"My Good Mamma": Women in *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Mervyn*

Leland S. Person Jr.

Studies in American Fiction, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring 1981, pp. 33-46 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.1981.0028*

"MY GOOD MAMMA": WOMEN IN *EDGAR HUNTLY* AND *ARTHUR MERVYN*

Leland S. Person, Jr.*

"Nothing has been more injurious" to mutual education than the "separation of the sexes," says the narrator of Charles Brockden Brown's *Alcuin* (1798). "They associate in childhood without restraint; but the period quickly arrives when they are obliged to take different paths. . . . All intercourse between them is fettered and embarrassed. On one side, all is reserve and artifice. On the other, adulation and affected humility."[1] Ostensibly a plea for women's rights, the dialogue in *Alcuin* nonetheless registers some uneasiness about the roles for women. Indeed, despite his thoroughgoing opposition to many arbitrary customs of marriage, the attitudes of Brown's major male characters toward marriage and women are extremely problematical. And even the narrator of *Alcuin* confesses to his friend, Mrs. Carter, that he would be "not a little surprized to hear of a woman proffering her services as president or senator" yet "might not refuse devotion to the same woman in the character of household deity" (pp. 39-40).

In this preference for such an idealized and passive image of woman, Brown of course anticipated such later American writers as Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and James; yet for Brown even the "household" image of woman as wife and mother had disturbing overtones. Even allowing for the Gothic conventions behind them, Brown's family portraits feature a surprising amount of violence: incest and murder, children's deaths, and the eruption of various other secret, repressed desires. In *Wieland* (1798), for example, Theodore murders his wife and children, while Clara fantasizes about being seduced or raped by her brother. In *Ormond* (1799), Constantia Dudley finally kills Ormond after he has caused the murder of her father. And in *Edgar Huntly* (1799), Clithero Edny kills Arthur Wiatte, a father surrogate, and then attempts Mrs. Lorimer's life, while Edgar himself kills numerous Indians and ultimately causes Clithero to frighten Mrs. Sarsefield into a miscarriage.[2]

*Leland S. Person, Jr., is an Assistant Professor of English at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne. His articles on American Literature have appeared in *American Literature*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *Emerson Society Quarterly*, and *Philological Quarterly*. He has recently completed a book entitled *Images of Women in American Fiction*.

But it is in *Arthur Mervyn* (1799, 1800) that such troublesome family relationships have their most profound expression. For Arthur views virtually every older male as a potential father and consistently fantasizes marriage with the latter's wife or daughter. In fact, Arthur views every significant female character as a potential mother or sister, persistently resists the image of woman-as-wife, and finally discovers in Achsa Fielding the "substitute" of his "lost mamma." Brown, moreover, couples his hero's feelings about experience and maturity with his radically ambivalent attitudes toward women. As a brilliantly subjectivized account of the problematical nature of woman for the male psyche, the novel becomes a prototype of many later American novels in its association of women and serious conflicts which men feel within themselves. Achsa Fielding is not only a European woman associated with the transforming potential of art, but a maternal figure who seems to threaten Arthur's sanity and creative power. Marriage to a new "mamma" severely restricts Arthur's growth toward maturity, provokes a lapse into insanity, and ultimately causes him to suspend narration of his story. In the process, Brown becomes the first major American novelist to adumbrate the opposition between women and art which would be developed so extensively by Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, and James.

As a number of critics have pointed out, one of the most fascinating aspects of Brown's fiction is his use of first-person narrators who are often unreliable. In his excellent analysis of *Arthur Mervyn*, for example, Patrick Brancaccio suggests that Brown attempts to "convey the ironic interplay between Arthur's conscious and unconscious motivation and the sense of bewilderment that results from the ambiguity of appearances." And in his provocative effort at a "just reading" of *Ormond*, Carl Nelson propounds a theory, equally applicable to Brown's other novels, that the fiction should be approached "through voice, uncovering the revelations of character and sensibility that he presents through his narrator in addition to or even in spite of her story."[3] Most critics agree, in fact, that each of the novels features a self-interested narrator whose story is designed to fulfill certain subjective needs. Both narrated by men, *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Mervyn* are especially good examples of Brown's sophisticated use of subjective narration; both consequently reveal a deep-seated male ambivalence toward family relationships. Together, they can be said to inaugurate the American male's fictional "flight from woman."[4]

