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# The Culpability of Fiction: Readings and Reception of Charles Brockden Brown

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# The Culpability of fiction: readings and reception of Charles Brockden Brown

"He affected to conceal nothing." - *Ormond*

The fervor over the cultural atom bomb that was Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* crossed the Atlantic thanks to Benjamin Franklin's printing press. The story of 16-year-old servant Pamela Andrews who maintains her virtue against Mr. B's advances found its way to readers from nearly all social strata. Not surprisingly, public reception of the novel differed in accordance with class, and education, but by the early decades of the nineteenth century reception depended largely on those who were writing publications about literature. For example, in 1825, a short story entitled, "THE FAMILY JOURNAL: A Country Lodging," in the *Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* portrays a charwoman as holding *Pamela* in high regard while an intellectual man shows disdain for such outdated writing. Even later in 1862, a religious periodical, *Zion's Herald*, notes that *Pamela* is still quite popular, but younger readers could misread it quite easily because of Richardson's engaging epistolary narrative. Young readers might have misread the novel by focusing on the racy scenes in which Mr. B rather aggressively tries to coerce Pamela into marriage rather than the message of virtue presumably embodied by Pamela's resistance to such overtures. Regardless of its actuality, the theory of *Pamela* argued by the literary crowd around 1825 held that the reader was responsible both for the types of books he or she chose as well as the way in which he or she read them. In other words, novels in themselves were no longer held to be dangerous to the minds of readers. On the contrary, the readers were now responsible for dealing with the fictional representations in novels.

Based on these observations of *Pamela*'s reception, I found that the locus of culpability for the dangers of the novel moved from the novel itself to its readers sometime after the 18th century, at least insofar as the intelligentsia were concerned. While noting the tendency of the earlier readers to hold the author accountable for reader impact, I would like to investigate how the locus of culpability shifted from author to reader as evidenced by the reception of a novel that "call[ed] into question the Enlightenment's persistent concern to define itself?" (Davidson 224). The intellectual elite manifests this concern through its clear effort to classify/situate a text and its reader's reaction through reviews and theories of fiction. Through an analysis of Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond; The Secret Witness*, the criticism surrounding his works, and his critical essays, I will render a scheme of the tastes and prescriptions of Brown's literary reviewers that confirms the hypothesis generated out of *Pamela*'s reception: according to the literary class, by the 1820s the reader was responsible for the personal repercussions of reading novels. The concern over dangerous books was no longer pressing because the novel had become a conventional genre in literature, an established genre with conventions widely recognized by both professional and recreational readers.

Since an account of the "average reader's" response to Brown's works is virtually inaccessible, I can only talk about what the intellectuals *writing* about the collective/general response to Brown's works and their commentary on this general audience reception. Our access to the general readership, then, comes through prescriptions by the elite intellectuals for how the representative "everyman" reader should be reading Brown and how the elites represented the regular reader. In writing about Brown, the basic difference between British and American intellectuals seems to be whether his own countrymen properly appreciated him. In an anonymous review of William Dunlap's biography of Brown in the *North American Review*, the

writer claims, without pointing to evidence, that Brown's American readers "discerned his merits without waiting till a foreign glory had shone on and revealed them" ("ART. V.--The Life of Charles Brockden Brown. "). The reviewer's opinion of Brown's status gives us insight to some of his reactions to the more difficult traits of Brown's fiction. The writer makes general claims about Brown's style and then discusses these claims as they appear in Brown's first four novels. In discussing the novels, the writer asserts universal responses to certain features, often using "we" to represent the readers. His diction presumes what he writes must be true for every reader of Brown's works.

While noting that reader responses might actually have been different from this writer's presentation, one can still see what his claims say about how readers were *supposed* to respond to Brown's works as conceived by the literary arbiters in America. For example, the writer describes the general climax of Brown's novels as if they will be read in one manner when he writes, "And the attention is so much engrossed, the imagination is so filled by what is passing now, that we care not for its connection, if there be any with the past or future…" (ART V). The writer suggests his imagination is at the whims of the writer. He almost seems to support a lack of control in the reader's reception. One could think this means that culpability is with the novelist. However, the passive voice suggests that his imagination and therefore all readers' imaginations are opened up to Brown's plot due to his style of writing. The passive voice suggests that the scenes passing in front of this reviewer are activating his imagination. He does not intimate that there is any possibility for immoral behavior due to such engrossed reading. Instead, one can see that he is presenting a mode of reading. The proper way to read depends on the ability of the reader to extract sentiments from what the novelist puts forth using one's ability of imagination and attention.

