83-119.
 11. I know of only one early American novel where a fall from feminine virtue goes unpunished. In William Hill Brown's second novel, *Ira and Isabella; or the Natural Children* (1807), the spunky seductress Lucinda goes on to lead a happy life, despite her sexual transgressions. But *Ira and Irabella* is also a playful satire of the sentimental novel.
 12. Quoted from "Isaac Mitchell's *The Asylum; or, Gothic Castles in the New Republic*," forthcoming (1980), *Prospects: A Journal of American Cultural Studies*.
 13. Frederick Monteser, *The Picaresque Element in Western Literature* (University, Alabama: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1975), chp. I.
 14. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, ed. Claude M. Newlin (New York: American Book Company, 1937), p. 783. Subsequent references to this edition of the novel will be cited parenthetically within the text.
 15. Joseph H. Harkey, "The *Don Quixote* of the Frontier: Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*," *Early American Literature*, 8, no. 2 (Fall 1973), 192-303.
 16. Robert Hemenway, "Fiction in the Age of Jefferson: The Early American Novel as Intellectual Document," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 9 (1968), 91-102.

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Modern Chivalry and the Origins of American Fiction

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The noted speculative anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, suggests that culture is a kind of “control mechanism” for human behavior. Symbols, in particular, become a “template” for action, a template that persists after the individual perceiver dies and thus provides continuity between persons and across generations. Popular or mass culture is one of the most obvious, pervasive, and systematic sources of the symbols that form the template for human action in a complex society such as the United States. More particularly, America’s first fiction—which was both “popular” and “serious”—early served as a mechanism for teaching Americans how to be Americans. Writers like William Hill Brown, Susanna Rowson, Hannah Webster Foster, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge both mirrored the values of the new American Republic and, more important, helped to systematize, symbolize, and thus solidify the uncertain identity of the shaky Republic.

Three kinds of fiction were especially popular in the years immediately following the Revolutionary War. Each of these forms was borrowed from an already existing English or European model but each was also altered to suit the values of the emerging United States. Sentimental fiction attempted to guide the moral and social values of new Americans by presenting “test cases” in the arena of seduction. Invariably in these books, (female) virtue was rewarded and (female) vice was punished. The second form was also built around a central test. But in Gothic fiction the test is psychological and epistemological, not moral and social. Again the protagonist is typically female. Again this female represents the “daughters of United Columbia” and even Columbia herself. But in Gothic fiction the test is usually passed. In the third fictional form, the picaresque, tests are regularly—and rather blithely—failed. The mood turns from the high seriousness of the earlier forms to comedy, social satire, and political parody. Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s massive picaresque novel, *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), postulates an ideal Republic but an ideal firmly grounded in the very real limitations of human beings. The novel warns simultaneously against reactionary politics and revolutionary aspirations. Through the contrasting personalities of Captain John Farrago and his servant, Teague O’Regan, Brackenridge balances the conflicting claims of an earlier Hamiltonian Federalism and an emerging Jacksonian democracy. (CND)