The most striking instance of conflicts in attitudes toward women in *Edgar Huntly* occurs in Clithero Edny's narrative within a narrative. Clithero had been accepted into the family of the aristocratic

Euphemia Lorimer as a companion-servant to her son. But as her natural child grew increasingly debauched, Clithero assumed his place in the mother's affections and in her marital plans for her niece, Clarice. Though slightly displaced, the relationship between Clithero and Mrs. Lorimer (like that between Arthur Mervyn and Achsa Fielding) is clearly that of son to mother. Not only does Clithero boast of Mrs. Lorimer's "maternal regard" for him (IV, 41), but he refers to himself as "I, her son" (IV, 78). To confuse this Oedipal drama even further, Clarice grows into a virtual twin for her aunt and is "joined," by the latter's wish, with Clithero. And finally, when the malicious Arthur Wiatte, Clarice's father and Mrs. Lorimer's twin brother, returns to revenge himself upon the sister who has had him deported, he is killed by the jealous and protective Clithero, who admits that, had the "assailant been [his] father, the consequence would have been the same" (IV, 70). Like Ormond or Theodore Wieland, like Welbeck or Achsa Fielding's jealous husband, Wiatte clearly plays the part (in Clithero's imagination) of a tyrannical father-figure who menaces the desired image of the mother.

Clithero's story, and the reason for his flight to America, reaches its climax when he tries to murder Mrs. Lorimer herself. With Wiatte's death, Clithero seemingly absorbs his demonic energy; yet consistent with the divided feelings of a son, now that the man he views as father is out of the way, Clithero's primary concern is that Mrs. Lorimer's "smiles" will change to "scowling and reproaches [and] invectives" (IV, 78). Finally, in a fit of revenge against the mother who, he imagines, reproaches the murder of Wiatte, Clithero surrenders to a sudden impulse to stab the sleeping Mrs. Lorimer with a dagger. However, in a perfect stroke of imagery, attesting to the ambivalent nature of his desire, Clithero confesses his failure to Edgar. The "force" of his attack, he notes, was "spent upon the bed" (IV, 79).

Edgar Huntly, of course, rather than Clithero Edny, is the main character in Brown's novel, and Clithero's embedded story is most important for the subliminal effects it has on Edgar. Feeling radically confused, Edgar admits that his mind was "full of the images unavoidably suggested by this tale, but they existed in a kind of chaos, and not otherwise than gradually was [he] able to reduce them to a deliberate and methodical inspection" (IV, 87). But as Edgar thus attempts to evade the implications of Clithero's "tale," he comes to act out its most important meanings in his own life. His transformation from man of social promise to bloodthirsty savage is an Americanized version of Clithero's European experiences. Both characters, for example, adopt Sarsefield as a mentor and Mrs. (Lorimer) Sarsefield as a

substitute mother. Both become sleepwalkers and killers, and both are responsible for acts of jealous violence upon Mrs. Sarsefield.

Edgar's rediscovery of Sarsefield, his former schoolmaster, toward the end of the novel, precipitates a radical conflict of allegiance; for Edgar it is a confrontation with the primary representative of the former life (and self) which he believed destroyed by his immersion in the wilderness. Whereas Clithero guided Edgar into the wilderness and the wellsprings of violence within the self, Sarsefield is the image of social authority and an advocate of the settled and married life. He is the foremost father figure in the novel, "the parent and fosterer of my mind," Edgar admits, "the companion and instructor of my youth" (IV, 230). To clarify his implicit opposition to the irrationality of the savage life, Sarsefield does not recognize Edgar in his wilderness condition. "My person was not instantly recognized," Edgar recalls. "He shrunk from my embrace as if I were an apparition or impostor" (IV, 231). Sarsefield thus causes Edgar to question his new identity and forces him to choose between two guides or models.