The *NAR* reviewer asserts a philosophy of reading which places the responsibility in the reader's faculties like imagination, fancy, and sympathy. Any credit given by this writer to Brown for causing these responses is only intended to assert his connoisseurship or entice more people to read Brown. It is as if talking about how he was moved by the novel is proof of his imaginative faculties at work. He gives more evidence that the responsibility is with the reader when he writes, "Brown's principal characters are designed chiefly for our imaginations and ingenuity" (ART V). Though the author creates the characters, this writer asserts that abilities of the reader are required to appreciate these creations. Using Brown's engrossing descriptions of American scenes, the writer shows how the reader responds: "…all appear before our eyes; the imagination has nothing to do but perceive, though it never fails to multiply and enlarge circumstances of horror and to fasten us to the picture… by increasing terror and sympathy…" (ART V). Here, he places the agency in the reader's faculties by showing that the faculties themselves are the sources of an emotional response to textual descriptions. The *imagination* causes the audience to identify with the characters, thereby intensifying the resultant emotions. Soon after, the writer seems to give a problematic analysis of Brown's description in *Edgar Huntly*, writing, "It produces the liveliest sense of danger and oppresses the spirits with an almost inexplicable sadness" (ART V). One can accommodate this passage to those above. It would seem the description, the novel, "produces" a response in the reader in this passage, but what does the producing? The description, though created by Brown, cannot *do* anything without the activation of the imagination. In the philosophy of reading espoused by this writer, the locus of responsibility is with the reader and his or her abilities like imagination, sympathy, and sensibility. He seems to support a dialogical view of reading. The writer creates that which the

reader actively responds to with his or her imagination. How, then, might the early nineteenth century American reader acquire these skills?

A look at Brown's contemporary, William Godwin's, "Letters of Advice to a Young American" suggests how an intellectual might recommend the young male student of America to become intellectual themselves. However, one cannot blindly take him at his word. For, this is a document with an intended public readership in mind. By noting the intention to release it to the public, one can read these letters as a general prescription of tastes from England to America. From 1818, Godwin's "Letters" is unique in that its purpose is not merely to suggest a means to becoming a good reader. Godwin contends that becoming a moral person is implied in becoming a better reader. "The noblest part of man is his moral nature," Godwin writes (172). For Godwin, the goal of man is to cultivate a moral sensibility. Morality depends "upon our putting ourselves in the place of another, feeling his feelings, and apprehending his desires…" (172). His description of the golden rule is the same reading skill, sympathy, displayed by the biography reviewer above. One's education should aim to increase the imaginative capacities as opposed to learning facts about man. He posits, "…cultivating our moral sentiments, will consist in our studying the best models…" (Godwin 172). He implies that the models one ought to study and imitate can only be found in literature. So the purpose of these "Letters" is to give Americans the means to achieving sound, sympathetic morals. He works his syllogism backwards from morality. Morality depends on sympathetic identification. Sympathetic identification depends on the imaginative faculties. The imagination depends on one's education. Lastly, one's education depends on models one imitates through books. Literature, then, is the foundation for morality. By reducing Godwin's paradigm, one might argue that books are essentially the cause of morality and therefore books like *Pamela* can cause virtuous behavior. I would counter that

Godwin, as well as others in the literary class, promote the idea that it is necessary for the reader to intellectually interact with those books to attain such a notion of morality. It seems that the mediation of the reader's mind is essential in this early nineteenth century theory of fiction. This introduces the notion of morality as tied to intellectual faculties.

Godwin gives the young American many different genres of literature from which to find good models. The important part of his recommendations is that he espouses a theory of fiction in which the reader is responsible for the response to a work. For example, pontificating on Robert Southey's translation and abridgement of *Don Quixote,* he writes, "…if read with a deep feeling of its contents, and that high veneration for and strong sympathy with its hero, which it is calculated to excite in every ingenuous mind…" (173). Godwin espouses a certain *manner* in which one ought to read chivalric literature in order to promote the best possible moral sentiments. Like Benjamin Franklin, books are seen as instruments with which one can better oneself. However, in Godwin's opinion the use of books is towards moral improvement instead of for Franklin's industrious advantage.

Godwin's is not the only transatlantic theory of fiction concerning Brown's readership. An article from *The Athenaeum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines* in 1825 indicts the American public for neglecting Brown's genius during his lifetime and claims Brown's posthumous popularity for England, frankly writing, "He would never have been heard of, but for us" (359). Whether from a sense of jealousy or other motives, this writer seems to release his bias against the American literary crowd through his appraisal of Brown's works. On the three novels written after *Arthur Mervyn,* he generalizes, "all are full of perplexity, incoherence, and contradiction" (360). He continues finding issue with Brown for not being open with his intention, nor revealing any conclusive evidence. His issues with Brown's early works are in line

with what Cathy Davidson writes on the Gothic novel: “Rationality…explanation merely translates the locus of evil from the supernatural, the abstract, and the remote to the human, the personal, and the present” (224). In trying to rationalize a piece like *Ormond*, readers only create more terror for themselves. Brown leaves no tidy endings for his audience. Davidson corroborates, noting, ”Typically, nineteenth-century readers laid the blame for inconsistences at the author’s feet…” (246). The anonymous English writer calls out Brown in frustration, writing, “So—in *Ormond*—who *was* the secret witness? —to what purpose?” (360). This writer’s claim has to do with the Enlightenment’s tendency to rational deduction through sense observations. He read the book, but there is simply not enough evidence provided to derive a comprehensive reading on this novel. Without enough evidence to give him a full picture, the writer deduces a flawed picture, an incomplete novel. Again, one could explain this writer’s anger about Brown’s “curious box—broken to pieces,” by citing the Gothic novel’s challenge to “the primacy of the individual mind and the claims of reason” (361, Davidson 224). Many other writers interpreted Brown’s challenge as a fault in his early works, but what might this say about the culpability of fiction?

This writer’s incomplete reading leaves him feeling guilty, empty, and unfulfilled. It would seem likely that he would condemn the novel for causing an unfavorable ending. Describing the point after the climax of *Wieland*, he writes, “…you leave off, in a tease… ashamed of the concern, that you have shown—and quite in a huff with him…” (361). One can see this writer invests an intense emotional attachment and involvement in reading. The reader’s faculties like imagination and sympathy are used (this writer might say abused) by the vivid descriptions of unexplainable events. Davidson suggests why he might be feeling unfulfilled, writing, “Far more subtly…the Gothic resists ending even as it assumes the cloak of

conventional sentimental closure" (225). The Gothic's use of conventions from sentimental literature led this writer to get his hopes up by expecting some return for his involvement with the story. He seemingly has not yet learned to doubt representations in fiction. Another critic suggests, that the secret-witness motif "incriminates the reader for eavesdropping on dark scenes and dusky revelations" (86). This might explain his response, but is it still notable that he does not take revenge after such a reading. However, I contend that he does not hold the old theory that an author is culpable for his readers' responses: "You feel, after he has described a thing—and you have just been pouring over the description…as if you, yourself, had seen it…" (357). This second person "you" is the writer's way of describing his experience as representative of what all readers will experience. It works to establish the writer's credibility in reporting on fiction while attempting to appeal to a reader through this supposedly common experience. It is like a friend reporting how he or she felt while riding on a rollercoaster, but asserting that you will feel the exact same emotions during the double corkscrew. The writer reports that he was "pouring over" the novel. If one takes him at his word, there is evidence that close, involved reading with strong emotional faculties is the type espoused by the literary class in England. Even if one does not take him at his word, this type of reading is what he claims one *ought* to be practiced. Note that none of the authors have deterred others from reading Brown's works. They will go through the trouble to show the development of their sympathetic capability through his novels, but never will you find a critic regretting the reading on moral grounds, or condemning the novel as dangerous because of the quality of Brown's descriptive ability.