When Edgar finally decides to reestablish his relationship with Sarsefield, therefore, he must disjoin himself from Clithero. Because Sarsefield has treated him with "paternal tenderness, and insists upon the privilege of consulting for [his] interests as if he were [Edgar's] real father" (IV, 234), Edgar abandons his efforts to reclaim Clithero from the savage state into which he has fallen. Confirming the internal split which such renunciation entails, he reasons: "The better part of me was, then, safe" (IV, 234). To reinforce that action, Sarsefield announces his intention to adopt Edgar and observes that Mrs. Sarsefield "longs to embrace [him] as a son" (IV, 251). As a tacit condition of that new relationship, however, Edgar must completely exorcise Clithero, the bad son who has already tried to murder the mother (in bed). For as Sarsefield warns Edgar, "I will not occupy the same land, the same world, with him" (IV, 253). Brown's account of this reordering of family relationships is not yet over, on the other hand, because Edgar becomes the unwitting cause of the death of Sarsefield's other child. With the same psychological logic he had employed in *Wieland* (when Carwin caused Theodore Wieland's death and then disappeared), Brown has Clithero perform a similar "service" for Edgar by causing Mrs. Sarsefield to miscarry. Clithero, the demoniacal double, has all along desired to kill his foster mother, and when Edgar reveals the fact of her presence in America, he coincidentally sets in motion the events leading to the unborn child's death. "Thou hast once more let loose my steps," Clithero tells him, "and sent me on a fearful journey" (IV, 276).

When Edgar's narrative ends, he must listen passively to a venomous attack on his behavior in the form of a letter from Sarsefield. In a reestablishment of authority that suggests the final repression of a demonic alter ego, Sarsefield reports that Clithero has drowned himself: "He forced himself beneath the surface, and was seen no more" (IV, 280). Thus, in virtually a single act Edgar has succeeded, deliberately or not, in ridding himself of both Clithero and the potential sibling rival for the Sarsefields' attention. And with Clithero effectively buried in the fluid depths of the unconscious, Edgar can assume his place as the dutiful son of Mr. and Mrs. Sarsefield. Yet in the end the novel illustrates, as Dieter Schulz suggests, a "failure of social adjustment," or social adjustment at the cost of integrated selfhood: "The Indian episodes, the release of the dark self, remain unincorporated into the hero's awareness of himself and the world."[5] In addition, Edgar fails to acknowledge the ominous nature of his future relationship with the Sarsefields: his potential for fulfilling the terms of Clithero's tale of incest and attempted matricide. But if Arthur Mervyn can be considered another version of Edgar Huntly, then Brown himself was well aware of the problems inherent in such a mother-son relationship.

Even more than Edgar Huntly, the young Arthur Mervyn must negotiate relationships with women in the various roles of mother, sister, and wife. Indeed, while women remain a peripheral, if subliminally important, aspect of Edgar's experience, in *Arthur Mervyn* they provide a crucial test of the hero's maturity and manhood. Arthur must try to resolve contradictions in his attitudes toward three significant women: Clemenza Lodi (Thomas Welbeck's "niece"), Eliza Hadwin (for a brief time his own fiancée), and Achsa Fielding (whom he finally marries). Consistently, Arthur views each woman as if she were his mother or sister and thus feels acute anxiety about her fitness as a wife.

Although *Arthur Mervyn* is generally conceded to be a novel of initiation, one of the first things Arthur reveals about himself is that, along with the other children in his family, he lives under a mysterious curse from his mother.[6] His father, he says, "has had many children, but some defect in the constitution of our mother has been fatal to all but me. They died successively as they attained the age of nineteen or twenty, and, since I have not yet reached that age, I may reasonably look for the same premature fate" (II, 17). Remarkably, then, the hero of this initiation fable begins his narrative with the news that he is fated to die before he reaches his majority. To Arthur's mind, his natural mother becomes a barrier to experience and maturity; in the

terms of the novel, she forces upon her children a choice between perpetual adolescence and premature death.[7]

After his mother's death, however, Arthur acquires a second mother: Betty Lawrence, a "wild girl" (II, 18) with whom Arthur himself, according to the report of a neighbor, has been in love. Unlike his natural mother, whose memory is associated with stunted growth, Betty can be both a stepmother and a potential object of her "son's" maturing sexual desires. In fact, Betty expels Arthur from his home, in effect demanding that he achieve an independent manhood. Arthur's two mothers, then, bespeak a confused vision of women in general and the contradictory impulses which he feels within himself: one toward adolescent dependency and a kind of eternal youth, the other toward mature independence and the perils of experience.

This opposition in his attitude toward women haunts Arthur for most of the novel. In a bizarre scene on his first night in Philadelphia, for example, he finds himself in a bedroom closet, observing a mysterious sequence of events involving a baby and its mother—or two mothers. Speculating wildly on what he perceives, Arthur convinces himself that the woman who conceived and bore the child is different from the woman who is being encouraged (by the father) to suckle it. As much as Clithero Edny's attempted murder of Mrs. Lorimer, Arthur's experience suggests a displaced enactment of some primal scene, but here tellingly altered by the child's imagination to preserve the purity of the mother. For according to Arthur's fabulation, the wife is surprised to discover the child in her bed and only after some time is persuaded to "take the babe to her bosom and give it nourishment" (II, 40). Without any further evidence, moreover, Arthur propounds a theory of immaculate conception. "One explication was obvious," he concludes, "the husband was the parent of this child, and had used this singular expedient to procure for it the maternal protection of his wife" (II, 40).

While these early episodes reveal contradictions in Arthur's attitude toward motherhood, his encounter with Clemenza Lodi at Welbeck's house in Philadelphia adds another dimension to his divided perception of women. Like Arthur's own father, Welbeck has apparently taken a younger, more vigorous wife. And under Welbeck's paternal supervision, Arthur dresses himself "in the French style," beginning a series of metamorphoses similar to those experienced by Edgar Huntly and thus ensuring his immersion in a shape-shifting world that will bring his most serious internal conflicts to the surface. So radically altered is Arthur's appearance that he is sure "some

insanity has fastened on [his] understanding" or that his "senses are the sport of dreams" (II, 52). With his perception magically altered and his very sense of self transformed, Arthur meets the exotic Clemenza, who appears like some "celestial vision" which it is beyond the power of art to capture. Convinced that he was "not born to execute her portrait" (II, 53), Arthur feels instead, like later American protagonists in the presence of fascinating women, transfixed by an image which is simply "prolific of enchantment" (II, 53). Clemenza herself, in fact, is a consummate artist, a musician with "transcendent skill," who quickly assumes a powerful control over Arthur's sensibility and threatens to change him even further. "I have read of transitions effected by magic," he says. "I have read of palaces and deserts which were subject to the dominion of spells; poets may sport with their power, but I am certain that no transition was ever conceived more marvellous and more beyond the reach of foresight than that which I had just experienced" (II, 54). Beyond such mesmerizing power, Clemenza's main fascination for Arthur is her personal and artistic relationship with Welbeck.

Whereas Clemenza is so adroit a pianist that her "right-hand notes were momentary and spontaneous inspirations" (II, 54), Welbeck is a conspicuous failure as an artist. A vivid example of artistic castration, his "maimed" right hand, the "forefinger of which was wanting," prevents him from writing "accurately or copiously" (II, 56). He is also a forger, and so close does his relationship to Arthur become, that his stunted and counterfeit artistry could be considered a hint (among many others) that Arthur's own narrative is disturbed and even fraudulent. In fact, Welbeck's purpose in "adopting" Arthur is to have him serve as amanuensis in the translation of a manuscript which Welbeck has stolen from Clemenza's brother, Vincentio. Such a role bodes ill for Arthur's career as an artist, and in discovering a new family, he has discovered a woman (Clemenza) who makes his troublesome relationship to his mother and Betty Lawrence seem tame by comparison. Whereas Arthur's mother encouraged prolonged immaturity as a hedge against premature death, Clemenza, the European woman as artist, is associated with the deformity of male creative power. This opposition will be dramatically brought together in the figure of Achsa Fielding, who is both mother and artist.

To complicate Arthur's relationship to Clemenza even further, however, not only does Welbeck demand that she be treated as his daughter, but he dresses Arthur in the clothes of her dead brother. And for his part, Arthur not only wants Welbeck to adopt him "for his own son" (II, 58), but he wishes to marry Welbeck's "daughter," precisely

the sort of conflicting desires expressed in Clithero's relationship to Mrs. Lorimer and Clarice. Moreover, Arthur soon learns that Clemenza is actually Welbeck's mistress—both daughter and wife—and his recognition of her pregnancy is "like the shock of an earthquake" (II, 77). "The charms of this angelic woman were tarnished and withered," Arthur reports. "I had formerly surveyed her as a precious and perfect monument, but now it was a scene of ruin and blast" (II, 77). For the first time in the novel, in other words, the two images of woman which Arthur has held separate are momentarily conjoined. The "angelic" woman as "monument" (or as "household deity," in the terms of *Alcuin*) is suddenly profaned by the idea that Welbeck is both father to Clemenza and father to her child.