At this point, I would like to suggest some reasons for why these writers have referred to works of literature as activating their emotive faculties in the manners they chose to. First, one might use this way of description to merely talk about the qualities of Brown's fiction, thereby

fulfilling the most basic job of the critic. Additionally, one might write about fiction in this way to conform to his or her contemporaries' ideas about what fiction and reading are. Lastly, there is the cause of connoisseurship. The writers want to prove their superior taste as well as their ability to imagine and sympathize. One might want to show an elitist, insider appreciation for Brown before he became popular. The notable thing about this way of writing criticism and journalism is that nobody condemns Brown's fiction in the slightest. Despite the emotional sensations activated by Brown's novels, no one perceived any danger in the novel itself. A look at Ormond can show how Brown tries to frustrate the reader's rational capacities and where exactly these frustrated readings have their sources.

In *Ormond*, one can see Brown's cautioning of the Enlightenment tenet of reasoned deduction. Apparently, those who expected a conclusive ending, or even criticized Brown's writing talent as scattered or undeveloped, did not read closely enough. A telling passage is when Sophia Courtland, the narrator, precedes the final climax in Stephan Dudley's former house, writing, "Human approbation or censure can never be exempt from injustice, because our limited perceptions debar us from a thorough knowledge of any actions and motives but our own" (Brown 250). Preceding the final scene with such a claim does little to stifle its intensity. Brown argues that there can be no complete knowledge of another. He supplies the reader an ending with incomplete information, but one cannot help but seek order due to predilections for conclusion. Sophia's assertion here essentially debunks the efficacy of reason other than in self-knowledge. Even so, that Ormond can invade Constantia's inner thoughts suggests to the readers that perhaps nothing is wholly our own. Some critics suggest that the closing message from Sophia to I.E. Rosenburg is rather to the reader: "…you have been a witness," she says (Brown 276). Bill Christopherson argues that "the act of reading, like the act of writing, imbibes an aura

of guilt; becomes a shared conspiratorial adventure" (86). Certainly, the guilt felt by some writers above does not cause derision towards Brown's fiction. On the other hand, their reactions might be due to an unsettling of their beliefs about the world. One could suggest that the reader feels like Constantia when she says to Ormond, "What your purpose is, or whether you have any purpose, I am at a loss to conjecture…. you offer me not the means of deciding…" (Brown 261). Perhaps the critics could not be justified in condemning the novel because of the explicit cautioning of reason. Given the method of reading in the early nineteenth century, is it not surprising to find unrewarded readers. However, this response slightly changes as the century progresses.

In Margaret Fuller's article on reprints of Brown, she does not mention any charges of inconclusive endings, or even frustration. She praises Brown for his exploration of human nature and deep feelings of humanity. Her analysis extracts meaning from Brown's novels and applies it to the modern world of 1846. For example, writing of the calamities that happen to Brown's protagonists, she says, they "are but a representation of those powers permitted to work in the same way throughout the affairs of this world" (Fuller 473). She personally apologizes to Brown for those who have not read and appreciated his works due to an over concern with worldly gain. As the soul of America increases, so too will Brown's readership, "and many will yet sit down with thy Constantia to the meal and water on which she sustained her full and thoughtful existence, who could not endure the ennui of aldermanic dinners…" (Fuller 474). The sympathetic identification continues from twenty years earlier, but Fuller transports Constantia's meal to the timeless present. In reading and identifying with Constantia, one will be focusing on one's existence rather than superficial worldly concerns. Fuller's literature-as-food metaphor is even more effective because the literature actually contains a meal.  Contrasting Constantia's

sustenance in *Ormond*, to a political dinner in the present time, Fuller argues for literature as a means to explore the things that matter in the present time and to become more in tune with humanity. Reading *Ormond* and sitting down with Constantia to eat are things, Fuller argues, which can and should be done in future generations. Margaret Fuller takes as a given the type of reading recommended by William Godwin and others twenty-five years earlier. The change in novel culpability seen through *Pamela*'s reception continues in *Ormond*'s reception despite the manifold differences between the two novels.