Before any relationship with Clemenza can proceed, however, Arthur returns to the country, where he meets Eliza Hadwin, the daughter of a Quaker farmer. Like other American heroes, he believes that the country can serve as his "sole asylum" (II, 119) from the complexities of human society. Unlike many later heroes, on the other hand, Arthur finds the country to be simply an alternate source of potentially dangerous relationships. For just as he had considered himself a potential son to Welbeck, Arthur now thinks that he could "embrace" Mr. Hadwin "as a father, and entrance into his house appeared like return to a long-lost and much-loved home" (II, 124). Within hours of his acceptance by the Hadwins, Arthur plots a secret marriage to Eliza, who is forbidden by her religion to marry a non-Quaker. But because his plans would "introduce discord and sorrows into this family" (II, 126), and because to "foster [his] passion was to foster a disease destructive either of [his] integrity or [his] existence" (II, 126), Arthur seeks relief from the impulse to marry. He remembers Vincentio Lodi's manuscript (which he has taken from Welbeck's room) and renews his vow to make a study of its language—the first of many occasions in the novel when art is a substitute for passion. Indeed, Eliza seems quickly forgotten, especially when Arthur discovers a twenty-thousand-dollar bank note in Lodi's book, and when the yellow fever epidemic strikes the city, Arthur takes the opportunity for a total escape on the pretext of searching there for Susan Hadwin's fiancé.

This second journey into the pestilential city assumes the form, as many critics have pointed out, of a journey into the underworld. Certainly it intensifies the numerous conflicts which Arthur has experienced, and again he is conscious of "transition from one state of being to another" (II, 148). Appropriately, his most important experiences involve Welbeck and Clemenza. Welbeck's unexpected reappearance in particular underscores the importance of this second urban visit.

Welbeck had appeared to drown himself as Arthur left the city, but, like Edgar Huntly with respect to Clithero, Arthur cannot so easily rid himself of the evil double associated with fatherhood and seduction. Furthermore, the ensuing confrontation between the two of them over the twenty thousand dollars becomes a symbolic confrontation between father and son. As much as the money, the object of conflict is Clemenza, the symbolic sister-mother of Arthur's imagination. The confusion over Clemenza's identity and relationship to Welbeck is a convincing illustration of Arthur's confusion about women and his own masculinity, and is certainly reinforced when Arthur learns (at the beginning of Book II) that Clemenza has been sold into whoredom at a boarding house run by one Mrs. Villars.

Before Arthur attempts to rescue Clemenza, however, he returns again to the country, where his relationship to Eliza reaches its climax. Although this alternation between city and country might suggest Brown's uncertainty about his materials and form, it is clearly consistent with his hero's agitated state of mind. With her father and sister dead, Eliza now controls the family property, and she eagerly wishes to put it into Arthur's possession. As much as Edgar Huntly, however, Arthur stoutly resists the idea of a propertied, domestic life in the country. Indeed, his whole attitude toward Eliza has changed; he now considers her a sister or even a daughter—anything but a potential wife. "Our intercourse had been short," he acknowledges, "but she relied on my protection and counsel as absolutely as she had been accustomed to do upon her father's" (III, 68), and he soon confesses to her that her "welfare is a precious delight, and no father or brother could watch over it with more solicitude than [he] will do" (III, 68).

The scenes with Eliza which follow go to the heart of Arthur's contrary impulses toward maturity and prolonged adolescence. Though some critics see in Arthur's rejection of Eliza a choice of experience over innocence, in the terms of the conflict noted, the choice indicates preference for the mother over the problematical sister and resistance to the woman as wife and equal.[8] In short, Arthur seeks to prolong his childhood, and, while his thoughts "hovered over the images of wife and children with more delight than over any other images" (III, 75), the wife he imagines "joined to the modesty and charms of woman the benefits of education, [and] the maturity and steadfastness of age" (III, 76).

Arthur's rejection of Eliza anticipates, as James H. Justus has suggested, Natty Bumppo's rejection of Judith Hutter at the end of *The Deerslayer*: both want to "preserve the integrity of an envisioned

destiny."[9] Although Arthur clearly seeks the experience of the city and Europe rather than of nature and the West, both he and Natty want an unencumbered life, both resist the ownership of property, and both view marriage as a "contract awful and irrevocable" (III, 81). Unlike Natty, of course, Arthur Mervyn does not entirely reject the idea of marriage; yet he does reject Eliza's "mental imperfections" in favor of the fantasy that in time he will be led "to the feet of one who more nearly approached the standard of ideal excellence which poets and romancers had exhibited to [his] view" (III, 81). And even though he claims (like Melville's Pierre) that in rejecting his "sister's" offer of a common-law marriage in the city, he is thinking only of her "fair fame," he nonetheless begins to view Eliza as a "bewitching creature" who would "seduce" him into an "indiscreet marriage" (III, 84).

Indeed, rather like an early Jay Gatsby, Arthur seeks an idealized image of womanhood and the attendant power to recreate himself in her eyes according to some preconceived and largely adolescent ideal. Making his way for the third time toward the city, he sees nothing ahead but "sunshine and prosperity," and his soul glows "with exultation at the grandeur and beauty of its own creations" (III, 96). Like Gatsby, however, Arthur must soon encounter the dark side of his dreams. Recalling his postponed mission to Mrs. Villars', he enters a house in which an "air of negligence and disorder was every where visible" (III, 99), a telling image of Arthur's irrational motives and of his misgivings about the disorder which matrimony would introduce into his life. For it is in this atmosphere that he discovers Clemenza. Instead of the spectacular artist he had imagined, Clemenza now suggests the same maternal malignancy which Arthur had feared at home. Her face is "sickly and pale" and appears in "mournful unison" with the "feeble and emaciated form" of her dying child. In this image of the infant, "meagre and cadaverous" (III, 108), Arthur encounters another example of the mysterious curse which motherhood entails upon children.

Although he does not know it at the time, Arthur also meets Achsa Fielding at Mrs. Villars'. With the death of Welbeck in prison, Arthur will be confronted for the rest of the novel with women, and the woman who corresponds most nearly to his newly formed ideal is, of course, Mrs. Fielding. "Her superior age, sedateness, and prudence, gave my deportment a filial freedom and affection," Arthur notes, "and I was fond of calling her 'mamma' " (III, 179). Her appeal is markedly different from Eliza's, whose image still poses a significant threat to Arthur's imagined freedom. Only as a sister is Eliza now acceptable, and with that in mind Arthur asks Mrs. Fielding to "adopt" Eliza as a daughter or younger sister. "She should be your daughter,"

he tells his "mamma." "No—you are too nearly of an age for that. A sister; her *elder* sister you should be. *That*, when there is no other relation, includes them all. Fond sisters you would be, and I the fond brother of you both" (III, 180). Even as he projects himself as brother, however, Arthur imagines himself married to a new mother. And rather than a mature relationship, marriage is characterized by dependency and idolatry, a surrender by the male to a type of idealized maternal goddess, perhaps an effort on Arthur's part to propitiate the terrible mother who curses his life. "The creature whom I shall worship," Arthur says (in the kind of halting syntax which hints at the deep reservations he feels), "it sounds oddly, but, I verily believe, the sentiment which I shall feel for my wife, will be more akin to worship than anything else. I shall never love, but such a creature as I now image to myself, and *such* a creature will deserve, or almost deserve, worship. But this creature, I was going to say, must be the exact counterpart, my good mamma—of *yourself*" (III, 188-89).