Brown himself wrote literary criticism and edited magazines after he wrote his early Gothic novels. His essay, "FIELDING AND RICHARDSON" gives some insight to the perceived public tastes at the time, and might offer Brown's personal opinion of his audience. However, one must take caution in judging Brown's literary criticism. For, as Davidson notes, "there is a tendency among historians (literary or otherwise) to privilege the written record, to trust those documents that do survive to convey an unvarnished rendering of the truth…" (247). With this in mind, one must acknowledge first that Brown was writing anonymously, and second, that his opinions are most likely shaped to fit the conventions and demands of his editorial medium. Therefore, when he says that Richardson's epistolary novels, "though so amply and eloquently unfolding all the workings of the human heart and understanding, are tedious and redundant," one might conclude that the culpability of the novel has faded alongside the popularity of novels like *Pamela* (Weber 141). He goes on to describe Richardson's novels as "universally acknowledged to be the most powerful teachers of virtue and generosity that are extant" (Weber 142). Brown's recognition of universal consent to *Pamela* as a teacher is important because one can see that the culpability of the novel is still present in the nineteenth century (1804) but only in reference to Richardson's novels. He seems to be repeating the

common opinion of Richardson. Brown himself, as a literary critic, does not seem to promote Richardson's works, and he certainly does not qualify them as dangerous teachers. In another article written by Brown as a critic, he makes a relativist claim that applies to much of the findings in the posthumous reviews of his own fiction. He writes, "The works that suited former ages are now exploded by us" (Weber 143). He recognizes a change in literary taste that can account for the difficulty he had in gaining widespread popularity early on in his career. "The works that are now produced, and which accommodate themselves to our habits and taste, would have been utterly neglected by our ancestors…they…will fall into oblivion and contempt at some future time" (Weber 143). These comments suggest that popular writers accommodate themselves to the taste of the reading public. One could suggest that Brown's *Ormond,* in not conforming to common literary tastes, is an attempt to locate his literature as higher than the popular literature. In foregoing popular style, he could be asserting himself with timeless literature, which will never "fall into oblivion." Brown's recognition of the changing literary tastes in 1805 might have originated in the lack of response to his novels. The larger implication of his comments shows an intelligence and acceptance of changing literary tastes and changing writing styles, but on whether the popular fiction is of quality he does not comment.

Though *Pamela* was once seen as dangerous for the new narrative technique introduced by Richardson, Brown's literary criticism shows that those views are outdated, and the novel is no longer a threat to the reader. Instead, as critics of Brown's fiction support, the reader is culpable for the type of his or her readings. One can see that a certain method of reading and of *talking* about reading was conventional during the early nineteenth century. This method of reading is characterized by an active, engaged imagination and a sympathetic identification with the characters in the text. However, the method of talking about reading is multi-layered. Again,

while noting Davidson's problems with taking historical texts as truth, it is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for talking about Brown's fiction in the examples I have provided above. These critics are probably styling their criticism to fit certain goals and conventions. In these historical documents about Brown's fiction, one can be confident in the conclusions that are common and the criticisms that are omitted. The popular response covers the vivid descriptions and unexplainable occurrences in these novels. Also, there seems to be either a charge of flawed writing or an acceptance of Brown's "conclusion, typically neither open nor closed—but slightly ajar" (Davidson 225). More importantly, the things that are omitted by these critics give the most support to my claim. The critics, including Godwin, do not even hint at regret for reading novels. Nor do any people give warnings against certain types of literature, let alone Brown's novels. It seems that in adopting such an involved reading method, one implicitly accepts the potential emotions that could result. In come instances, one can see these intense emotions are a good sign. In the selections from *Ormond,* Brown's philosophy is discernable through the otherworldly fog, but there is no recourse for the reader when one is held accountable for any tainted feelings that result. Such a silent, invisible reader contract would fit right in with Brown's fiction.

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