Despite such a compulsive attraction for Mrs. Fielding (or perhaps because of it), Arthur still resists the idea of marriage, however. He would rather worship some image of Achsa from afar than love the real thing. "Love her I *do* as I love my God; as I love virtue," he says. "To love her in another sense, would brand me for a lunatic" (III, 215). Indeed, the very idea of a union with Mrs. Fielding precipitates a conflict within the self so radical that Arthur can only perceive it as a form of insanity. " 'Twould be frenzy," he thinks. "Achsa Fielding *my wife*! Good Heavens!—The very sound threw my soul into unconquerable tumults" (III, 216). As he wonders how to "escape the enchantment," Arthur's thoughts appear both fantastical and nightmarish, and the news that Achsa loves him sends a "flush of scorching heat" through his body and intensifies the delicious conflict that he feels. "My temples began to throb like my heart," he admits. "I was half delirious, and my delirium was strangely compounded of fear and hope, of delight and of terror" (III, 218). Possessed by such "nameless terror," and radically confused by the "scorching heat" of a love he dares not reciprocate, Arthur imagines a prolonged relationship with Achsa as an immersion in a wilderness in which he will be engulfed and drowned: "Methinks, that one falling from a tree overhanging a torrent, plunged into the whirling eddy, and gasping and struggling while he sinks to rise no more, would feel just as I did then" (III, 220).[10]

Sure that such conflicts "were all tokens of a mind lost to itself" (III, 220), Arthur soon suffers a nightmare which clarifies the Oedipal nature of his confusion. With both Welbeck and Mr. Hadwin, Arthur had considered himself an adopted son who then espoused his father's

daughter or wife. Now he considers Achsa Fielding the "substitute of [his] lost mamma" (III, 213), and in his dream comes face to face with Achsa's husband. In a pointed example of rebellion against a father-husband who then unleashes his jealous wrath upon the covetous son, Arthur reports: "Fielding changed his countenance into rage and fury. He called me villain! bade me avaunt! and drew a shining steal [sic] from his bosom, with which he stabbed me to the heart" (III, 221).

If his expected marriage to Mrs. Fielding provokes a serious internal conflict, it also threatens Arthur's capacity to order his thoughts and tell a coherent story. As a prototype of the European woman whose character would be developed more fully by Hawthorne and James, Achsa Fielding embodies experience which is incompatible with both Arthur's potential maturity and his narrative powers.[11] Although Mrs. Fielding intends to take him on a tour of Europe as a wedding present (thereby suggesting a concern for his education), for his part Arthur has returned to a condition of innocent dependency in his marriage to a substitute mother. Thus, what began ostensibly as a *Bildungsroman* ends as a novel of arrested development. Like other American heroes (e.g., Natty Bumppo, Hawthorne's Kenyon and Miles Coverdale, Jay Gatsby), Arthur achieves a kind of perpetual adolescence in which he is ever to be denied the majority which threatens his life. He is saved from his mother's curse not by asserting his manhood and taking a wife but by finding a "good mamma" who will keep him eternally young.

However, such a marriage, such a differentiation of "mammas" into "good" and "bad," carries a high price. Consistently, Arthur perceives Achsa Fielding in artistic metaphors, and through a process of displacement he uses art to counteract the threat she poses. The closer Arthur gets to his marriage, the more compulsive becomes his need to write. "I must quell these tumults," he says to himself. "They will disable me else. They will wear out all my strength. They will drain away life itself. But who could have thought! So soon! Not three months since I first set eyes upon her. Not three weeks since our plighted love, and only three days to terminate suspense and give me *all*" (III, 196). Yet so severe a change in his own nature does that "*all*" seem to imply that Arthur immediately seeks release through his pen.[12] Anticipating in some ways Arthur Dimmesdale's frenzied composition of his Election Sermon (after his "forest walk" with Hester Prynne), this Arthur also conceives of his pen as a "pacifier." It "checks the mind's career" and "circumscribes her wanderings," he notes. "It traces out and compels us to adhere to one path. It ever was my friend. Often it has blunted my vexations; hushed my stormy passions; turned

my peevishness to soothing; my fierce revenge to heart-dissolving pity." "I must continue at the pen," he concludes, "or shall immediately relapse" (III, 197). Only when he takes pen in hand, in other words, does Arthur feel relieved of his internal "tumults." Rather than an instrument for reconciling and integrating the passionate experience of woman, art becomes a means of avoiding inner conflict, an escape from the pressures which the female provokes within the self.

Much like the musically gifted Clemenza Lodi, then, Achsa Fielding seems to threaten masculine creativity. With her "musical" voice, she radiates a metamorphic power to "entrance the soul of the listener" (III, 197), and her presence is so dominating that Arthur fears he will cease to have a "separate or independent existence" (III, 212). In his decision to marry Achsa Fielding, therefore, Arthur apparently surrenders his independent manhood as well as his creative efforts as a narrator. For like later European women (e.g., Miriam Schaefer of *The Marble Faun* or Christina Light of *Roderick Hudson*), Mrs. Fielding is conceived as an artist whose power is expressly designed to transform the American male. "As to me," Arthur confesses, "I was wax in her hand. Without design and without effort, I was always of that form she wished me to assume" (III, 212). For Brown, as for many later American novelists, assuming those forms which women seem to demand is perceived as a change so radical that it portends the loss of identity, independent will, and creative power. Thus, in favor of his marriage to Achsa, Arthur Mervyn suspends his narrative and—ominously—his pen. "Lie there, snug in thy leathern case, till I call for thee," he says, "and that will not be very soon. I believe I will abjure thy company till all is settled with my love. Yes; I *will* adjure thee; so let *this* be thy last office, till Mervyn has been made the happiest of men" (III, 230). Whatever his attitudes toward the rights of women in *Alcuin*, in *Arthur Mervyn* Brown struck a chord which would be echoed by many later American artists: a sense that art provides an escape from, rather than a complement to, women and passion.

Notes

[1]*Alcuin: A Dialogue* (New York: Grossman, 1970), p. 24.

[2]Quotations from *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Mervyn* are from the Kennikat Press edition (Port Washington, N.Y., 1963), and will be cited in the text by volume and page.

[3]Brancaccio, "Studied Ambiguities: *Arthur Mervyn* and the Problem of the Unreliable Narrator," *AL*, 42 (1970), 18; Nelson, "A Just Reading of Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*," *EAL*, 8 (1973), 163-64.

[4]For an extended study of this theme in European thought and writing, see Karl Stern, *The Flight from Woman* (New York: Noonday, 1965).

[5]"*Edgar Huntly* as Quest Romance," *AL*, 43 (1971), 332.

[6]The most thorough analysis of the initiation theme in Brown's fiction is still Warner Berthoff's "Adventures of the Young Man: An Approach to Charles Brocken Brown," *AQ*, 9 (1957), 421-34.

[7]In *The Fear of Women* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), Wolfgang Lederer notes that "a mother may try to arrest the child at her favorite stage: from her sense of identification and 'mystic participation' with the child she may hold on to the boy, accept him only as a submissive, helpless infant, and effeminize him as Dionysos was effeminate, because the son, before he leaves his mother is a 'woman-thing.' " "The result of such holding-on is of course a crippling of development, an impeding of individuality tantamount to castration and death" (pp. 67, 68).

[8]Kenneth Bernard, for example, concludes that Arthur's rejection of Eliza and his marriage to Mrs. Fielding "represent a definite choice on Mervyn's part, a rejection of innocence and ignorance, a desire to enter into the world as it is." See "*Arthur Mervyn*: The Ordeal of Innocence," *TSLL*, 6 (1965), 441-59.

[9]"Arthur Mervyn: American," *AL*, 42 (1970), 309.

[10]Such imagery is common in male visions of women. As Lederer notes, by way of accounting for the number of female monsters in myth and fairytale, there is for men a "universal human image and preoccupation with a monstrous and deadly female, whether seductress or mother" (*The Fear of Women*, p. 65).

[11]In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Dell, 1966), Leslie Fiedler links Achsa Fielding to the tradition of the dark, foreign woman in American literature: In Mrs. Fielding Brown "almost invented the first Dark Lady of our fiction—but he is not *afraid* enough either of her experience in passion or her connection with things European to imbue her with a sufficiently sinister allure" (p. 301). Perhaps not, but Achsa Fielding certainly is the first in a long series of female characters who provoke the most radical internal conflicts, many associated with the creation and perception of art, in American protagonists. For an account of such characters in the work of Hawthorne and James, see my "Aesthetic Headaches and European Women in *The Marble Faun* and *The American*," *SAF*, 4 (1976), 65-79.

[12]For a provocative analysis of the importance of Arthur's pen as phallic symbol, see Brancaccio, pp. 24-26, who argues that the pen "becomes the symbol of the need to realize his financial and sexual ambitions and the need to justify them to the world," and that at the end of the novel, "Brown has Arthur release his pen, that ambiguous symbol of his male power, with the Oedipus-like self-confidence of attained happiness which caps the irony of this final section" (pp. 25, 26).